ANALYSIS LENS

T. Sugiman
Professor, Faculty of Integrated Human Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan

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Contents

Summary

First, a concept of conflict and its resolution is expanded to include a positive aspect of conflict as well as a negative aspect. Conflict can provide a social system with instability and prevent it from becoming too rigid to continue to reproduce social communication. The conceptual expansion brings about a deeper insight into the measures that are often used to prevent, mitigate, and resolve conflict; that is, the prohibiting of the use of physical force and the including of a third party. Also, law and social movement can be regarded as a mechanism that selects conflicts of societal consequence from many conflicts that are produced in everyday face-to-face interactions.

Second, an academic discipline named "group dynamics" is introduced as a social science analysis lens for conflict and its resolution. Group dynamics studies the dynamic nature of a collectivity that consists of persons and their physical and institutional environments. The collectivity is investigated from two aspects. One is the collective behavior that is observable behavior shown by persons and their environments in a collectivity as a whole, while the other is the communication that is a series of processes of formation, continuance, change, and disappearance of social

norms and collective atmosphere.

A huge number of collectivities in a society constitute partially overlapping structure. A person is located in an intersection of many collectivities. In a situation in which a researcher studies a certain collectivity, there is another collectivity encompassing the collectivity and the researcher, which makes it impossible to separate a research object and a researcher, as can be done in natural sciences. Studies in group dynamics are, in principle, carried out as a collaborative practice by both a researcher and a research object; that is, people in a research field.

1. Introduction

Having explored various domains of conflict in the previous topic, we will focus on analytical perspectives and concrete analysis methods of conflict and its resolution in the present topic mainly from social science viewpoints. As an introduction to nine articles included in this topic, the present paper argues two points below.

First, we would like to expand our conceptual scope of conflict before entering into discussions on specific perspectives and analysis methods. It is emphasized that conflict can provide a social system with necessary instability and prevent it from becoming too rigid to continue to reproduce social communication. This positive aspect of conflict should not be overlooked, although it is also true that the destructive power of conflict often has a negative impact on a social system from which the conflict has been produced.

Second, an academic discipline named group dynamics will be introduced as an analysis lens for conflict and its resolution. Group dynamics, as one of the human sciences, investigates the dynamic nature of a human collectivity as a whole. This discipline is instrumental as conflict cannot be avoided in our society and even has positive functions for a social system. The basic perspective of group dynamics along with its major concepts will be described while referring to each of the nine articles included in the present topic.

It may be helpful to include an additional remark on group dynamics, especially for those who are already familiar with the discipline. The group dynamics that we use as an analysis lens in the present topic is a new type of group dynamics that is quite different from traditional group dynamics, which is typically characterized by studies of small groups in laboratory settings. Traditional group dynamics also tends to depend on methodological individualism in which a group phenomenon is explained by decomposing it into cognitive and behavioral processes of an individual person.

In contrast, the new group dynamics focuses on the dynamic nature of any kind of human collectivity, regardless of its size, organization, and visibility. Persons who are not even aware of the existence of each other can be treated as a collectivity, such as those who follow a particular fashion, who speak the same dialect, and so on. Furthermore, more than two persons or more than two collectivities that are in a conflict can be treated as a single collectivity. The structure of conflict can be clarified only when all collectivities in a conflict are simultaneously put in a scope as a single

collectivity, although we do not deny the importance of analyzing each collectivity separately.

The new group dynamics also differs from the traditional one in methodology. It puts much greater emphasis on the overall nature of a collectivity than the psychological processes of an individual person in the collectivity (See *The Persons and Conflict*). This emphasis on a collectivity leads us to an extreme but most convincing meta-theory called social constructionism. Social constructionism insists that psychological processes are constructed socially or by a collectivity to which the person belongs, although they are regarded as processes in an inner world or in the mind of a person by common sense and even by psychology. The present paper owes a lot to social constructionism proposed by Gergen (1994a, 1994b) and Sugiman (1999b).

2. Conceptual Expansion of Conflict

Conflict is likely to be regarded as a negative occurrence in our life. It is widely believed that conflict should be avoided if possible and that it should be resolved as quickly as possible to regain a peaceful situation. A conflict-free society tends to be thought of as the ideal society.

It is quite possible, however, that conflict can serve a positive function for a social system. A German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, argued this positive aspect of conflict from the standpoint of his theory of social systems while he fully recognized negative aspects of conflict (Luhmann, 1984). His argument on conflict will help us expand our notion of conflict and relocate the term "conflict resolution" to a broader context than the one in which it has been embedded so far.

According to Luhmann, one of the most important aspects of a social system is communication. Communication plays a central role in his theory of social systems to the extent that a social system is defined as a system constituted by communication autopoetically. Here, communication is referred to as the transfer of tacit framework from one party, either a person or a collectivity of persons, to another. It is the tacit framework that gives meaning to an action. For example, one can interpret the action of "rushing toward a goal to get a point for one's team" only in the tacit framework in which it is naturally assumed that one is playing football. Otherwise, one can only demonstrate a rapid physical movement of one's body that is only expressed as a mere behavior, not an action. The other players and the audience share the same framework as oneself, depending on whether they are happy or unhappy to see one's action.

Every party will naturally depend on a particular tacit framework, although that framework differs from one party to another. When the framework of one party is communicated to another, the framework of the former is transferred to the latter and becomes a more fundamental framework for the latter than the one it has depended on so far. Then, an action of the latter becomes an action that has meaning even if it is viewed in the tacit framework that has been held only by the former until the communication occurs. This means that the two parties have reached a situation in which they depend on a common tacit framework and, in this sense, they have constituted a larger social system.

A social system will expand more if the tacit framework is further communicated to more parties. By this expansion of a social system, more parties depend on a single framework. In other words, more parties are integrated into a larger social system by being bounded by a single framework. Through expansion, the system achieves more stability. This might cause some problems if the social system's environment is stable and does not require the social system to change.

However, excessive stability, or rigidity, of a social system can threaten its survival in situations where the environment is full of change and/or the social system itself is complex enough to be susceptible to even a small environmental change. In such situations, it is critical that the social system be able to transform its tacit framework and thereby enable new actions to be produced.

Conflict makes it possible for a social system to transform its tacit framework. Conflict is a communication of refusal, or a communication of "no." It occurs when one party communicates to another and the latter understands what the former party says but communicates "no" to the former, which is also understood as a refusal by the former. It is very often the case that a communication of "no" from the latter to the former is responded to again by the former with "no." This is the beginning of conflict that is a continuous exchange of "no."

In conflict, a tacit framework of each party is rejected by one another. This can threaten the validity of the framework of each side and thus reduce the stability of each of the two social systems. In this situation, it is possible for each social system in conflict to refrain from sticking to the framework that it has depended on thus far and to create a new framework that could not have been produced without experiencing conflict. It might even be possible for a new framework to be shared among the two parties so that they constitute a single social system.

If we pay attention to not only the negative aspects but also the positive aspects of conflict, we can acquire a deeper insight into the measures that are often used to prevent, mitigate, or resolve conflict. Here, let us examine two measures: prohibiting the use of physical force and including a third party into the conflict between the two parties. The measures might appear to be nothing other than attempts to avoid escalation of conflict and to facilitate conflict resolution. However, it is important that they are also conditions under which further conflict can be maintained.

It is true that we often prohibit the use of physical force to avoid sustaining irreparable damage. However, physical force can also complicate, refine, and perpetuate a conflict. When physical force is allowed, conflicts are either not risked at all or are finalized relatively quickly and simply. In this sense, the prohibition of physical force has the function of increasing the possibilities of conflict, although it is done in an attempt to prevent catastrophe.

The inclusion of a third party also has the function of perpetuating a conflict while it is attempting to mitigate and finalize a conflict. The third party should be brought into a conflict as an impartial agent who has not allied beforehand with any of the parties in the conflict. However, this tends to trigger a new phase of conflict in which a struggle to

win the third party over to one's own side is added to the conflict that has already existed. Thus, conflict is not resolved but is continued while changing its nature and increasing its complexity.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that our society is full of possibilities for conflict and is actually faced with a huge number of conflicts. Fortunately, many conflicts are not critically destructive but are helpful in preventing social systems from becoming excessively rigid. In other words, the scale of many conflicts is small and they are produced in a small social system in which face-to-face interaction plays a central role, like in a family, workplace, or small community.

It is also true, however, that there are some conflicts that escalate until much more than a few people are involved. What is it, then, that causes a particular conflict to grow from an informal level conflict into one that has significant societal consequences? Here, two selection mechanisms should be focused on; that is, law and a social movement.

In a traditional society that is characterized by its stability, law is a principal means of selecting conflicts worth the risk. More exactly, law tends to enforce economic and political positions and thereby make it possible for those who have property and power to reject the demands of others and press others who are less powerful into hopeless positions in a conflict. Moreover, the capacity for conflict extends the power of their positions. Domination was typically achieved by this process in the past. As domination by the powerful was established by the capacity for conflict, special language was developed and expressions of respect for the powerful naturally came about.

In a modern society that is characterized by its instability and complexity, social movement is more powerful in selecting significant conflicts than official structure by law. Interestingly, the emergence and development of a social movement depends on the self-description of a society by the term "social movement." Moreover, employing this theory of social movement makes it possible to distinguish such movements from mere unrest, upheaval, or random violent episodes. This is true for various social movements, including revolutionary movements, nationalist movements, women's movements, youth movements, emancipatory movements, religious movements, and so forth.

A goal that is included in the self-description above accentuates the nature as a social movement. By the goal, what might have been regarded as the accident of emergence becomes the risk of success. The goal tends to serve as an alibi, as the basis of necessary continuation of the social movement. Furthermore, the goal tends to radicalize the movement, in which resistance and opponents are identified and thereby readiness for conflict is assembled even if the end state toward which one strives is not empirically defined.

Having expanded the concept of conflict, group dynamics will be introduced in the rest of this paper. This discipline is instrumental for analyzing both positive and negative aspects of conflict and exploring the way in which we utilize and/or resolve conflicts.

3. Group Dynamics as Analysis Lens

3.1. The Basic Perspective of Group Dynamics

Group dynamics is defined, in the present paper, as a field of study in which the dynamic nature of human collectivities or groups is investigated by looking at the collectivity or group as a whole. Collectivities studied by group dynamics are very diverse, and can include: two-person collectivities consisting of a husband and a wife or two persons who love each other; a small group participating in a job or a sport together; a large organization which might have a membership of hundreds or thousands; a crowd of people who pack a football stadium; and people who are members of a nation. In a time when the global environmental problems and the conflicts between developed and developing countries are increasingly strident, it might also be time to redefine several billion people living on a spaceship named "earth" as a collectivity.

Group dynamics does not restrict the collectivities it studies to the ones whose spatial boundary can be easily recognized. For example, persons who share a technical term, a dialect, or a national language can be treated as a collectivity even if a part of them is scattered far from the place where the majority is located. It is also possible to treat, as a collectivity, those who follow a certain fashion or those who share a certain custom to use a unique instrument even if they are spatially scattered and do not fit the ordinary image of a group.

Even more than two persons who are hostile towards each other can be regarded as a single collectivity. Similarly, more than two collectivities or groups that are in conflict with each other can be regarded as a single collectivity for which conflict structure is analyzed while each collectivity is also a focus of analysis.

Game theory is instrumental for formulating a conflict situation in which more than two players are faced with each other along with their own sets of options. The theory was originally proposed as a practical mathematical method for operations research. The major focus was on finding equilibrium solutions that were realized when each player took a rational strategy. However, in group dynamics, equilibrium solutions can be used as an overall description of the near future of a collectivity that includes all players. For example, when there are two equilibrium solutions in a game with three players, conflict structure can be illustrated as a boat that has the three players on board -- i.e., is in a position between two whirlpools which correspond to the two equilibrium solutions, and is likely to be drawn into either of the two whirlpools by unpredictable fluctuation. (See *Structural Source of Conflict.*)

It should be noted that a concept of collectivity includes not only persons but also their environment, although only persons have been emphasized to refer to a collectivity in the above just to establish understanding. The nature of a collectivity is, therefore, an overall nature produced by both persons and their environment. (See *Alliances: Sanctioning and Monitoring.*)

The nature of a collectivity can be described from two aspects. One is an observable aspect called *collective behavior* and the other is an unobservable aspect called *communication*. Both aspects of the nature of a collectivity will now be explained.

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Biographical Sketch

Toshio Sugiman is Professor of Group Dynamics at Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan. His major research interests are the theoretical development of group dynamics and the action research based on the discipline. However, group dynamics he has pursued is totally different from the one that was developed mainly in the US and was characterized by rigorous natural scientific approach in which human group behavior was investigated by hypothesis testing where laboratory experiments played a central role. Instead, he has tried to develop a new group dynamics in which social constructionism is a theoretical backbone and collaborative practice by researchers and people in research field is emphasized in diverse areas like organization, community, education, medicine, and so on. He was a president of the Japanese Group Dynamics Association and an editor of the journal of the association in 1994-98. He is also an editorial consultant for the journal, *Applied Psychology*, published by the International Association of Applied Psychology.