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Theories, Dimensions and Causes of Conflict: An Overview

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Abstract:

Theories of conflict provide useful premises for gaining insights into the dynamics of conflict. Among other things they are useful as analytical tools handy for organizing data and making predictions. Precisely, theories facilitate description, explanation and prediction. Theories are very important tools versatile for providing insight and perspectives on issues. There are diverse submissions on theories of conflict, which help us make sense and guide us in understanding of realities around us and the world at large. The paper is a synthesis of some theories and issues in conflict and conflict resolution. It approached the discourse in a concise and lucid manner anchored on mainly secondary sources of data, examines sequence of diverse but interconnected theories of conflicts; it also investigates factors, dimensions and causes of conflict. Understanding of how conflict occur, what causes it, its various dimension and classification, as well as approaches to resolving it will be helpful in understanding the dynamics of conflict and its management not only within the West African sub-region and the African continent but the world at large.

Keywords: Theory, conflict, structural factors, violent conflict, peace building

1. Introduction

Theory is a set of inter related concepts, definitions and propositions or hypothesis that present a systematic view of phenomenon by specifying relations among variables with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomenon. Theories are set of assumptions or system of assumptions, accepted principles and rules of procedure based on limited information or knowledge, devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behaviour of a specified set of phenomena; abstract reasoning. Theories are developed to serve as a foundation for argument, explaining ideas and propositions

It should be noted that theories cannot be said to be perfect in terms of providing explanations for the whole gamut of international issues and problems that crop up day by day no can we say that theory help us to predict event with exactitude. Nevertheless, a good number of these theories possess utility value and this explains why theories occupy an important place in present day international relations.

The paper explores literature on conflict resolution especially conflict theories, its types and causes with a view to understanding of how conflict occur, what causes it, its various dimension and classification, as well as approaches to resolving it. The study is significant in its own right because it will provide an informed us appreciably in understanding the dynamics of conflict and its management within the West African sub-region, the continent and world at large. The peaceful resolution of conflict is a highly commendable phenomenon in contemporary world politics. Theories do provide a wide range of insight and greater emphasis on different techniques to manage and resolve conflicts. It is believed having an insight of the various theories, causes and dimensions of conflict will be helpful as a path way to resolving our contemporary conflicts at all levels. It's the authors hope and believed that this cluster of submissions of views on conflict related issues will be helpful to students of peace and conflict studies, analyst and policy makers alike for an insight on conflict and as a guide towards understanding and addressing conflict related issues.

2. Causes of Conflict

Brown, (1997) identified four main clusters of factors that make some places more predisposed to violence than others. These factors according to Brown, as reported Uyangoda, (2005) are structural factors, political factors, economic/social factors. Countries with highly intermingled populations are less likely to face secessionist demands. However, if secessionist demands develop in countries with intermingled populations, ethnic groups will seek to establish control over specific tracts of territory. This may result in direct attacks on civilians, intense guerilla warfare, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide. In Africa most of the conflicts were attributed to systemic collapse and weakness of the states especially after the cold war ends following the withdrawal of the protection and support the ruling class were receiving from the super powers to dictate their respective countries. More so, fault-lines in the architecture of the post-colonial African State; and the vulnerability of the continent to the vagaries of global processes and nature, such as the region have disadvantaged position in the world market and environmental degradation. The root causes of violent conflict, such as poverty, exclusion, gender and political/economic inequalities are traceable to these global and local fault

lines. They have always constituted a time bomb under governance processes in West Africa, being the primary source of latent, indirect violence (Aningetal., 2010).

2.1. Political Factors

Four main political factors have been highlighted in the scholarly literature on internal conflict: discriminatory political institutions, exclusionary national ideologies, inter-group politics, and elite's politics. Over time, the legality of the system as a whole can fall in to question. Secondly, exclusionary national ideologies of nationalism and citizenship, based on ethnic distinctions, engender minority resentment and even resistance. Thirdly, many scholars contend that prospects for violent skirmish depend to a large extent on the subtleties of domestic, inter-group politics.

2.2. Economic and Social Factors

Three broad economic and social factors may be identified as potential sources of internal conflict: economic problems, discriminatory economic systems and negative consequences of economic development and modernity. Among contemporary economic problems that lead to internal conflicts and violence are economic reforms that produce social inequalities, economic slowdowns, stagnation and, as in some cases in the developing world, economic collapse.

2.3. Cultural /Perceptual Factors

Two cultural and perceptual factors have been identified. The first is cultural discrimination against minorities. The second source is perceptual factors. Kleiboer, (1996), contended that conflict usually fall under the following groups: Dominion issues (structural factors); Philosophical issues (political and cultural factors).

3. Theories of Conflict

Conflict theory, usually pursues to methodically clarify the over-all delineations of skirmish in civilization. Conflict philosopher typically effort with Weber's three schemes of stratification: class, status, and power. Here, power generally treated as the central feature of society. It also acts as a cohesive set of cultural standards. The location and users of power is one of the main components of the conflict theory. It also acts as a primary factor that directs society and social relations.

4. Nature of Conflict

Regarding the concept of conflict, there are two types of approaches: (1) the classical and the (2) behaviourist. The first one focuses on the macro level, where interactions take place among groups. Groups can be formed at many levels national, institutional, ethnic, class, and ideological. Different types of methodologies have been suggested by Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1981). As per Schelling (1960), conflict is different from violence. It takes place due to different objectives, purposes, requirements or standards clash and violence.

5. Micro Theories of Conflict

Cunningham, (1998) highlighted that one of the most important supposition is that the main cause of war causes from human nature and human behavior. Conceivable consequences to human behavior had been discussed by the behaviourists, biologists and psychologists through animal behaviour or ethological studies (O'Connell, 1989). The Seville Statement suggests that novel kind of accountability in the demeanor of human group should be practiced (Mack, 1990). Like most ground-breaking theories, the inborn or normal theories gave way to more cultured and systematic hypotheses over time. One important development is the development of the frustration- Aggression theory.

5.1. Frustration- Aggression Theory

Frustration-aggression theory as popularized by Feierabends and Nesvold (1971:569-604), is one of the outstanding theories in explaining political instability. Its basic assumption is that all aggression, whether interpersonal or international, has its root causes in the frustration of one or more actors' goal achievement. The authors conceive systemic frustration as driving from the inability of the political system to meet the legitimate expectations and aspirations of the people-both material and otherwise. Systemic frustration on its own ordinarily engenders aggression on the part of the frustrated. But the problem for the political system arises in a situation in which the dispossessed, the disgruntled, and the frustrated members of the polity are able to establish a linkage between their material depravity and the political system (Fawole, 1994:11-23). Political aggression, which is a precipitate of collective frustration, thus becomes directed, in different forms, against the political system. The system aches, and depending on its resilience, ultimately breaks down. This is what has largely manifested as state failure in various African countries. More than anything else, the basic of systemic frustration on the part of contemporary Africans lies in the monumental economic failure that has come to define the continent's history, arguably since political independence (Mimiko, 1999:23). The Frustration-Aggression theory rests on the basic stimulus-response hypothesis.

5.2. Social Learning Theory

This theory uses the hypothesis that aggression is not inborn or intuitive. Rather it is a result of the process of socialization. People learn aggressive attributes at home, in school, and by interaction with others. It has been an always try by the social learning theorists to find the association between individual and the environment.

5.3. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

This theory had been established by the psychologist Henri Tajfel. This theory mainly focuses on normal psychological procedures that function under all situations (Caims, 1994: 5). The main concept is that the need of positive self-esteem and self-worth is something people want to transfer. Another assumption is the concept of *in-groups* and *out groups*. Another concept of this theory has been proposed by Caims. There is slight hesitation that an unhinged system of social divisions between a majority and a minority is more likely to be perceived as unlawful as a stable one (Tajfel, 1978). Consequently, groups place importance on the perceived legitimacy within their social environments (Horowitz, 1985: p.12).

6. Macro Theories of Conflict

As per Down (1957), in alienated civilizations, national relations are powerful, self-justifying, fervent and inescapable.'

Macro theory emphasizes on the communication of groups, precisely on the mindful level. Early political theorists, have chosen one element to distillate: power. In the 19th century, post Napoleonic Europe was largely concerned with the *balance of power*. Deterrence theory rested on the assumption that a *balance of terror* due to the superpowers' nuclear arsenals would prevent conflict. Deterrence theory gave way to more sophisticated theories such as decision making and game theories. Decision making and game theories have their origins in the 20th century model of the rational actor (Schelling 1960). According to Thomas R. Dye (1998:29-32), the significant rudiments in game theories are the plans that are working by each party with the meaning of attaining supreme gain. Equally, conflict in Africa especially the one involving government and rebels, a tendency exists among rebels group's commanders to change their allegiance, loyalty and in most cases sudden changes occur in the leadership hierarchies.

One of the most important contributions of Schelling is his hypothesis of the interdependency of conflict, competition and cooperation among actors (Horowitz, 1985, p.5).

Judging from the above, therefore, while behavioral theories examine the individual subconscious, the classical theories concentrate on the conscious interaction of groups. Classical theory has often been occupied with the exercise of power and the use of force in intergroup relations. While classical theory is useful in explaining acts and events, it does not answer questions about subconscious motivational factors.

7 Conclusions

From the fore going it could be understood that conflict is a multi-faceted, understood differently and is a reflection of human nature, it characterizes and represents interactive nature of human relations and interests, particularly in terms of material and spiritual needs. Conflict is inherent due to the scarcity of resources, struggle for power, diversities, and competitive nature of human being. West Africa and African continent at large by virtue of its history, and legacies of colonial powers found itself in almost all forms of conflict. Striving to address this conflict requires understanding of its nature, causes as well as devising how best to resolve them. Causes of conflicts are very wide, depending on the circumstance surrounding conflicts, although practitioners, and analyst provide a wide context in trying to provide explanations on conflict, it is believed that conflict can bring positive things to human lives due to the possibility of bringing change in society. Also, it was understood that conflict is by its very nature complex and dynamic, though, most of the elements attributed to its occurrence are familiar, studies have shown that conflict due evolve from simple to complex and to an unpredictable stage. Conflict may be likened to a disease whose effect may possibly lead to penetration of other diseases. Many a simple conflict turns to a full-blown war because of the interaction of other interest within or external to it that further complicates situations. However, in spite of these realities the analysis provided on the concepts, and theories of conflict will provide an insight as well as a guide as to how best to look at issues and crisis as they occur. Lessons learned based on the experiences enable the exploration of other ways in meeting and mitigating the challenges of conflict. One thing is clear though, the inherent nature of human existence can always continue to be side by side with conflict. Conflict is a continuous and dynamic process that defines the development of societies.

It is evident that the information available concerning conflict and theories of conflict is vast, and developed over time progressing with each development opening up to another approach to its understanding. It is also clear that each contribution seems important and relevant in our understanding of conflict. The extensive research on approach to understanding conflict reflects the myriad and complexity of human conflict.

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