Conflict Theory: Concepts, Techniques, and Stages

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Criticism

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CONFLICT THEORY: CONCEPTS, TECHNIQUES, AND STAGES.

BY

THOMAS KRAMER
The social worker of today is being placed in situations which call for him to devise new tools and strategies of intervention which are relevant to present day problems. It is recognized that many of our current social problems are inherent in some of our institutions and that only by changing these institutions can real results be achieved. Problems arise due to the fact that these institutions often stringently resist change and conventional methods employed by professional practitioners have often only been able to solve or ease individual difficulties or maladjustments. There have been a growing number of social workers who have spoken out against these established inequities. They have worked at organizing the poor to bring about structural changes and they have not shunned confrontation in the name of professionalism.\(^1\) This helping of the underprivileged and the disenfranchised realize their potential and worth has called for social workers to devise new methods and tools of operation. The need for effective and powerful strategies of change along with a competent understanding of these strategies has made such knowledge and skills an essential part of the social workers arsenal.

There has been an increasing tendency for workers to shift their emphasis and energy toward these institutional problems and away from individual problems. When dealing with institutions, planned change calls for a carefully planned and thought out method of operation. Essential to this planning is an analysis of the type of community response to planned change effort. Warren speaks of three

types of possible community response to issues calling for change. These
are not inclusive categories but should be viewed as on a continuum. They
are consensus, difference, and dissensus. In issue consensus the worker or
change agent feels that there is substantial agreement within the community
concerning the proposed changes. In issue difference the worker doesn't
have agreement but expects to be able to get it. In issue dissensus the
worker knows there is not any agreement between the principle parties and
does not expect to get any. It is with issue dissensus, or a potential
conflict situation, with which this paper will mainly deal and also with
strategies based on dissensus and conflict. It should be noted here that
while some authors differentiate between conflict and contest, for the pur-
poses of this paper the terms will be used interchangeably.

Contest situations appear in every facet of social relationships.
Whenever there is a situation where one person's (or groups') gain is another
person's loss the possibility of conflict exists. Although conflict is
generally thought of as negative there can be positive consequences of a
conflict situation. Conflict concerning housing, for example, may result
in legislators probing more thoughtfully into the problem and perhaps may
result in new legislation protecting the occupant. Conflict increases
the energy and motivation within the system and forces the persons involved
to increase their understanding of their position by having to articulate their
views and by having to bring forth and develop supportive arguments.  

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2Ibid., pp. 13-15  
1Richard Walton, Interpersonal Peacemaking: Confrontation and Third
Party Consultation (Addison-Wesley Publishing 1969), pp.50-55
This increased awareness may change many attitudes and help to clear up misunderstandings and mistaken impressions. For example, a racial conflict may result in expanded media coverage and debate and may help to dispel many stereotypes which were commonly held by both sides. For the social worker who wants to bring about planned change in institutions, conflict provides a means of forcing the community to take sides. Once the lines are drawn and the goals formulated the worker must decide how he will attain this planned change.

The worker who is faced with a response of disfavor from those in a position to bring about planned change will be forced to make many decisions based on numerous factors. How much of a chance do those proposing planned change have to win in a power struggle? What are the best means to gain support for these changes? At what point or issue can these resisting change best be attacked? The answer to these questions will determine whether or not the worker commits his group to strategies of contest or not.

If the worker sees his group as equal to or stronger than the opponent and if there is no other way to bring about the change he desires satisfactorily, then the worker will commit all his resources to winning by force. After this decision to use conflict strategies the worker must be willing to abandon, for the time being at least, any effort to work in collaboration with those resisting change. He must utilize every means he knows to gain support for his group and to siphon the resources of his opposition.

The idea of the building of the support base is a vital one to the strategy of contest. The attraction of organizations and people to your efforts at planned change is one of the most necessary elements to success.

Richard Walton, Truth, Love, p. 22
The greater the contributions, the support, and the following, the greater chance the change movement has of succeeding. The means by which the worker can draw people and organizations to his cause is by exhibiting and utilizing power.

Power has been defined by Bennis as consisting of five components. It is vital to the social worker who is acting as a change agent to have an awareness of the types of power. First there is coercive power which is the ability to reward or punish others. Coercion is unrecognized legitimate power; it is the use or the anticipated use of force to impose one's own will upon another.

A second type of power is referent or identification power. This refers to power which is given to a person, or group because of attraction to the person in the leadership role, a role model.

A third type of power is expert power which means the association of science with truth, therefore one who is an expert must be speaking the truth and gains for himself or group the power to influence and control others.6

Legitimate power is the fourth type and is described by Goldhammer and Shils:

There are three major forms of legitimate power: Legitimate power is regarded as legal when the recognition of legitimacy rests on a belief by the subordinated individuals in the legality of the laws, decrees, and directives promulgated by the power-holder; traditional when the recognition of legitimacy rests on a belief in the sanctity of traditions by virtue of which the power-holder exercises his power and in the traditional sanctity of the orders which he issues; and charismatic when the recognition of legitimacy rests on a devotion to personal qualities of the power-holder. Usually, of course, these personal qualities are, or appear to the followers to be, extraordinary qualities such as sanctity and heroism.7

The fifth form of power is value power. This is power or influence which

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is gained by an attraction of others to the values of an individual or of a group. This power is gained when persons find in a group or in an individual admirable and sought after values which they wish to possess also.

Of these five types of power the change agent needs to be aware that not all five are used, nor are they as divided in practice as they are outlined on paper. Traditional power is very seldom used since change agents are often working without established laws or in some cases against them and are very often regarded as oddballs by those opposing change. Tradition has very little to offer since it is often tradition which is being challenged. Coercive power is one which a worker who is attempting to build up a base of power is unlikely to use. Coercive power, or the forcing of persons to join your cause is not as lasting a force for the worker to use. Coercion is usually at odds with our values and mores. Also constant surveillance is needed to ensure compliance and other types of power offer more in terms of loyalty and commitment. Although the use of physical force is not often used coercion may take other forms which are more frequently used by the worker. Political influence or pressure is an example of a means of coercive power which a worker can use to persuade others to join in his planned change effort. Expert power is one which can be used by the worker to build up his support. If the change agent is recognized and possessing knowledge which is seen as that of an expert then he will gain followers who perceive him as being right in his decisions and ideas. Referent power is another means by which the worker can gain support. If the community emulates and identifies with him he will be able to exercise control and influence over them. Perhaps the most potent type of power that a change agent can possess and understand is that of value power. If the worker or the group he represents transmits values which the community admires and wishes to
gain then the size of the group and its base of support will grow.  

The competent understanding of these types of power allows the worker to strengthen his own group or to weaken his opposition. If he perceives that the power of those who oppose him come mainly from a certain value that the community admires, he could promote or advertise that same value as also being held and cherished by his group. Although other factors are involved (possibly this value is totally unacceptable to your group), this is a means by which not only could your cause gain support but also you could considerably weaken those who oppose you by deriving them of a basic source of power. Since contest situations are often decided by who has the greatest power (influence, wealth, or personnel) an understanding of power is vital to anyone working for planned charge.

In addition to the building of a following or power base the worker must also be aware of certain techniques used in contest strategy. In contrast to collaboration, contest strategies call for a number of techniques which differ sharply from techniques of collaboration. Walton writes of distributive situations and of integrative situations. Distributive situations are those which we have been referring to as contest situations, where there are limited resources and each party is trying to maximize their own gains and to protect and promote their own interests. Integrative situations are characteristics of collaboration strategies, where groups or individuals are combining their resources and working together towards a common goal. Walton compares the two situations which is reproduced below.


DISTRIBUTIVE SITUATION

1. Behavior is purposeful in pursuing our goals.
2. Secrecy
3. Accurate personal understanding of our needs, but publicity disguised or misrepresented.
4. Unpredictable, mixed strategies, utilizing the element of surprise.
5. Threats and bluffs.
6. Success is often enhanced by forming and stereotype of others, by ignoring the others logic, by increasing the level of hostility.

INTEGRATIVE SITUATION

1. Behavior is purposeful in pursuing goals held in common.
2. Openness
3. Accurate personal understanding of own needs; and accurate representation of them.
4. Predictable; while flexible behavior is appropriate, it is not designed to take other party by surprise.
5. Threats or bluffs are not used.
6. Success demands that stereotypes be dropped, that ideas be given consideration on their merit regardless of source, and that hostility not be induced deliberately.

The worker who is attempting to bring about planned change in a situation where there is issue dissensus would need not only to know about the above techniques but also have the skill to be able to use them effectively. If he, due to dissensus, choses to use a contest or conflict strategy he must have a very tight control maintained over the organization. The ability to insure secrecy within your group and to successfully use stereotypes depend on a highly disciplined following. If used correctly and with an accurate analysis of your own and your oppositions resources, contest strategies can bring about total achievement of your goals in a situation where change by any other means was improbable.

However, there could possibly come a certain stage in the contest when the worker realizes he is losing. Since he had commited himself to "all or nothing" in the beginning he is now faced with gaining nothing. At such a stage

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10 Ibid., pp. 336-337

the worker may need to resort to a different strategy in order to salvage some of his demands. Bargaining is a means by which a worker can secure some of his goals although he will be forced to give up some also. When the worker uses bargaining he must be positive that his decisions or the decisions of those who control the group represent the will of the followers. Everyone in the situation must be willing to give up something in order to gain something and both parties must be willing to coexist.

Conflict may also be resolved in other ways. Upon initial conflict, or at anytime during the conflict, the worker may discover that the reason for the dispute is a misunderstanding or blocked communication. Instead of having to continue "fighting it out," the worker may be able to reach an agreement by merely explaining his planned changes in a more direct or clear manner. For example, a service agency may resist attempts of clients to form a policy advisory board. In the course of the conflict, say during a demonstration, the worker realizes that the agency is opposing the change because the agency was mistaken as to the amount of power the advisory board was to have. If after a better explanation the agency cooperated then the conflict will have ended in collaboration.

The attempt to bring about planned changes necessitates the need to be prepared for community and institutional responses to these proposed changes. If the initial community response is, or is anticipated to be one of consensus then the worker will use collaborative strategies of which some of the techniques were outlined under Walton's integrative situation. If there appears to be difference to the issues by the community then the worker will employ campaign strategies in an attempt to persuade the reluctant parties to join.

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In the change effort. However, if upon initial effort or investigation the worker discovers that there is not consensus, nor can the differences readily be solved then he is likely to employ strategies of contest. This paper has attempted to look at some of the concepts, the techniques, and the stages of contest strategies. Since now some of our basic institutions are being blamed for societal problems there is more resistance than ever to planned change.

The social worker who is attempting to bring about these types of reforms will be opposed not only by the institutions and vested interests but also by communities which associate many of these institutions with tradition and the American way. The task of the worker will be to change not only the institutions but also the thinking and values of many citizens. This job calls for not only a dedication to improving human life but also a knowledge of conflict strategies and skill in the application of these strategies for conflict management.
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