**CONFLICT THEORIES FROM SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Karl Marx Theory**

Marx the great social philosopher opines that the degree of inequality in the distribution of resources generates inherent conflicts of interest. He explains that contradiction in capitalist modes of economic production and how these would lead to conflict processes that would usher in communism via a revolutionary action that would be carried out by the proletariats (the ruled). Although, his predictions were wrong, perhaps because of some fatal errors in his logic, but his analysis is still very much useful, applicable and relevant to most of the conflicts being experienced the world over. Karl Marx views that the more the rate or degree of inequality in the distribution of the relatively available or the scarce resources in the society, the greater is the basic conflict of interest between its dominant and subordinate segments. The more the subordinate segments (proletariat) become aware of their true collective interests, the more likely they are to question the legitimacy of the existing pattern of distribution or allocation of scarce resources. Also the subordinates are more likely to become aware of their true collective interest when changes wrought by dominant segments disrupt existing relations among subordinates, practices of dominant segments create “alienative dispositions”, members of subordinate segments can communicate their grievances to one another, which, in turn, is facilitated by the ecological concentration among members of subordinate groups, and the expansion of educational opportunities for members of subordinate group.

Marx also exerts that the more the subordinate segments at a system become aware of their collective interests and question the legitimacy of the distribution of scarce resources, the more likely they are to join in overt conflict against dominant segments of a system. The greater is the ideological unification of members of subordinate segment of a system and the more developed is their political leadership structure, the more likely are the interests and relations between dominant and subjugated segments of a society to become polarised and irreconcilable. The more polarised are the dominant and subjugated, the more will the conflict be violent. The more violent is the conflict, the greater is the amount of structural change within a society and the greater is the redistribution of scarce resources.

**Max Weber Theory**

Weber sees conflict as highly contingent on the emergence of “charismatic leaders” who could mobilise subordinates. He opined that subordinates are more likely to pursue conflict with super ordinates when they withdraw legitimacy from political authority when the correlation among members in class, status, group, and political hierarchies is high, the discontinuity or degrees of inequality in the resource distribution within social hierarchies is high, and when social mobility and social hierarchies of power, prestige, and wealth are low. Conflict between super ordinates and subordinates becomes more likely when charismatic leaders can mobilise resentment of subordinates. When charismatic leaders are successful in conflict, pressure mounts to routinise authority through new systems of rules and administration. As a system of rules and administrative authority is imposed, the more likely are new subordinates to withdraw legitimacy from political authority and to pursue conflict with the new super ordinates, especially when new traditional and ascriptive forms of political domination are imposed by elites.

**Conflict-Theory Model of Dahrendorf**

Dahrendorf (1958) introduces to the theory of conflict the view of productive and constructive conflict. He sees conflict as necessary for achieving an end in the society or for realisation of social goals. He holds that social conflict produces change in the system which is necessary and good. Dahrendorf’s attempt was to determine a systematic locus and a specific framework for a theory of conflict in sociological analysis. He contends for two different kinds of struggles in an organisation. He calls them “exogenous” and “endogenous” conflicts. The **endogenous conflict** is the conflict that is generated with an organisation, system or a society. In this, he agreed with Marx that internal conflict comes from the present social structure. He went beyond the internal dynamics of conflict to allow for external factors, which he called exogenous conflict. This also influences social change. In order words, **exogenous conflict** is brought upon or into a system from the outside. The theory asserts that certain conflicts are based on certain social structural arrangements and hence are bound to arise whenever such structural arrangements are given. Furthermore, the dichotomy of social roles within imperatively coordinated groups, and the division into positive and negative dominance riles are fails of social structure. Here are the assumptions for the structural arrangement which could lead to conflict as Dahrendorf presents in his conflict theory model.

• In every imperatively coordinated group, the carriers of positive (status quo) and the negative (change of status quo) dominant roles determined two quasi-groups with opposite latent interest. • The bearers of positive and negative dominant roles organise themselves into groups with manifest interests unless certain empirically variable conditions intervene.

• Interest groups which originate in this manner are in constant conflict concerned with the preservation or change in the status quo.

• The conflict among interest groups in the sense of this model leads to changes in the structure of the social relations in question through changes in the dominant relations.

**Pluralist Perspective of Conflict**

The advocates of the pluralist school of thought such as Hugh Clegg et al, holds a different view about conflict. The school views conflict as having a constructive contribution towards what is defined as healthy industrial order. Thus, given the appropriate institutions of regulation, the overt and active manifestation of conflict resolves discontent, reduces tension, clarifies power relation and adjusts the industrial structure. Accordingly, it creates as many solidarity groups as it devices and re-embodies the principles of self-determination. The pluralist school emerged as a criticism to the political doctrine of sovereignty, the notion that in an independent political system, there must be a final authority whose decision is supreme. Contrary to this assumption, the pluralists believed that within any political system, there are groups with their own interests and beliefs and the government itself depends on their consent, loyalty and cooperation to survive. Rather than existence of a definitive decision by final authorities, this theory contends that there are instead only continuous (conflicts, antagonisms) and compromises. In essence, a plural social or industrial relation has to accommodate different and divergent pressure groups in order to ensure that the differing group interests are harmonised such that social and political changes take place peacefully. Thus, to the pluralists, same is achievable through continuous negotiation, concession and compromises within and among these pressure (interest) groups and between the authorities. Given these backgrounds, and based on expositions of the functionalist and the pluralist schools, and their identification of the place of effective communication in the prevention and management of industrial conflicts, as evident on the need for clear communication, understanding, continuous dialogues, negotiation, concession and compromises within and among the differing groups in the work place, institution or society.

**Structural – Functional Theory**

Talcott Parson (1960) champions the course of this theory after the World War II. The structural functionalist asserted/projected that individuals will adjust to a given structure in an organisation institution or society. Any change in the structure of the organisation or institution causes conflict and it destabilises the organisation. Conflict should then be minimised in order to maintain stability with both the individual as well as the institutions. The theory reflects a system approach where each part has one or more functions to perform. The theory sees conflict as dysfunctional, abnormal, and a disease which can be endemic to a society. It focuses on things that will maintain the state of equilibrium and collaboration in the organisation.

**The Theory of Structural Balance**

Helder (1958) in this theory states that Ego tends to like whom his friend like, but dislike whom his enemy like. Also Ego tends to dislike whom he dislike, and likes whom his enemy dislikes. This non-rational approach to theory of conflict has the following assumptions according to Mazur (1968).

• For any three persons or groups, there are four trials: like – dislike, support – conflict, conformity – divergence, and positive identity – negative identity. All these tend to balance.

• Within any triad, an increase in magnitude of one sign leads to an increase in magnitude of all signs.

• Relationship of like, support, conformity, and positive identity tend to coincide. On the other hand, the relationship of dislike, conflict, divergence and negative identity tend to coincide. The tendency increases with increasing intensity of the signs, and consonant relationship increase together.

**Assumption on Ethnicity and Conflict**

According to Person, Novak, and Gleason (1982), the word “ethnic” was derived via Latin from the Greek ethnos, which means “nation or race”. Ethnicity has been viewed since the earliest times in terms of a group setting associated with the idea of nationhood. But in recent years, the instrumentalists’ view of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Africa and the rest of the world hold that “ethnicity is not a natural cultural residue but a consciously crafted ideological creation”, ethnic conflicts result from the manipulations of the (radical) elite who incite and distort ethnic/nationalist consciousness into an instrument to pursue their personal ambitions. The problem with the theory despite the fact that it contains some validity is that, it almost ignores completely the core motives and elements in ethnic conflicts such as the roles of fear and group psychology and importance of symbolic controversies which are often less comprehensible to the “outsider”. Thomson (2000) defines an ethnic group as “a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship, ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language.” Toland (1993) basically agrees with Thomson in her conception of an ethnic group, but takes it one step further by adding a sense of longing on the individual level: “…(ethnicity is) the sense of people- hood held by members of a group sharing a common culture and history within a society.” Bamass argues the assumption “ethnicity and nationalism are not ‘givens’, but are social and political constructions. They are the creations of elites, who draw upon distorted and sometimes fabricated materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their wellbeing or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves… this process invariably involves competition and conflict for political power, economic benefits, and social status between the political elite, class, and leadership groups both within and among different ethnic categories” (Kruger 1993). In the light of the discussion above, it is important to note that mere differences in values or regional development, or between ethnic groups for that matter, do not as such promote ethnicity and ethnic conflict, according to Kruger (1993). Quoting Brass, he states “… Ethnic self consciousness, ethnically based demands, and ethnic conflict can occur if there is some conflict either between indigenous and external elites and authorities or between indigenous elites.” Nevertheless, the assumption on ethnicity and conflict therefore, states that, “ethnic identity has a symbolic dimension which makes conflict arising from it more intense than otherwise. Ethnicity has the symbolic capability of defining for individual the totality of his existence including his hopes, fears and sense of the future. Any action or thought that is perceived to undermine the ethnic group which includes those that diminish its status in the eyes of the members evokes very hostile and sometimes violent response.” An aggressive and murderous ethnic militia man may even believe that his very existence is threatened by the perceived injury to his ethnic group. Similarly, a poor villager believes that a cabinet minister from his village represents his own interest and share of the national cake even though he may never receive any personal material reward as a result of the appointment.

**Assumption on Culture and Conflict**

Culture simply means the sum-total of all human existence which comprises norms, values, traditions, beliefs, customs, languages, patterns of behaviours, art music, food, mode of dressing and so on. Cultures have been delineated along a number of dimensions by various writers such as: Glen Fisher, in an interesting book called Mindsets and in his chapter in Weaver’s book (1998) characterises two kinds of societies: those based on achievement and those on ascription. Those described as “achievement” emphasise doing, in contrast to being, which describes “ascriptive” societies. The former value change and action, whereas the latter value stability and harmony. Weaver (1998) likens culture to an iceberg, in which only the tip is seen above the water line. The part that is obvious is the external culture, which is explicitly learned, is conscious and more easily changed. The external culture includes many of the elements that we normally think of as “culture”: music, literature, drama, foods, dress, customs, and verbal communications. These are all aspects of “behaviour”. External culture may also include some of our beliefs, such as religion and explicit ethnics. These aspects of culture are all obvious to a newcomer. However, there is also an internal culture, which is implicitly learned and difficult to change. That is the part which is below the waterline in the iceberg analogy. It includes some of our beliefs, our values and thought patterns, attitudes, non-verbal communication, and perceptions. Beliefs are interrelated and form “belief system”, which because they are learnt early in life, are difficult to change. It is also difficult to perceive and fully understand the internal culture of someone from a different group. Yet it is this part of culture that defines who we are and what really is important to us. Because we are often unaware of these elements it is difficult to articulate them to others, even to those whom we love. We are most unlikely to expose our inner-selves to someone with whom we are in conflict. Geert Hofstede in Weaver 1998 describes four dimensions by which he placed a number of societies on graphs. Two are particularly relevant o conflict transformation:

• Power distance – defines the extent to which the less powerful person in a society accepts inequality in power and considers it normal. All societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others.

• Individualism – opposes collectivism (in the anthropological sense). Individualist cultures assume individuals look primarily after their own interest and those of their immediate family. Collectivist cultures assume that individuals – through birth and possibly later events – belong to one or more close “in-groups” from which they cannot detach themselves. A collectivist society is tightly integrated; an individualist society is loosely integrated. Hofstede characterises American and Northern European societies as generally having low power distance and high individualism. Many African and Latin American societies have large power distance and low individualism. Some of the Southern European societies are in the middle with large power distance and medium individualism. John Paul Lederach, probably one of the best known theorists and practitioners in the field of conflict transformation today, posits that “social conflict emerges and develops on the basis of the meaning and interpretation people involved attach to action and events. Social meaning is lodged in the accumulated knowledge, that is, a person’s bank of knowledge”. Conflict is related to meaning, meaning to knowledge, and knowledge is rooted in culture. People act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them. The symbolic interactionist, Herbert Blummer (1969) emphasises the importance of symbols and meanings attach to them. Therefore, Ladarach’s assumptions (1995) can simply be liberally summarised as follows.

• Social conflict is a natural, common experience present in all relationships and cultures.

• Conflict is a socially constructed cultural event, people active participants in creating situations and interactions they experience as conflict.

• Conflict emerges through an interactive process based on the search for and creation of shared meaning. • The interactive process is accomplished through and rooted in people’s perceptions, interpretations, expressions, and intentions, each of which grows from the cycles back to their common sense knowledge.

• Meaning occurs as people locate themselves and social “things” such as situations, events, and actions in their accumulated knowledge. A person’s common sense and accumulated experience and knowledge are the primary basis of how he creates, understands and responds to conflict.

• Culture is rooted in the shared knowledge and schemes created and used by a set of people for perceiving interpreting, expressing and responding to social realities around them. However the term “culture” is often linked with ethnicity, as both the external and internal cultures are often determined by our ethnic groups, along with influences from the larger world through socialisation, education, the media and exposure to a different way of thinking and behaviour. We talk about “the culture of violence”, “the culture peace”, “the culture of poverty”, “the culture of corruption”, “corporate culture” and so on as they pervade different societies in various or different forms.

**The Role Theories of Turner**

Role is defined as that set of activities associated with any given position in an organisation, which include potential behaviours in that position, and not only those of the incumbent in question. Although Turner accepts a process orientation, he was committed to developing interactionism into “something akin to axiomatic theory”. He recognised that role theory was segmented into a series of narrow propositions and hypotheses and that role theorist had been reluctant “to find unifying themes to link various role processes.” Turner’s strategy was to use propositions from the numerous research studies to build more formal and abstract theoretical statements. He therefore, sought series of statements that highlight what tends to occur in the normal operation systems of interaction. To this end, Turner provided a long list of main tendency propositions on

(a) roles as they emerge,

(b) roles as an interactive framework,

(c) roles in relation to actors,

(d) roles in societal settings,

(e) roles in organisational settings, and

(f) roles and the person.

The most important of these propositions to this study are examined below.

**Role as an Interactive Framework**

• The establishment and persistence of interaction tend to depend on the emergence and identification of ego and alter roles.

• Each role tends to form as a comprehensive way of coping with one or more relevant alters roles.

• There is a tendency for stabilised roles to be assigned the character of legitimate expectations and to be seen as the appropriate way to behave in a situation. (Tendency for legitimate expectations). In these three additional propositions, interaction is seen as depending on the identification of roles. Moreover, roles tend to be complements of others as in parent/child, boss/employee roles – and this operate to regularise interaction among complementary roles.

**Role in Societal Settings**

• Similar roles in different contexts tend to become merged, so they are identified as a single role recurring in different relationships. (Tendency for economy of roles).

• To the extent that roles refer to more general social contexts and situations differentiation tends to link roles to social values. (Tendency for value anchorage).

• The individual in the society tends to be assigned and to assume roles consistent with one another. (Tendency for allocation consistency).

Many roles are identified, assumed, and imputed in relation to a broader societal context. Turner first argued that people tend to group behaviour in different social context into as few unifying roles as is possible or practical. This people will identify a role as a way of making sense of disparate behaviour in different contexts. At the societal level, values are the equivalent of goals in organisational settings for identifying, differentiating, allocating, evaluating, and legitimating roles. Finally, people tend to assume multiple that are consistent with one another.

**Role of Business in Conflict Situations**

Widening communities of business actors around the world is moving to adopt new approaches to corporate social responsibilities, and a “triple bottom line” of profitability, social and environmental responsibilities. Under the right conditions, the private sector may be able to help prevent violent conflict. Like public and aid supported investments, the private sector needs to be guided by an informed commitment to guard against side effects of its investments which may have negative impacts on the “structural stability” of the local and national host society, and plan for ways in which it can ensure the maximum positive benefits. Business – local, small and medium – sized enterprises, multinationals and large national companies – can play a useful role in conflict situations. Conflict implies higher risks and costs for businesses, and it is therefore, in the interest of most businesses to support efforts that prevent, resolve or avoid exacerbating conflicts. It thus becomes imperative for each and every business enterprises/organisations to support peacemaking and peace building activities. It is only under a peaceful atmosphere and environment that the “corporate culture” of any organisation could be accomplished. Challenges include how to:

• develop a sufficiently long – term perspective to promote sustainable development and help reduce conflict, and strike a balance between long–term thinking and short–term investment horizons, with the need for quick returns in unstable situations.

• understand the roles of some trade actors or networks in causing or exacerbating conflict – in particular in extractive industries (diamond, oil, forest products, and others) that are major sources of revenue for warring parties and arms sellers.

• encourage big business to stimulate local development, job creation and basic social infrastructure, especially in remote areas. This can contribute to long – term social stability and improved local livelihoods.

• link the social investment programmes that are sometime supported by companies, in particular in the health or education sectors, to wider development and conflict concerns.

• harness the potential role of companies as powerful players who could use their influence positively on political actors not only to negotiate immediate conditions for their investments but also to avert violent conflicts.

• ensure that the use by companies of public security agents and military personnel to secure installations and protect staff is not at the expense of the local population, and that illegitimate armed groups or the youth are not being inadvertently supported or financed by them.

**CONCLUSION**

However, the conflict theories from sociological perspective have exposed you to various views, opinions, ideologies and assertions propounded by different scholars about how conflicts emerge or arise among individuals during the course of social interaction at the individual, institution and societal levels.