

COMMUNITY CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION *

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THIS is an era in which much complaint has been registered about the lack of citizen as well as social work commitment to important issues of the day and a lack of ready response to major problems of society: in the words of Daniel Bell, an era characterized by "the end of ideology."

These general complaints do not, of course, apply to individuals in society and in social welfare who have continued to struggle for the advancement of ideas and both new and old causes. But, if we look at our communities as a whole, it is evident that there is less excitement over major issues and much more concern over the institutional aspects of daily living. In the Jewish field alone, it is possible to suggest [although at the risk of a substantial disagreement] that our communities become much more exercised about the percentage of allocation for the United Jewish Appeal than they are over the building of a socialist land-based Israel, more concerned over merger between family and children's agencies than they are over the great upheaval affecting family life with its concurrent effects upon our children, more exercised about the addition of a number of beds to hospitals or

homes for the aged than they are about the development of broad gauged medical care programs for the entire population and more exercised about the elaboration of a new community center building than they are about the quality of Jewish life, whether it be viewed as a family or in religious terms.

At the universities and among the social scientists, there has been perhaps more discussion of community issues but no more concern about the function of conflict in community life than is apparent in our usual civic enterprises. A few notable exceptions should be mentioned: James Coleman, Robin William, and Lewis Coser.¹

I propose first to consider some problems of definition and the significance of the subject for community organizations, then to consider some views about the course of conflict in community affairs and the constructive potentials in conflict situations.

Definitions

The dictionary defines conflict in its verb form as "to battle, to clash, to be antagonistic." In its noun form it

¹ James S. Coleman, *Community Conflict*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1957; Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1956; and Robin William, *The Reduction of Intergroup Tensions*, Social Science Research Council, New York, 1947.

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means sharp disagreement which emphasizes process rather than end results. It is reasonably evident that such a definition has some connection on the one hand with violence and even warfare, and on the other hand with competition or simpler disagreements. As a matter of fact, we will probably be on sounder ground if we consider conflict as representing quite a range of human behavior moving from one extreme of violent, antagonistic conflict in which one part *must* emerge victor over the others to the other extreme at which conflict means only a difference of opinion which inevitably ends in a compromise. In the field of welfare it is seldom that conflicts move to the extreme of physical violence, but it is true that we are given to continuous differences of opinion. This suggests that we concentrate today on the middle of this range where sharp disagreement can loosely be distinguished from violent imposition of a view on the one hand and from simple disagreement on the other. In all of this discussion I would suggest that we consider not disagreements or conflicts among individuals but conflicts in community situations even though we recognize that individuals are instrumental in carrying out community conflicts.

There are two widely held views about the subject of community conflict. One maintains that society has climbed slowly and painfully out of the morass of warfare to a form of peaceful co-existence. We have moved from situations in which human relations were governed by continuing conflict to a more "civilized" situation of vigorous competition. In this view, it is hoped that we can move on in the evolution of society to an era of cooperation in which conflict will be even further reduced to minor disagreements and cooperation.

In the other view, there is a continuous inevitable and even desirable cyclical relationship among conflict, competition and cooperation. Whenever a conflict is resolved by competition or cooperation, the seeds remain for conflict. In turn, whenever there is a deep conflictful situation, there exists the seed for competition or cooperation. The cycle is viewed as a necessary part of social change. Since we have not achieved the era of universal cooperation, but we do have recurrent conflicts even within the field of welfare, it may be wise to consider the constructive possibilities in both alternative views.

The Significance for Community Organization

A concept of conflict has special meaning for that part of community organization which is most frequently concerned with community issues rather than the technical provision of services. Ideologically, community organization has for a long time been committed to the view of cooperation and compromise. This assumption is based upon the view that federations or community councils are widely representative, that conflict divides a community and that conflict is bad for either fund-raising or for the development of a strong community spirit. We daily have to square this belief with the reality that conflict recurs, that no voluntary community organization is fully representative and that conflicts sometimes lead to change and progress in community affairs. Does this reality exist in our communities because we are still too barbaric and uncivilized, because our techniques are poor, or because conflict serves a constructive purpose in the ordering of human affairs? It is a thesis worth exploring that sharp conflict of ideas, within certain loose limits, is both necessary and healthful for community af-

fairs and that it is a way for new ideas to emerge and thus lead to change and improvement in social conditions.

In order to develop this thesis, it is important to distinguish several types of conflict in the middle range:

The first may be called the conflict of pure ideology, in which individuals hold beliefs and opinions so strongly that to abandon or modify them is considered treasonable to the innermost core of each individual's existence. Resolution of conflict can be viewed as resulting only in the total acceptance of one view over another. One view must prevail and the other must capitulate.

A *second* form of conflict may be called pseudo-ideological, in which the issues are considered not really deeply important to many members of the community. For most persons the issues are really not important enough to argue about, although they are prepared to go through some of the motions perhaps a little wearily. Functionaries of organizations, staffs and administrators may often be the major exponents of differences of opinion, about which it is very difficult to exercise or arouse anyone else seriously.

A *third* form of conflict centers around personalities. Whatever conflict exists may superficially appear to revolve around issues but actually be an expression of an individual's need to be either aggressive, hostile or dominating at any price.

Fourthly, we have what may be termed the conflict of political ideology in which the issues of social functioning are paramount. Here there are real differences about how to achieve an improvement in social affairs, an improvement in the conditions of human beings, and an improvement in social functioning.

[The term, "political," is used here to mean action on group interests, not necessarily party politics.]

The first three types of conflict certainly exist in all of our communities and must be dealt with. Since ready agreement is likely that these forms are least vital, I would like to concentrate upon the fourth, the so-called conflict of political ideology. Perhaps we can view such conflict first from the point of view of the extent to which, within it, new ideas may be initiated or innovation in social functioning brought about.

If we look into our own experiences, I am sure we will recall situations in which a new idea was vigorously argued, debated, and finally adopted to the advantage of our communities. The great debates over social security and social insurance in the 1930's and over health insurance today illustrates the general point. It may be more difficult to identify universal examples in Jewish social work, but I would offer the controversy over UJA versus local allocations which has helped our federations achieve a wider, more universal responsibility than for either local or Israel interests alone; the argument over coordination of care for the aged which has produced pioneering examples of hospital home care, home for aged integration, and so on. In these examples conflict seems to have been a part of innovation and change.

We can, unfortunately, also recall conflicts which have hurt all the participants. In these cases, less widely reported, one born of the conflict has been resistance to change. Such resistance has sometimes led the contenders to "stand pat" or to compromise with each other to keep going without effecting any significant change.

In view of such experiences what can we say about the initiation and the course of conflict situations, the professional role in it, and intervention to achieve constructive ends without having the conflict deteriorate into destructive warfare?

The Course of Conflict

In the following remarks I acknowledge a heavy debt to Dr. James S. Coleman and his stimulating monograph on *Community Conflict*.²

Four basic conditions seem to be necessary if conflict as we have defined it is to take place:

(1) *There must be an important issue.* The issue may be in the distribution of economic benefits, in the allocation or distribution of power, in the adoption of one set of values over another, or in the distribution of influence in community affairs. For social work the important issues, at least for conflict purposes, appear to revolve usually around control over the use of limited resources. Resources are limited in terms of money, of positions for community policy-making, of supporters. If we consider position, support and funds as crucial resources for the conduct of welfare activities, then it is conceivable that issues may arise over how these limited resources are to be distributed in any community enterprise.

(2) *The important issue must affect different people differently.* This is so obvious that it probably does not need elaboration, but it is worth reminding ourselves that when we seek to raise philanthropic funds, these funds are not inexhaustible and donors are likely to have views about their use different from the views held by the solicitor.

(3) *The persons or groups differently affected must have some way to meet and express their differences.* When community groups operate in their own tight little circles, there is reduced opportunity for clash and conflict. However, federation and various community organization efforts have all emphasized the importance of opening up channels of communication between various groups in the community, and this

very condition for federation has laid the basis for conflict—namely, the creation of an arena in which differentially affected persons or groups can meet and express their differences.

(4) *Finally, individuals or groups must feel that they can somehow influence the course of events by their actions.*

It is obvious that there are many other specific conditions which affect the course of conflict, but there is time only to mention a few briefly:

(1) The economic structure of a community: conflict obviously works itself out differently in a community of commuters to New York City and in a self-contained community, be it Jewish or otherwise, where most of the members live and work in a limited geographical area. I suspect, too, that the economic base of our Jewish philanthropies varies in communities and this alters the conditions for conflict. Where predominant funds are secured from outside the Jewish community [public funds or community chest], the course of conflict obviously moves differently from that in a community where the bulk of funds is secured from Jewish philanthropy.

(2) Shifts in population: when community populations have lived together for a long time, they have inevitably developed a common set of standards and certain norms about how groups behave with each other. When population shifts radically, new groups move in or move out, and there is a shift both in values and in the ways by which groups handle themselves. This was seen many years ago in the influx first of German and then of East European and finally World War II refugee populations. It is also seen as Jewish populations move into the suburbs and create new forms of organization.

(3) The residuals of past cleavages and conflicts: when communities have had sharp conflicts in the past, it is frequently true that scars remain which

² *Op. cit.*,

can provide the basis for new conflict. On the other hand, where communities have successfully resolved past conflicts and, in the resolution, developed a stronger sense of community coherence, they are capable of dealing with new conflicts more constructively.

(4) Finally, time is a factor, for we know that over many years some issues tend to disappear and others arise. One of the most common examples in Jewish communities is the dilution of the old differences which arose with the Eastern European migration at the turn of the century.

If these are some of the conditions affecting the course of conflict, what can we say about the initiation of a real disagreement? Coleman suggests that conflict arises because in all communities there tends to be a small group of persons vigorously partisan in favor of an organization such as a federation, and another relatively small group consistently opposed to the organization. A very large portion of the population is neutral or uncommitted. The large neutral group tends to go along with whatever is decided upon by the leadership of the organization in question. However, for a variety of reasons the leadership of the organization in question may begin to commit errors. In most communities affairs go rather smoothly until trouble arises and trouble may be in the form of economic upheaval, population shift, the intrusion of great outside forces such as war, or the introduction of a new idea which upsets the equilibrium of the past. Whatever the cause, these difficulties lead to dissatisfaction which encourages the opposition group to capitalize upon them.

This impetus runs counter to a normal tendency of all social organizations to seek stability. Organizations like to have things so organized that they can go smoothly from one day and one year to the next. However, new ideas are

vital for the health of any organism. How do new ideas become incorporated; how does an organization select good from bad ideas [good and bad in the sense of the aims of the organization]? If the normal organizational tendency is to settle down, how can it usefully be unsettled? A review of the literature on the subject suggests that one useful way for organizations to be unsettled is to have opposition groups take advantage of minor difficulties or dissatisfactions to introduce new ideas.

We need next to ask ourselves *how this introduction of new ideas from an opposition group becomes converted into a conflict* rather than remaining a simple disagreement. It is here possible only to trace the steps for the subject has not been thoroughly enough studied. It appears, however, that dissatisfaction in the affairs of an organization customarily remains at the specific level. There is a certain dissatisfaction with individual acts of the organization. Complaint is raised that budgeting procedures are too rigid or too time-consuming, that the hospital gets too much money or the community center gets too little, that the Hebrew school should have gotten a new building last year.

The first step from dissatisfaction to conflict takes place when the dissatisfactions move from the specific to the general, when the opposition groups can say the organization is just not serving its purpose, it is *always* making bad decisions, it is not functioning in the interests of the community. When dissatisfactions can be generalized so that the whole organization and the total behavior of all of the members can be criticized as undesirable and bad, then the conflict is well on the way.

It seems common to many conflict situations that this generalization of the dissatisfaction also changes the tactics from simple disagreement to antagonism. This often takes the form of personaliz-

ing the differences of opinion. The executive has not just made one mistake—he is inefficient or is opposed to the community interests. There is a small group of people who are indifferent to the needs of the community and are only trying to further their own interests. If this antagonism on a more personal basis is permitted to proceed to its logical conclusion, one group becomes convinced that the other is all bad and there is nothing good to be said for it.

If this situation proceeds sufficiently, community groups become polarized. The large, neutral middle group is increasingly encouraged to choose sides. The longer the conflict continues, the more the middle group is divided into pro- and anti-camps. If this is permitted to go on far enough, a complete cleavage is assured and a full-fledged conflict is on.

Next, it becomes clear that new leaders have begun to emerge in the community. The opposition group begins to draw in more and more persons from the neutral elements to assume positions of leadership in their opposition and dissatisfaction. The new leadership is not likely to have been a part of the federation or community system of making decisions in the past. When things are going along smoothly, the system, and by this I mean the welfare system of the federation or council, has worked out a set of rules by which the members play the game "fairly," with compromise and negotiation. New leadership is not a part of this pattern of compromise and negotiation, and it is much more likely to be partisan. The normal constraints which a community builds up to govern its affairs begin to weaken and the separation into partisan groups hardens.

Next, organizations of the community as well as individuals get drawn into the conflict. As organization members begin to choose sides, it is harder and

harder for the organizations to remain neutral.

Finally, as the conflict deepens, individuals in the community begin to place more and more reliance upon word-of-mouth communication and rely less on the former media of open meeting, committee, newspaper or the bulletin. This becomes obvious because as the conflict is harsher the things that people want to say about each other and about the situation are difficult to reduce to writing and people are more comfortable expressing these views privately and in face-to-face conversation.

Intervention in Conflict

This is a partial outline of the course of conflict, but if it has any validity we need to ask ourselves *what can be done to intervene* so that the conflict serves the purpose of introducing new ideas without hardening into destructiveness. Some steps can be taken *de novo* when a conflict arises; others must be built up over a long period of time so that they exercise a moderating influence when the conflict occurs.

Perhaps the first approach is to make effective use of the structure of authority and decision-making in the organization involved in the conflict. We are accustomed to thinking of two kinds of decision-making authority: one in which a few individuals or groups dominate and one in which power over decisions is shared widely by many organizations. We are also accustomed to think that the latter is preferable to the former, and that we can settle a conflict simply by getting more parties around the table to argue it out. This may sometimes be true, but we need to remember that even where influence is narrowly held the individuals can be exceedingly sensitive to community needs and can respond to it readily if

they are so inclined. Similarly, where there is a wide sharing of responsibility for decision-making, the result may be not community satisfaction and progress but a stalemate because of the inevitable differences of opinion which tend to slow down action. The solution does not seem to be a simple appeal to tight control or wide dispersion of decision-making. Instead it depends on a reliance upon authoritative groups in both kinds of organization to respond to new developments in the community rather than to ignore them or attempt to isolate them. Channels need to be maintained wide open for learning about difficulties and means must be available to explore the causes of these difficulties as soon as they are identified.

A second point of intervention is the willingness of community organization personnel to take action. It is certainly wise to avoid running after every brush fire. Similarly, it is unwise to permit minor difficulties to blow up into large-scale community problems. The earlier it is possible to move in and deal with differences to the satisfaction of the disaffected, the less likelihood there is that the differences will spread and community groups become polarized into separate camps.

This could easily be interpreted to mean that differences of opinion should be smothered and that opposition is to be "bought off." The truth is that alertness becomes effective in converting conflict into constructive uses only if palliatives are avoided and effective action taken where necessary.

Another significant step is that of co-optation. In its simplest form, this simply means the willingness to bring new blood from the opposition into our own organizations. Most social organizations tend to become fairly rigid and rely upon a fixed nucleus of leadership. Many excuses are found for keeping out

new leadership on the grounds that they are either uninformed, they really don't know how to deal with the problems, and and so on. If there is little opportunity for bringing in new leadership as it emerges early in the stages of a disagreement, there is then the likelihood that this leadership will harden in its opposition, that it will be more and more difficult to find a reasonable ground for a negotiation. No criteria have yet been systematically developed about when and how leadership of one organization can co-opt that of another in the interests of converting a conflict into action. However, it is clear that there is a gray and ill-defined line between trying to "buy in" one of the opponents and bringing him in, in order to capitalize on his new ideas. This approach of co-optation is not without its dangers. Many studies have been made which indicate that new leadership thus brought in can substantially change the character of the old organization.³ In Jewish federations the incorporation of new leadership during and following World War II substantially modified the scope and direction of federation activities.

There are a few other long-range conditions which control whether these disagreements move in the direction of fight or constructiveness. Where informal and social relationships among members of the community are very close, there is less risk of groups pairing off. Conversely, where groups tend to be isolated from each other, there is much more likelihood of hardening conflict. This suggests that one of the aims of community organization can be the narrowing of this gap between community groups. This does not mean the usual kinds of social activities of community centers, but means a concentra-

³ See Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grass Roots*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1949.

tion upon the informal social relationships among leadership members of the community. Acting upon this aim is extraordinarily difficult when we recognize the social class and economic gaps which separate members of most communities in most cities. Nevertheless, federations can do much to shorten the distance which separates rich and poor, old and new settler, upper and lower class.

The density of organization in a community seems to play a significant part in controlling the course of conflict. Contrary to the usual view, the more organizations there are in a community, *provided they have regular contact with each other*, the more a community has the capacity to contain conflict and guide it into constructive uses. This emerges from a very simple social fact, that when there are many organizations, they tend to exercise a moderating influence upon each other. This type of influence has a centrifugal effect of keeping the organizations from flying too far apart from each other. This is especially true when members of these organizations overlap and are in touch with each other on a variety of issues. Of course, where the organizations tend to be self-contained units with very little contact this moderating influence does not exist and there results a fly-wheel effect in which groups may be thrown out of the core of community activity.

Finally, in this connection, the extent of interlocking memberships exercises a moderating influence. Where many individuals in the community are members of many organizations and of different organizations, there seems to be a tendency for the different organizational interests partially to neutralize each other. It may seem peculiar that one of our usual complaints about there being too many organizations and too many multiple memberships can be short-sighted because we fail to recognize

their constructive influence in community life. But a variety of studies suggests this to be true at least to the extent that testing this premise in many situations is warranted.

Implications for Community Organization

We have had no systematic study of the dynamics of conflict so that it is difficult to know how Jewish communities as such have handled conflicts internally. Casual or professional observation suggests however that there have been many vigorous welfare conflicts which have led to improvement in some communities and losses in others. The struggle over whether or not to merge certain agencies has had different results. In some communities merged agencies have ended up providing much wider kinds of community service than the previously separated organizations. This has taken the form of more and better qualified personnel employed and the extension of new services, as for example, to emotionally disturbed children, to families through family counseling, and to home-care by hospitals. On the other hand, almost identical conflict issues have led to a running fight with the agency to be merged either remaining separate, weak and ineffective or becoming merged with sharply reduced programs and personnel. I am sure each of us can provide our own case illustrations. There are communities in which there have been bitter knock-down fights over UJA allocations, and there have been others in which sharp differences of opinion which have led to new formulae of use to all parties concerned. We are familiar with situations in which individuals have bitterly called attention to running community sores without any action and others in which individuals have been able creatively to introduce new programs, new services, new points of view.

As professionals we need to ask ourselves how much do we know about the

conditions which separate one type of outcome from the other. If we look at our individual experiences we will find that a sharp disagreement may lead to a better way of developing, organizing or handling our programs, or it may degenerate into name-calling. Further and careful study of the subject, out of our own experience and that of related social sciences, should help us distinguish the one from the other.

A final note may be worthwhile as to the *role of the professional social worker*. I suspect that no matter how much we may deplore the lack of commitment and ideology at national conferences, in our own community situations we are more than self-conscious of the limitations of our influence and authority. Effective as we can be, we recognize that real power and influence seldom lies in our own hands. How shall we perform and how shall we function in the light of this ready fact? We know from the behavioral sciences that when individuals are personally confronted with conflicting roles which on the one hand demand vigorous action and on the other the counsel of caution, they will take one of several courses of action, some of them conscious, some unconscious. The individual may welcome the conflict and wade into the middle of it. He may try to avoid the conflict entirely by simply ignoring its existence. He may choose one or the other side of the conflict and throw all of his weight on that side to the exclusion of the other.

There are no easy answers to this subject, but I would suggest that the following provide the framework for future attention to this subject: Conflict is inevitable in our communities. Conflict contained within certain loose bounds serves constructive purposes for community health. There seems to be a natural history for the development of conflict which, if properly understood, will permit us better to keep conflict within the constructive lines suggested. Professional responsibility lies first in our understanding this natural history of conflict and secondly in deciding at what point it is appropriate for professional employees to intervene in order to guide the outcome. This is not to imply that professional personnel have any overpowering influence in the situation but thorough study may suggest sensitive points at which understanding professional intervention can be effective.

The professional will be in a position to recognize when specific dissatisfactions begin to blend into a general attack, when lack of action spreads conflict, when new leadership emerges and can be brought into the organization, when contact among community groups is sketchy and diversive and where informal social contacts and communications can be set up and when firm action is constructive and not foolhardy. By these and other acts, a conflict situation can serve to introduce new ideas and keep community organizations alive and vital.