JOURNAL OF PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
JPSDS 1(1), 1-10, December (2022)
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OPEN ACCESS
ORGINAL ARTICLE

Understanding the Nature of Conflicts in Africa: A Theoretical Exploration

Adekunle AJISEBIYAWO[1]& Joseph ONOYEMEAKPO[2]
[1]Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, Nigeria..
[2]Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro, Delta State, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author:
Adekunle AJISEBIYAWO
ajisadey80@iuokada.edu.ng

Abstract
The focus of this paper is to explore the different theoretical perspectives that inform the academic attempt to understand and explain conflict in Africa. The African environment is riddled with past history of conflicts among groups either for economic outlet or imperial space and most often, such past negative interactions have made it difficult even now for some of these groups to live harmoniously together within the present state system and to trust each other. The paper observes that no one theory or explanatory schema can offer a holistic explanation of conflict. At best, each of the possible theories can only offer a partial explanation of the causes and nature of conflict in Africa and beyond. As Deutsh (1992) has noted, "any comprehensive approach to understanding conflict will necessarily include consideration of both objective and subjective factors". This paper attempted to synthesize the many sources of theories of conflicts and to provide the intellectual background from which these different theories come from. Therefore, if this paper has done anything at all, it is to offer basis for assessing different theoretical strands aimed at offering cogent and reliable explanations for most of the conflicts in Africa and especially in the West African sub-region.
Keywords: Conflict, Functionalism, Humanitarianism, Structuralism, Theory

Introduction

Attempts at explaining social phenomena in the social sciences have generated a variety of theoretical perspectives and approaches. These varieties of theoretical perspectives and approaches have equally offer methodological options for investigating social phenomena which often times are contradictory and confusing[1]. As Przeworski and Teune had opined, the role of social science is to explain social phenomenon. Explanation consists of applying general sentences and theories to particular events and if this is to be so, then the accumulation of knowledge must involve comparative research.[2]

These attempts at explaining the social world and its phenomena can be divided into two opposing schools. The first is the Positivist/Objective School of the Social Science which treats the social world as if it were a hard, external objective reality; its scientific endeavour focuses on analysing relationships and regularities between the various elements which it comprises. The concern of the Positivist/Objectivist school is with the identification and definitions of these elements and with the discovery of ways in which these relationships can be expressed. This perspective expresses itself more forcefully in a search for universal laws which explain and govern the reality which is being observed. The second is the Subjective approach to social science, a term which qualifies all social scientists that stress the importance of the subjective experience of the individual in creating his social world,

modifies and interprets the world in which he finds himself. The emphasis is upon the explanation and understanding of what is unique and particular to the individual rather than of what is universal and general. [3]

The purpose of this section is to explore the different theoretical perspectives that inform the academic attempt to understand and offer explanations of conflict because in the social science, if we must think, we must think theoretically or empirically.

Conceptualising "Theory" and Types of Theory

A theory is a set of hypotheses postulating the relationship between variables or conditions, advanced to describe, explain, or predict phenomena, and make prescriptions about how positive changes ought to be engineered to realize particular ethical principles. Put differently, a theory is a statement attempting to account for general phenomena or patterns rather than explaining unique or individual instances of the general phenomenon of which it is part. A theory, therefore, reflects the particular worldview or perspective of the scholar or theorist. The diagram below shows the major four explanatory or theoretical schools in the social sciences.

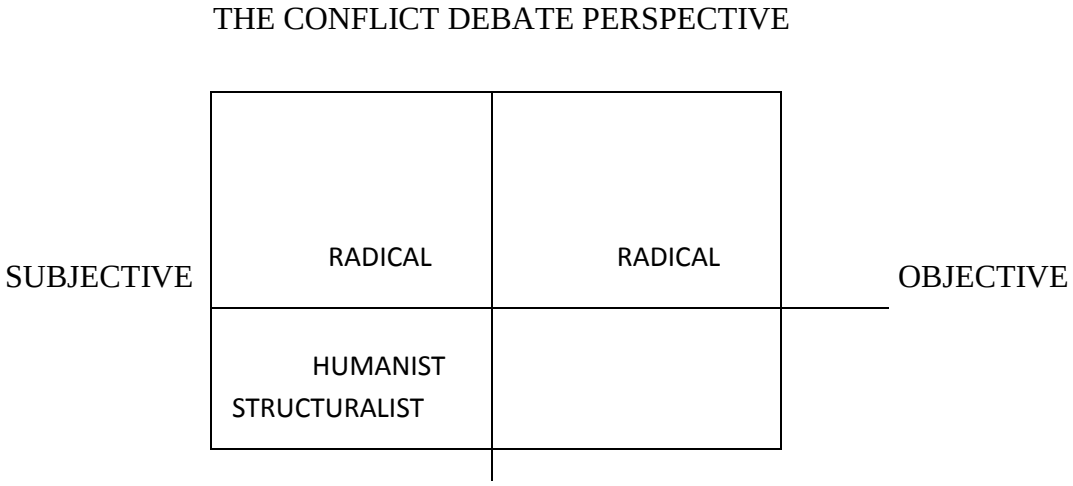


Fig. 1: Four Paradigms for the Analysis of Social Theory

(Adapted from Burrell and Morgan, 1985:22)

Each of these four paradigms is made up of certain "fundamental assumptions scholars make about the world they are studying."[4] However, the paradigms are not exclusive and independent of each other even though they may represent differences in perception and explanation of the same phenomenon. Paradigms and the theories derived from them are not immutable as they are often revised or abandoned when events have overtaken their assertions and hence their usefulness as a theoretical explanatory or analytical tool is at best temporal. Major events such as wars have been especially important in bringing about changes in theories and influencing "what ideas and values will predominate, thereby determining the ethos of succeeding ages."[5] To date, three such system-transforming wars have accounted for changes in perceptions in the 20th century. These were World

War I, World War II and the Cold War. As Schlesinger has confirmed, "every war has been followed in due course by skeptical reassessments of supposedly sacred assumptions"[6].

Today, sociological theories come in many forms and are directed to many different ends thereby raising contentions about the usefulness of theories as a basis for understanding social change and phenomena. This is because social theorists approach their subject matter from a preconceived perception or assumption that is based and informed by their respective paradigms or school of thought. It is in this sense that a theory becomes a systematic and organized postulation about social phenomenon. As Chilcote has pointed out, "theory relates to description, analysis, and synthesis. Theory involves viewing and thinking; theory generates insight. Loosely conceived, theory comprises sets of systematically related generalisations. More specifically, theory is a coherent body of generalizations and principles associated with the practice of a field of inquiry."[7] In explaining this further, Cohen has stated that, "the goal of any theory is to explain something which has occurred with a view to dealing with problems which arose or may arise as a result"[8].

The subject matter of the social scientist is the human being and his behaviour. This makes social theories and theorizing rather difficult to be subjected to mathematical exactitude; the kind that theories in the physical and biological sciences are used to, basically because the subject matter of the social scientist (man and his behaviour) is unpredictable. Deriving from this, social science theorizing, therefore, does not accept universal generations which is derived from deductive reasoning and favoured by the natural science because of its exactitude, tendency generalization which is derived from inductive reasoning is equally suspect in social theorizing because of its leaning toward determinism and therefore susceptible to disprove by a single deviant case. Meehan had therefore argued that social science theorizing should favour probabilistic explanations and generalizations.[9]

Deriving from the above therefore, four types of theory can be identified in the literature of the social science. These are analytic, normative, scientific and metaphysical theories. Analytical theories are rational basically because they rely on the use of reasoning like logic and mathematics. Although they do not concern themselves with addressing issues that deal with daily existence, they, nevertheless, provide us with clear statements which are true and from which statements leading to theory formulation can be derived. Normative theories, on the other hand, are formulated or concerned with what "ought" or "should" be rather than "what is". Therefore, they are like principles and are prescriptive rather than analytical or descriptive. When combined with non-normative theories, they produce ideological statements rather than explanatory or descriptive statements. Scientific theories produce universal, practical and empirical statements of facts that seek to explain the relationships between two or more events or phenomena. Scientific theories are derived from research findings and have universal application. They provide useful explanations, can predict and make statements derived from empirical observation and which can be subjected to tests of validation. Finally, metaphysical theories have little to do with science and make propositions that may be difficult to test or validate, and its statements are highly subjective.

Theories of Conflicts

There is an underlying competition among theories attempting to offer explanation on the nature, causes and the impact of conflicts. The competition stems from the fact that while an explanation derived from a school of thought will tend to emphasise the poverty or failure of theories from other

schools, it also portend to offer a better explanation of conflicts. Our responsibility here is not to judge a theory as better than another but rather to explain the theoretical framework within which each theory is derived.

The Structuralist Perspective or School

Two opposing strains of theory can be discerned within this perspective. The first is from the Radical Marxist and neo-Marxist school as exemplified by the works of Marx and Engels, Lenin, Mao and others commonly identified as belonging to the Underdevelopment and Dependency school such as Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, and Walter Rodney. The second strain comes from the liberal functionalist school as exemplified by the works of Ross, Scarborough and Galtung. The underlying theoretical similarity of both the liberal and Marxist structuralist rests on the fact that they view incompatible interests based on competition for resources and its control as being responsible for social conflicts. The main argument of the structuralist is that conflict emanates from the way societies are structured and organized which exclude some from having political and economic access thereby bringing about injustice, poverty, alienation, exploitation and domination of one class by another class. The Marxists blamed capitalism for creating this situation of exploitation, hegemony and monopoly by the bourgeois class while the neo-Marxist sees it from the perspective of the developed and underdeveloped societies. The way out is not the absence of conflict but rather the internationalization of conflict through a socialist revolution. Ross has noted that in societies where economic and political discrimination are the basic defining features of its structure, where economic and political activities are monopolized by a group or class of people adversarial conflict will be imminent.[10]

The structuralist perspective provides us with an explanation of immediate and underlying factors that may and will always lead to conflict and even escalate internal conflict. The struggle for economic and political relevance and recognition by marginalized class will always pit them against the class that hold and monopolise these factors. The emphasis on material interests have made some scholars to argue that the structuralist perspective might at best, provide a narrow theory of conflict.[11] However, materialism provides a strong and formidable basis for most conflicts within the Africa sub-region. Conflicts that now have an ethnic colouration actually have their roots within the struggle between ethnic groups to control the source of raw materials.

Johan Galtung writing from the liberal structural perspective, conceptualizes violence into four types.[12] The first is the 'classical' form of violence which is harm that is deliberately inflicted. The second is all form of misery deriving from the deprivation of basic material needs. Third is all form of repression which translate into loss of freedoms of various kinds; particularly freedom of choice. Finally, every form of alienation resulting from the deprivation of non-material needs, relations with society, others and oneself resulting in loss of identity. These four categories, Galtung further sub-divided into two types; direct violence of which the first type above is an example and structural violence into which the remaining three falls into. The distinction drawn by Galtung is that while direct violence is harmful actions usually caused by individuals or groups against others, the perpetrators are usually identifiable, structural violence results from features built into the structure of the society with no identifiable actor or perpetrator and with no necessary distinct starting point.

The Biological or 'Natural Human' Perspective or School

Basically, theories derived from this perspective are restatements of Darwinian view of the evolution of man from animals. This view of man has constituted one of the basic features of the conservative

ideology.[13] Other classical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, St. Augustine, Edmund Burke, Malthus and Sigmund Freud have variously expressed this perspective. This perspective sees the tendency towards aggressiveness and conflict as a flaw in human nature. Freud had argued that human being's destructive and violent tendency is a product of a struggle between the instinct associated with life and survival and the instinct associated with death. He concluded that periodic war and conflict is necessary because men preserve themselves by directing their destructive instincts and tendencies to others. These are natural feelings that need periodic release if man is not to implode. In relation to this sentiment of a periodic release of man's innate animalistic tendencies to violently express himself that Zinberg and Feldman have argued that periodic military confrontations serve as outlet for aggressive instinct. They justified conflicts as an "essential part of human nature" that is neither good nor bad, but must be accepted merely "because it is there".[14]

While some individual terrorist's or guerrilla's bio-social make-up can be explained by this perspective, it will take some convincing to explain that a whole group made up of several individuals all fall within this explanatory schema. Its explanatory value of the situation in the Niger-Delta may not therefore be adequate.

The Economic Man/Materialist Perspective or School

The economic perspective based their explanation of conflict on the fact that conflict is not 'fighting about' but 'fighting over' material thing. This perspective raised a fundamental question whether conflict is the result of greediness or man's acquisitive tendency or whether conflict is as a result of grievance over a perceived injustice. Although many explanations can be proffer for the various cases and the increase of conflicts on the African continent, actually underlying most of these conflicts are economic considerations, a contest for the control of economic assets or resources of the state. The primacy of economic consideration or economic imperative is also behind the Marxian conception of conflict.[15] For Marx, conflict is a natural phenomenon because it involves the appropriation of the man-produced world of material objects. Conflict, therefore, for Marx is a historical category basically because his theory of revolution is set within the frame of the materialistic conception of history. The transition from one social epoch to another is set within an environment of conflict; the overthrow of the existing stage, an organic process by which a new society comes into being. Thus, the materialist conception of history underlies all other aspects of Marx's sociology.

The Realist Perspective or School

Three strands of arguments can be discerned from the realist perspective. The first is the descriptive realism which sees the world as an arena of conflict. The second is the explanatory realism which seeks to offer reasons for conflict within a genetic defect in human beings which influence them to behave negatively.[16] War therefore becomes inevitable because it is ingrained (that is, natural) and thus become part of human nature. The third strand is the prescriptive realism which builds on the arguments of both the descriptive and explanatory realism and submits that states and individuals have a moral justification to defend their basic interests and ensure their self preservation by any means available and possible.

The emphasis of this perspective is on power and pursuit of national interest by every available means. The theory is a modern elaboration of Hobbesian's state of nature where man is right in

pursuing his own interests over and above others'. Morgenthau[17] who is a leading proponent of this perspective argued that humans by nature are selfish, individualistic and naturally conflicting and conflict which characterizes the imperfection of the world has its roots in human nature. He, therefore, concluded that as long as human beings and states pursue their own interests or national interests defined as power, such pursuit will always and eventually come into conflict with others who are equally pursuing their national interests, thereby leading to the inevitability of conflicts and wars. Since national interests are pursued within an environment of scarcity and competitiveness, conflicts among nations and individuals engaged in the pursuit of scarce and competitive interest are common.[18]

The Psycho-Cultural Perspective or School

This perspective argues from the point of pluralism. Wherever there are many ethnic occupying the same geopolitical zone, there are bound to be conflict. The conflict arises from the deep-seated fear of one ethnic dominating the other. Its root is also located in cultural differences and chauvinism, that is, one ethnic culture seeing itself as superior than the other. Conflict induced by ethnic differences take a long time to resolve and as examples have shown in the African continent, such conflicts result in ethnic cleansing and genocide. This type of conflict is further fueled where there is a history of ethnic discrimination, or deprivation based on ethnic origin. Following Maslow's Hierarchy of Motivation[19] and Burton's theory of Human Needs,[20] conflict becomes inevitable when one ethnic group is perceived as hindering another ethnic group from satisfying a range of needs; the highest being self-actualization, that is, fulfilling one's full potential as a human group or member of an ethnic group.

Ethnic nationalism or identity is fueled by a feeling of alienation and marginalization manifest through denial of access to political or economic system of the state. The control, domination and monopoly of the state apparatus by an ethnic group will always induce in other ethnic groups' feelings of humiliation, oppression, victimization, and inferiority which combine to wear away a person's dignity and self-esteem and may lead to acts of aggression against the dominant ethnic group or the state itself. According to Northrup, any event that threatens ethnic identity and attempt to remove the feelings of 'safety' guaranteed by group identity usual leads to defensive reactions and conflict.[21] The feeling of safety engendered by membership of a group negates fear which forces an individual to see threats whether real or not and to suspect the motives of others. As Faleti had noted, this tendency to see things in a selective way is mostly due to past history of competition for scarce resources in which the opposition always comes out as winners".[22]

In plural societies, political stability and instability are usually dependent on the state of mind, the mood and perception of the different ethnic nationalities that made up the societies. In relating the psycho-cultural perspective to the relative deprivation thesis, Davies had argued that; "it is the dissatisfied state of mind rather than the tangible provision of "adequate" or "inadequate" supplies of food, equality or liberty which produces [conflict]".[23]

The Systemic/Relational Perspective or School

The systemic perspective argues that any discussion of conflict must take into cognizance the social context within which the conflict takes place. This paradigm turns our focus to social factors and the effects of rapid changes on the stability of the society. Huntington[24] and Palmer[25] have argued that rapid development may cause conflict and instability because of the structural changes such development may bring about. Systemic changes lead to changes in people's material comfort including environment degradation that may adversely affect access to sources of livelihood, uncontrolled population explosion, skewed allocation of resources, denial or access to political and economic apparatus of the state, domination and marginalization of ethnic minority and abandonment of cherished traditional beliefs and value systems. Systemic changes almost always cause rupture in the social fabric of the society and this may create feelings of alienation and causes conflict.

Related to this is the relational theory which postulates that society is divided into groups which are in competition with each other. The nature of the competition is that it leads to conflict. Thus, this theory explains conflict as located within the relationship among groups. Groups differ from each other based on their cultural values, interests, economical and historical background and capabilities. It is these differences that create tension among and between them whenever they have to come together to compete for scarce resources. Zartman has observed that conflict is "an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence"[26]. In the same vein, Coser has equally concurred that conflict occurs when two or more people engage in a struggle over values and claims to status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rivals.[27] Coser had further explained that conflict emerges whenever one party perceives that one or more valued goals or means of achieving these valued goals are threatened or hindered by another party or parties or by their activities.[28] These perceived threats occur especially if both parties are seeking to expand into the same physical sphere or field of influence or activity. This perceptive may offer us explanation for the struggle between ethnic groups in Nigeria, or the Krio and Mende in Sierra Leone, the Bassa, Gio, Mano, Krahn and Kpelle in Liberia, the Tutsi and Hutsi in Rwanda and Burundi, and the Bambara, Malinke and Sarakole in Mali to mention a few.

Human Needs/Deprivation Perspective or School

Central to this perspective is the Frustration-Aggression Theory which summarized as conflict being innate to man and involved in all social interactions among human beings. John Dollard and his associates initially developed this theory in 1939 and had since been elaborated upon and expanded by scholars such as Berkowitz[29] and Yates[30]. This theory has argued that when men are frustrated, they resort to acts of aggression. Frustration comes when there is gap between what a man wants and what he actually gets, what Davies has put as the difference between "expected need satisfaction" and "actual need satisfaction".[31] The central thesis of this perspective is that acts of aggression do not just

occur unless as a natural instinctive reaction to denial or frustration that may occur as a result of the denial especially in situations where legitimate desires is denied. This may be as a result of how the society is structured or through forms of oppression or marginalization. Thus, the individual denied expresses his feeling of disappointment and anger through violence directed, most often, at those perceived as responsible for the denial.

Closely related to this is Ted Gurr's relative deprivation thesis which states that "the greater the discrepancy, however marginal, between what is sought and what seems attainable, the greater will be the chances that anger and violence will result".[32] He defined relative deprivation as "a perceived discrepancy between men's value expectations and their value capabilities"[33]. Of equal importance here is the J-Curve theory which is a combination of both Marx and Engels theory and that of de Tocqueville in his study of the French revolution. The J-Curve theory, therefore, postulates that when the gap between expected need satisfaction and the actual need satisfaction becomes intolerable; that is, when an intolerable gap between what people want and what they get exists, rebellion or conflict may ensue.[34]

Conclusion

None of these theories or explanatory schema can offer a holistic explanation of conflict. At best each of the theory can only offer a partial explanation of the causes and nature of conflict. As Deutsch has noted, "any comprehensive approach to understanding conflict will necessarily include consideration of both objective and subjective factors".[35] This chapter has merely attempted to synthesize the many sources of theories of conflicts and to provide the intellectual background from which these different theories come from. The academic and intellectual move in the Social sciences now is interdisciplinary which makes approaches eclectic. If this chapter has done anything at all, it is to offer a basis for assessing the explanatory power of each theory and perspective to understand conflict.

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Authors' Bio
Adekunle AJISEBIYAWO, *PhD* is Lecturer at Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, NIGERIA. Email: ajisadey80@iuokada.edu.ng)

Joseph ONOYEMEAKPO, *PhD*is Lecturer at Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro, Delta State, NIGERIA. Email: nosjawhere@gmail.com