THE KANTIAN IMPERATIVE: AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MANAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

Our contemporary society is gradually becoming saturated with violent as well as non-violent conflicts. Human relationships, growth and progress have all been seriously affected by these conflicts. Unfortunately, the traditional or the conventional methods or styles of conflict resolution and management have not been able to adequately resolve conflicts satisfactorily due to the fact that these methods or styles of resolving and managing conflicts are not only inadequate, but also have several notable disadvantages that are counter-productive to the over-all aims and purposes of conflict resolution and management. For this reason, a more practical alternative to the conventional methods or styles of conflict solution and management is required in order to resolve and manage conflict adequately and more satisfactorily in our conflict-prone modern society. This paper therefore, advocates for an adoption of the principle of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative popularly known as the "Humanity Formula" as a practical alternative method of conflict resolution and management. Hence, the aim of the paper is to critically examine the conventional methods of conflict resolution and management vis-a-viz one of the principles of Kant's Categorical Imperative, with a view to showing that the Kantian Imperative can and should become an alternative method of conflict resolution and management. The paper then argues and recommends that the principle of Kant's Categorical Imperative is more practical, more natural and more appropriate method than the conventional method and should be adopted as an alternative method of conflict resolution and management in our contemporary society.

Keywords: Kantian Imperative, Conflict Management, Conflict Styles, Conflict Resolution, Conflict Methods, Contemporary Society

Introduction

Conflict is indeed a characteristic of human nature. However, the nature and the rapid increase in the level of conflicts in our society is a cause for a serious concern and requires some proactive measures if human beings are to co-exist meaningfully and peacefully.

Globally, conflicts occupy the central place in every discussion and on every network news or broadcasts because of its ravaging effects. Conflicts have ravaged countries in countless ways since the history of human civilization, tearing apart families, communities, institutions, food systems, and regions of the world, as well as causing hunger, starvation and deaths. Currently, Ukraine is the largest and latest conflict to erupt. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on Feb. 24, 2022 has resulted in destruction, casualties and quite a number of displaced people. Afghanistan has also suffered

through decades of civil war, foreign interventions, insurgencies as well as wide-spread political, religious and economic insecurity. Conflicts in Afghanistan has cut off entire communities from livelihoods and rendered thousands of Afghans refugees within their countries borders and nowhere to run to. In Ethiopia too, the conflict has been equally complex. The conflict between Ethiopia and her neighbouring Eritrea which led to war exacted a devastating toll on civilians of both nations. Also, the South Sudanese civil war put communities through nearly a decade of violence, poverty and hunger. The ongoing war in Syria is escalating each year with humanitarian atrocities, nation-wide devastation and millions of civilian deaths. Even Yemen, one of the poorest countries of the world is not left out in the global conflicts. Nearly a decade of war has left thousands dead and millions of people displaced in Yemen. Nigeria has her own fair share of the conflicts. Although a civil war has not been officially declared in Nigeria, yet Nigeria and Nigerian peoples feel the actual heat of war on daily bases. The activities of the Boko Haram terrorist's organization, the Fulani herdsmen terrorists, the bandits in the north and the Unknown gunmen and kidnappers in the South have all exacted many economic, religious, political and social problems than anything.

A quick glance at the origin and nature of the conflicts described above as well as others not mentioned here, would reveal that appropriate method of conflict resolution and management was not and has not been employed or explored towards the resolution and management of such conflicts in those areas and regions. Hence the need for an alternative and appropriate method of conflict resolution and management that is more practical, more natural and less problematic in dealing with the complexities of contemporary conflicts.

Therefore, this paper discusses the meaning, origin, nature and types of conflicts as well as the various methods or styles of resolving and managing conflicts in the society. The paper also looks or examines one of the principles of Kant's Categorical Imperative as the alternative for other conventional methods of conflict resolution and management. Thus to begin with, a conceptual clarification of the term conflict would ensure a better understanding of our discussions.

Meaning and Nature of Conflict

Conflict is present in everyday life of individual as well as organizations. We can say that wherever there is an interaction and relationships between individuals or groups of people, conflict is inevitable. Conflict has been considered as an expression of hostility antagonism, aggression, rivalry and negative attitude towards an individual, groups, nations or structures. It is also linked with situations which involve the contradictory or irreconcilable interests between two opposite parties. For Louis R. Pondy (1989), the term conflict is used in three different ways:

(i) Antecedent conditions of conflict-full behaviour such as scarcity of resources or policy differences.
(ii) Affective states of individuals involved such as stress, tension, hostility anxiety, and
(iii) Cognitive state of individuals that is their perception or awareness of conflict situation.

Many scholars have come up with different definitions, concepts, views or school of thoughts of conflicts from a more intellectual platform all over the world. For instance, Quicy Wright (1990) defines conflict as opposition among social entities directed against one another. Bakut in his conceptual approach defines conflict as the pursuit of incompatible goals or interests by different groups or individuals" (Bakut, 2007). For Bakut, all humans or groups of humans have goals and interests which may not be the same with the goals and interests of other groups. Sometimes conflicts become inevitable when these groups confront each other in the process of achieving their goals. Note that even though conflicts may be seen as a threat to peace, it is not all conflicts that are a threat to peace. As earlier stated, it is only the negative action taken to resolve the conflict that represents the threat to peace. The term `negative' here refers to action that entails injuring other people or destroying their property in the attempt to resolve the conflict: for example, the use of arms (armed conflict) to resolve the conflict in one's favour which may result in mass killings, murder or even genocide of innocent and unarmed civilians" (Bakut, 2007).

Conflict therefore pertains to the opposing ideas and actions of different entities, thus resulting in an antagonistic state. Conflict also means contradiction arising from differences in interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations, beliefs, perceptions and tendencies. Conflict may be either manifest, which can be recognized through actions or behaviours of individuals, or latent, in which case it remains dormant for some times. Although, contradictions exist at all levels of the society – intra – psychic/personal, interpersonal, intra – groups, inter – group, institution, intra – national and international. Conflict is often a by – product of social change which may lead to constructive transformation. Hence conflict is not necessarily negative in itself. It is a normal, natural and inevitable phenomenon in any interactive situation of human life. It is equally a universal feature of human society. Conflicts are dynamic as they escalate and de- escalate, and are constituted by a complex interplay of attitudes and behaviours that can assume a reality of their own. Early theorists like Morton Deutsch (1973) distinguished between *destructive* and *constructive* conflict. For him destructive conflict is to be avoided while constructive conflict is a necessary and valuable aspect of human creativity.

From the above, we can deduce that conflict has the following features:

(i) Conflict involves a series of events and is a dynamic process. Every conflict is made up of a series of inter connected episodes.

(ii) A conflict between two individuals means that they have contradictory values, perception and goals.

(iii) Conflict arises when individuals are not able to select the available courses of action.

Suffice it to say that conflict is quite an indispensable but essential element of human relations. Consequently, conflict influences our actions and decisions in one way or another.

Classifications of Conflict

Conflict has been classified into many different types by different people. Sometimes some of these classifications are just a mere repetition of other classifications in a different format or titles. Here we are concerned with the classifications of conflict into the following types according to Gaya (2006):

Interpersonal conflict

Interpersonal conflict can also be called Man against man type of conflict. This is an external conflict between two individuals. The conflict may be direct opposition, as in a gunfight or a robbery, or it may be a subtler conflict between the desires of two or more individuals. This occurs typically due to how people are different from one another. We have varied personalities which usually results to incompatible choices and opinions.

Intrapersonal Conflict

This type of conflict is also known as Man against Self type of conflict. This is a type of conflict in which the struggle is internal. I**ntrapersonal conflict** occurs within an individual. The experience takes place in the person's mind. Hence, it is a type of conflict that is psychological involving the individual's thoughts, values, principles and emotions without affecting another individual directly. Examples of interpersonal conflict are the use of time, choice of partner, moral questions, goals and aspirations.

Intragroup conflict

This is a type of conflict that occurs among individuals within a team. Because of the incompatibilities and misunderstandings among these individuals in the group, conflict emerges. In every group or team, interpersonal disagreements may occur as a result of different personalities within the group or team which may lead to tension.

Inter-Group Conflict

This refers to conflict between groups such as club, class versus class, family versus family.

National Conflict: This refers to conflicts within a nation, involving different groups within the nation. This could be interethnic, inter-religious, or competition for resources. The Tiv-Jukun crisis is a good example of national conflict.

International Conflict: This refers to conflicts between nations. This could be for ideological reasons, territorial claims, and political competition. The Bakassi-Peninsula crisis between Nigeria and Cameroon is a good example of international conflict.

The different types of conflict above require or demand appropriate method of resolution. Unfortunately, the traditional methods of conflict as discussed above have not been able to adequately resolve conflicts without some misgivings. It is for this reason that we propose an alternative method of conflict resolution.

Methods of Conflict Resolution and Management

Conflict management methods refer to the different techniques or styles with which conflicts can be responded to. Behavioural scientists Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, who developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, have identified five styles to responding to conflict. They are: competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation. It is important to note here that no conflict style is inherently right or wrong, but one or more styles could be inappropriate for a given situation. In other words, certain situations or conflicts demand specific or particular conflict style or technique.

Competing/Forcing

Competing also called forcing is a conflict handling method, style or technique in which an individual firmly pursues his or her own concerns despite the resistance of the other person. Here, competing or forcing involves pushing one viewpoint at the expense of another or maintaining firm resistance to another person's actions. Competing style is an attempt to gain power and pressure at the other person's expense.

Disadvantages of Competing

- It may negatively affect one's relationship with the opponent in the long run.

- It may encourage other parties to use covert methods to get their needs met because conflict with these people is reduced to – "if you are not with me, you are against me."
- It requires a lot of energy and can be exhausting to some individuals.

Accommodating/Smoothing

Accommodating is also known as smoothing. This involves accommodating other peoples' concerns, rather than one's own concerns in order to preserve relationships. Here an individual sets aside his own personal needs because he wants to please others in order to maintain peace.

Disadvantages of Accommodating
- It can result in a false solution to a problem.
- There is a risk of abuse, i.e. the opponent may constantly try to take advantage of one's tendency toward smoothing/accommodating.
- It may negatively affect one's confidence in his ability to respond to an aggressive opponent.
- It makes it more difficult to reach a win-win solution in the future.
- Some supporters may not like the accommodating or smoothing response and may be turned off.
- Those who use accommodating style are regarded as unassertive and cooperative and may play the role of a martyr, complainer, or saboteur.

Avoiding/Withdrawing

Avoiding also known as withdrawing is a conflict handling style or technique in which a person does not pursue his/her own concerns or those of the opponent. He/she does not address the conflict; rather he/she deliberately sidesteps, postpones or simply withdraws instead of facing the situation. People who avoid the situation hope the problem will go away, resolve itself without their involvement, or think that others are ready to take the responsibility. Thus avoiding or withdrawing style may be perceived as not caring about one's own issue or the issues of others.

Disadvantages of Avoiding
- It may lead to weakening or losing one's position; not acting may be interpreted as an agreement.
- It may negatively affect one's relationship with a party that expects his action.
- It may be destructive if the other person perceives that one does not care enough to engage.

- It allows the conflict to simmer and heat up unnecessarily, resulting in anger or a negative outburst.

Compromising

Compromising is a style or technique that looks for an expedient and mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. The style demonstrates that one is willing to sacrifice some of his goals while persuading others to give up part of theirs – give a little, get a little.

Disadvantages of *compromise*
- It may require close monitoring and control to ensure the agreements are met.
- It does not contribute to building trust in the long run.
- It may result in a situation when both parties are not satisfied with the outcome known as a-lose-lose situation.

Collaborating

Collaborating also known as *problem-solving or problem-confronting* is a conflict handling style or technique that views conflicts as problems to be solved and finding creative solutions that satisfy all the parties' concerned. It involves an attempt to work with the other person to find a win-win solution to the problem in hand, by identifying the underlying concerns of the opponents and finding an alternative which meets each party's concerns.

Disadvantages of collaborating
- It does not permit a win-win solution.
- It may not be practical when timing is crucial and a quick solution or fast response is required.
- It requires a commitment from all parties to look for a mutually acceptable solution.
- It may require more effort and more time than some other methods (Ejeh & Yong, 2015).

We can see that none of the methods discussed above is completely without some disadvantages. Although, there is no method that is completely without some disadvantages, yet, we seek a method that is less problematic and with few disadvantages.

Kant's Categorical Imperative in Brief

Immanuel Kant was an influential German philosopher who lived from 1724 to 1804 (Scharcht, 1984). His ethics is based on his distinction between hypothetical and

categorical imperatives. He called any action based on desire a hypothetical imperative, meaning by this that it is a command of reason that applies only if we desire the goal. But for Kant, the commands of morality must be categorical imperative which must apply to all rational beings, regardless of their wants, desires and feelings. Hence categorical imperative for Kant (1785) is an unconditional imperative which immediately commands a certain conduct without having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by it. It commands actions as good in themselves and not as a means to other ends. For Kant therefore, there is only one categorical imperative and it is this: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that t should become a universal law" (Kant, 1785). Kant gave three different formulations of the categorical imperative which are regarded as the principles of the categorical imperative. The first formulation of the categorical imperative is: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature" (Kant, 1785). According to Kant, a maxim is a rule of action a man follows as part of his rule of life, whatever rules of living other men may have.

The first formulation of the categorical imperative means that in formulating a principle of conduct, a rational being is constrained to postulate an ideal. And in positing such an ideal, and himself as part of it, the agent sees himself in relation to other rational beings as one among many, of equal importance with them, deserving and giving respect on the basis of reason alone, and not on the basis of those empirical conditions which create distinctions between men (Kant, 1785). The second formulation of the categorical imperative is: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (Kant, 1785). This means that a rational being is constrained by reason not to use his fellow human being merely and simply as a means to achieve his own purposes; but always to recognize that they contain within themselves the justifications of their own existence and a right to their autonomy (Kant, 1785). This second formulation supports universally accepted laws and so forbids vices such as murder, theft, dishonesty, rape, fraud etc which from time to time are causes of conflicts between individuals in the society. Hence the second formulation of the categorical imperative imposes on all rational beings a universal duty to respect the rights and interests of others (Ejeh, 2015). The third formulation of the categorical imperative states: "Always so to act that the will would at the same time regard itself as giving in its maxims universal law" (Kant, 1785). Thus, for Kant, actions which are in accord with the categorical imperative are morally permissible while those contrary to the categorical imperative are not only impermissible but also ought not to be performed.

Looking at Kant's ethical principles above, one would see that it is humanistic in nature. It is also deontological because it values the actions more than the

consequences of the actions. For this reason and for the purpose of this study, the second formulation of the categorical imperative – "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means," which is generally known as Kant's Humanity Formula, is taken or chosen as the principle of the categorical imperative which we advocate for as the alternative method of conflict resolution and management. The choice for this principle is because apart from being humanistic in nature, it is less problematic in application as a method of conflict resolution.

Kantian Imperative: An Alternative method

Having examined the meaning and applications of the traditional or conventional methods of conflict resolution and management, and having found them inadequate in resolving and managing conflicts, we hereby present Kant's Humanity Formula or the principle of the second formulation of the categorical imperative (referred henceforth in this paper as the Humanity Formula) as the alternative method of conflict resolution and management in contemporary society.

The Humanity Formula of Kant's categorical imperative demands that we treat humanity (everyone) as an end. We find this formula so compelling to be an alternative method of conflict resolution and management because its principle resonates with currently influential ideals of human rights and dignity. The Humanity Formula forbids us from using people as objects. It recommends that we instead recognize in them the inherent dignity and value that we all have regardless of gender, religion or race. Hence for Kant, all rational beings have inherent value and should never be treated as instrument for achieving one's desires or ends. Thus, when we treat someone as an end, we respect his inherent value; but when we treat someone as a means, we see him as having only instrumental value. According to Fieser (2017) the humanity formula presents both negative and positive components. The negative components according to him, demands that we avoid treating people as a mere means, which tells us only to abstain from using people as instruments, which is a bare minimum obligation. The positive component says Fieser, is that we should undertake to treat people as an end in themselves. This tells is to actively assist or support others in retaining their dignity and rights. Hence, as Fieser rightly noted, we must go a step further and help others, especially when misfortune strikes them, as well as when they are in conflicts.

Be that as it may, the question here is: how do we practically apply the Humanity Formula to our everyday life experiences, especially when confronted with the reality of human complexities that usually bring about conflicts? Also, what makes the Humanity Formula the preferred alternative for conflict resolution and management? Firstly, the Humanity Formula is easy and more practical to apply in our daily lives

than other methods of conflict resolution. What the formula requires or demands from us is to always be conscious of other peoples' needs and ready always to respect and protect their dignity and rights as well ours. This is not hard to apply because naturally, as rational human beings, it is already our duty and obligation to respect the rights and dignity of other rational beings. The duty and obligation to respect the dignity and rights of other rational beings are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hence, we really have no choice than to respect and uphold the rights and dignity of every human person since anything contrary would attract some legal sanctions.

Therefore, to be practical, the Humanity Formula can be applied in our daily experiences in a number of ways especially when confronted with conflicts. First, when in conflict, we could start with conflict analysis in order to ascertain the nature, origin and causes of the conflict. In analysing the conflict, one would be able to determine whether the causes of conflict violate the rights and dignity of not only the partners in conflicts but also our own rights and dignity, or to determine whether our position or demands in the conflict amount to using the other person or ourselves simply or merely as a means. Determining whether we are merely using our partner in conflict merely as a means to our own ends – to achieve our own purposes – or whether our partner in conflict is trying to use or treat us merely as a means to his own ends or purposes would enable us to seek to resolve conflict objectively in order to maintain relationships. The Humanity Formula can therefore be used as a litmus test in determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, as well as deciding whether we should insist on having our ways in every conflict.

Secondly, the Humanity Formula is more desirable and a preferred alternative method than the other methods – accommodation, compromise, competition, withdrawal and collaboration because unlike these methods, the Humanity Formula contains humanistic ideals that every rational being usually subscribes to willingly and convincingly. The processes of compromise as a method of conflict resolution can at times lead to one using himself merely as a means to the ends of the other partner for the purpose of retaining or maintaining relationships. The same can be said of the other methods – withdrawal, competition, accommodation and collaboration. Hence the traditional methods of conflict resolution are more likely to involve using partners in conflicts merely as mean to an end instead of as an end in themselves as advocates by the Humanity Formula. This might be the reason why in spite of the applications of the conventional methods of conflict resolution, people still find it difficult to resolve conflict peacefully, adequately and appropriately. Therefore, it is time we try another method – the Humanity Formula – as an alternative to the conventional methods. Hence, we advocate and recommend Kant's second principle of the

categorical imperative (the Humanity Formula) over and above the conventional methods of conflict resolution and management.

Recommendations

Having examined both the conventional methods of conflict resolution and Kant's Humanity Formula, the paper, through its findings recommends Kant's Humanity Formula otherwise known as the second principle or formulation of the categorical imperative as an alternative method of conflict resolution and management in contemporary society. The paper urges conflict resolution stakeholders as well as the mediators, negotiators, conciliators, and collaborators, including the parties in conflict to adopt and apply the principles of Kant's Humanity Formula in resolving and managing conflicts in our contemporary society. It is believed that using this method would make resolution of conflict easier as well as help in managing conflicts.

Conclusion

In this paper, the meaning, nature and types of conflict were examined alongside Kant's ethical principle – the categorical imperative. The paper discovered that although conflict is an inevitable human characteristic, yet, the level and rate at which conflicts occur in our contemporary society calls for proactive measures. In providing solution to the increase of conflict and inability to resolve conflict in our society, the paper recommends as a practical alternative, Kant's Humanity Formula which is expected to resolve and manage conflict more efficiently and constructively than the conventional methods. Finally, the paper appeals to stakeholders of peace studies to adopt the Humanity Formula as a better method of conflict resolution and management.

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