Conflict and dialogue perspectives to social change: Insights from an African culture

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I examine the conflict and dialogue perspectives to social change. Distinguishing between conflict and aggression, I argue that although conflict of interest is inevitable, it is also inevitable that we use aggression to deal with our conflicting interests. The conflicting nature of human interests makes at least verbal conflict to be unavoidable, but I distinguish between verbal conflict and verbal aggression. With the help of Aristotle’s components of persuasion, I further distinguish between verbal conflict approaches such as rational nonaggressive, rational aggressive, and character- or emotion-targeted verbal aggression. With insights from the Akan of Ghana, I argue that effective constraints against aggressive behaviour can be built into social policy and, ultimately, culture. Incidentally, a critical but non-aggressive approach to verbal conflict rhymes with an agonistic mode of dialogue that redeems traditionally congenial dialogue from much of its weaknesses.

INTRODUCTION: THE TWO PERSPECTIVES

This study appreciates intellectual efforts made by conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and conflict management theorists to reduce conflict in the world, but this study departs from these efforts in two ways. First, what these theorists call “conflict” I call “aggression,” because I see conflict as much broader than aggression, and while I see conflict as a necessary ingredient of life, I think that aggression is not. Second, while these theorists work toward reduction, transformation, resolution, or management of already existing conflict, this study explores ideas in the direction of aggression prevention or at least of moderation. Such focus is significant in articulating (for humanity) the potentials that accrue from the conflicting nature of human interests and in exploring these while mitigating the effects of extremist handling of conflict, such as aggression.

In this regard, two perspectives to social change are considered. On the one hand, proponents of conflict argue that conflict is not just inevitable, but desirable for change. On the other hand, some deliberative theorists have argued for dialogic deliberation as a tool for holding society together. So while one perspective argues that social change is not possible
without some sort of tension and conflict, the other argues that social change is more a product of dialogic interaction and cooperation. The point is that, at the surface level, each of these perspectives seems necessary (at one point or the other) for social change, but they also seem diametrically opposed to each other. The necessity means that we cannot dispense with any one of them out of hand, and the apparent diametric opposition means that we ought to make some attempt at seeking some sort of methodological reconciliation. Let me begin with the conflict perspective.

**THE CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE**

My focus is on social conflict, rather than internal conflict (between ideas in the mind), conflict of schedules (in management studies), conflict of loyalty (in legal studies), or conflict between man and the forces of nature. In this regard, I will define conflict as describing a situation where two or more parties pursue goals that appear to be mutually incompatible. This situation may involve disagreement, collision, or struggle between two opposing views, persons, organizations, or nations over an issue, idea, or resource. In this overall sense, conflict may be in the form of physical combat (armed or unarmed), verbal or semantic war, or competition. Conflict theorists have argued that this situation is not only inevitable, but also desirable for progress. Even the quest for social change is an invitation to an occasion of conflicting interests, especially in going against the conservatives or those benefiting from the status quo.

According to Lewis Coser (1956, 197), a major conflict proponent, conflict is necessary to prevent the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity. Coser cites Georges Sorel (1967), who expressed worry that the gradual disappearance of class conflict might lead to the decadence of European culture, and who argued that a social system is in need of conflict to renew its energies and revitalize its creative forces. But beyond class struggle, Coser (1956, 197-98) argues that conflict within and between groups can prevent accommodations and habitual relations from progressively impoverishing creativity. Instances like the clash of values and interests, the tension between what is and what some groups feel ought to be, and the conflict among vested interests and new strata and groups demanding their share of power, wealth, and status, have been productive of vitality. Coser cites John Dewey (1930, 300), who notes,

> Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.... Conflict is a *sine qua non* of reflection and ingenuity.

Coser also argues that conflict not only generates new norms and new institutions, it may also be said to be stimulating directly in the economic and technological realms. As such, Coser questions the relevancy of the idea of trying to reduce or eliminate conflict, an idea that is fostered by the “human relations” approach (by which I think he probably means the conflict resolution and transformation theorists). This approach stresses the collective purpose of the total organization and either attempts to deny or to reduce conflicts of interest in industry or human affairs. But Coser (1967, 198) maintains that “a successful reduction of industrial conflicts may have unanticipated dysfunctional consequences for it may destroy an important stimulus for technological innovation.”
Central to the conflict perspective to social change is the idea that change cannot take place without tension and confrontation. This is because a change in social status quo will first be resented by beneficiaries of the status quo. This argument has a lot of history as its vindication, since history is filled with conflicts and wars that have brought about momentous social changes, and it can be argued that much of these social changes could not have been secured otherwise. Tyrants like Napoleon and Hitler could not be subjected to dialogue, and their character appeared to plead for the inevitability of conflict to determine what idea of society should prevail. Dialogue could not seem to assuage the Nazi of their deep-seated racial attitude towards Jews (and other marginal groups). Per the benefits that colonization afforded the European colonizers, hostile confrontation at some point was inevitable for the colonies to attain their freedom. This picture of the inevitability of conflict was somewhat repeated in the “Arab Spring,” in which people rose to do away with regimes that had betrayed the trust of their peoples and used repressive tactics to stay in control. History can point to other examples to support the necessity of conflict for social change, such as the French/Russian/American revolutions, and the stopping of people like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, and of events like the Khmer Rouge and the Rwandan genocide (some of these instances are debatable, of course).

There is no greater indication of the necessity of the tension or threat of conflict than its effectiveness in keeping good governance in check, even in a democracy. It is not just that politicians and political parties struggle perpetually with one another for power, but citizens or subjects struggle perpetually with their leaders to extract premium service. So while the presence of political opposition is necessary for effective governance, the threat of impeachment or outvoting is necessary for effective public account giving. In this sense, multiparty adversarial democracy has been built to absorb much of the belligerence that aggressive participants would otherwise exercise in less positive or more military ways.

The conflict approach is premised on the supposition that social order is maintained by interest and domination, with power in the hands of those with greatest political, economic and social resources. This perspective can be defended by arguing that even when a consensus is reached, it is likely to be a consensus of those who are uniting in common interest. Thus, consensus will not necessarily be a consensus of seeking truths, but of common interest or of the most dominant interests. Inequality is a natural outcome, since those in control of disproportionate shares of society’s resources actively defend their position, mainly through coercion. This coercion could be subtle or brash, covert or overt. This scenario suggests none other than the conclusion that any social change must come through struggle, since the benefitting group is unlikely to easily give up its privileges.

The conflict perspective can argue that no society is completely harmonious. In fact, the more likely scenario is that people often oppose the status quo. When this happens, new ideas often emerge to resolve the tension brought by opposition. These new ideas often become the new status quo, begging for future opposition and synthesis. The fact is that everything is changing and a society cannot merely depend on old ideas if it seeks to develop. Society must find a way of rising to the challenge of new visions to progress and the frequent failure to do this leaves conflict as a major channel of opening up people’s understanding to new perspectives and to broader visions. This should be among the reasons why it will be difficult to comprehend a society that is completely devoid of conflict.
Merits of the Conflict Approach

Firstly, conflict seems much quicker in dealing with despots, tyrants, imperialists, and the general category of humanity that understands only the language of force (although by conflict here I do not necessarily mean aggression). Secondly, conflict (like social agitation) is also an attractive alternative to enduring bureaucratic hurdles which are often set up against social change. In this case, conflict can heighten concern over underlying issues by bringing them to the limelight. Footing this bill are several forms of social conflict, including riots and civil disobedience. Against the backdrop of bureaucratic delays to social change, social conflict has clearly shown its potential to gain instant attention (and more urgent responses) for its executors.

Thirdly, this leads to a broader point: General understandings of what constitutes progress could often become complacent and lose coherence, but conflict often enables people to see the bigger picture and the way forward. Sometimes, the adage “no pain no gain” appears applicable to this kind of collective mind shake-up.

Demerits of the Conflict Approach

Much of the supposed demerits of conflict are actually demerits of aggression, which make conflict a not very handsome method for effecting social change, since aggression (1) lacks an objective paradigm for determining its use, (2) is very expensive, (3) causes loss of civility and generates deviant behavior, (4) causes discontinuity, (5) unless accompanied by dialogue, does not in itself end in resolution, (6) breeds negativity that can actually hurt progress, (7) dispenses with opportunities to listen to other people’s views, and (8) causes quick but short-lived changes. Let me begin with (1) and get to (8).

My first issue with a conflict approach to social change regards the lack of paradigm(s) for determining the soundness of an envisaged change. Good and bad ideas of “change” can necessitate conflict in equal measure. As an instance, while citizens that have endured centuries of despotism could look to conflict as the last resort for freedom and democracy, miseducated and possibly deranged fanatics could equally look toward conflict for eradicating “abominations” like democracy, Western education, and the “new” idea of gender equality. But in distinguishing aggression from conflict, I will later attempt to provide a paradigm for conflict that rids it of this sort of subjectivity.

Even when we are clear about the soundness or goodness of the social change for which conflict is sought (such as instituting democracy or other forms of social progress), conflict can demand a great psychological and emotional resources like courage and fortitude, and of physical resources like finance and human energy. If it involves aggression, conflict can particularly occasion the destruction of lives and property and even continue to threaten these. We can add to this the prospect of hurt feelings or memories and emotional or psychological trauma. These are all because aggression projects a certain kind of radicalism or extremism that is more liable to harm than good. Compared to the dialogue approach, the conflict approach to social change (especially when it involves aggression) is more expensive to undertake.

Apart from loss of resources, we need to contend with loss of civility, the generation of deviant behaviour, and the threat to social stability. This is also reflected in the temporary (or possibly permanent) disappearance of courtesy and politeness. Conflict is more likely
than dialogue to occasion violence, and it is often said that violence begets violence. Aggression naturally leads to counter and further aggression. This is because, like every other practice, it reinforces proclivity to itself. We increase proclivity (or strengthen our dispositions) to certain actions or behaviour by simply indulging in them.

Change cannot easily be forced upon people. Aggression can secure victories (it can result in a winner or a loser), but it does not lead to resolutions of underlying issues. Very often, the winner is a winner in the absolute sense, and the winner can take all, leaving the loser with nothing except what could emerge from the winner’s good graces (if at all possible).

Embarking on hostilities may foreclose opportunities to listen to, weigh, and benefit from other people’s views regarding issues for which conflict is sought. Some of such views may be constructive enough to discourage/foreclose aggressive conflict or make it unnecessary.

In particular, aggressive conflict may bring about quick changes, but if these changes do not have broad-based rational support, then their durability is debatable. The other alternative, dialogue, is a method that may generally take more time but could yield more enduring results. Again, the issue of contention is broad-based rational support; speaking of which, it may be better to take a longer time in reaching the right decisions than to rush into taking the wrong ones, especially since taking a wrong decision can mean starting all over again.

**THE DIALOGUE PERSPECTIVE**

For purposes of this article, I will use the term “dialogue” in the sense of a written or spoken conversation between two or more persons, or between representatives of organizations or groups, with a purpose of reconciling dissenting, diverse, and conflicting interests. I could use dialogue and deliberation interchangeably, or refer to dialogue as involving deliberation. If dialogue involves deliberation between parties, and if dialogue aims at reaching consensus regarding “the way forward,” then dialogue can be seen as an agent for social change.

The dialogue perspective, unlike the conflict approach, assumes that the only way to credible social change is communication with the willingness to compromise. Kwasi Wiredu’s (1996 and 2010) plea for democracy by consensus is centered on this point. Compromise seems the only instrument for arriving at decisions that leave all parties satisfied (or at least near-satisfied) and with no one feeling ignored or rejected. Ideally, it is supposed to take account of all interests concerning the issue at hand. The dialogue perspective is premised on the assumption that parties to dialogue are willing to trim their views and demands, so that the agreement will be preferable to each party’s single interest.

The dialogue perspective can be supported by the argument that if parties are willing to listen to each other, it is not clear that there is any human situation that cannot be resolved (or at least made manageable) by dialogue. This perspective can be supported further with the assertion that no matter how dialogue is avoided in a social setting, one may still have to go back to it (at least at some point) for fruitful social outcomes.

**Merits of the Dialogue Approach**

I need not emphasize what will result of aggressive contact between a majority and a minority, even when the minority is “right.” In contrast, however, dialogue has the potential
to take account of minority concerns. And beyond this, dialogue seems the best perspective for the long term because its characteristics include communication between and understanding of parties involved, as well as compromise and less use of both material and emotional resources.

In short, it is only in dialogue that compromises are made. If a compromise appears at any point in an apparent conflict, it is indicative of some disposition to dialogue. This could obtain if one party observes the other giving up something of value to it, and is thus encouraged or enabled to do the same.

Dialogue affords participants the opportunity to discover shortcomings in their respective demands. This is because participants are compelled to explore common grounds, listen attentively for understanding, suspend judgments, and examine their own assumptions. Very often, people’s demands could be based on some ignorance of issues or the hoarding of vital information from them. Dialogue thus ensures that parties come to more properly understand each other’s demands and even to realize errors in their demands. New implications of a position can be discovered, which could enable the position to be re-examined for coherence. These things are not guaranteed from dialogue, but are often expected results. There is an African saying that “sense is not in one person’s own head” because an idea emerging from an opponent could be the right one. When diverse groups come together to dialogue, there is predictably diversity in thoughts and this conduces to nation building and development. We could thus venture to assert that the dialogue approach might be more supportive of democratic ideals.

Another advantage of dialogue is perhaps with the quality of tone or approach. There could still be disagreements based on positions that might seem nonnegotiable, but the tone is (expected to be) different. Dialogue is supposed to occasion a good number of attitude shifts: from conquering to growing, from silencing to knowing, from telling to asking. This is a path to greater creativity and expanding horizons.

The most decisive advantage of dialogue over conflict seems to be inclusivity. This is because all parties involved can bring their ideas together and the ones that seem most appropriate are commonly selected. This could make everyone who is involved to feel part of the decision-making process; hence, participants are less likely to feel cheated. Even if one’s proposal is not taken as the final decision, one may be more understanding because she has made an input. There is much less likelihood of opposition to commonly agreed decisions, even when such decisions might be resented in private by few participants.

The process of dialogue might be time consuming, but it creates a better scenario and space for weighing and balancing pros and cons of various policies and ideas. Dialogue gives the opportunity for parties to more carefully explore options regarding issues. A successful dialogue gives satisfaction (or near-satisfaction) to all sides, and further disagreement gives more time to sort out concerns. It could be likened to collective bargaining, in which everyone leaves the table not necessarily winning, but rather swallowing some demands in order to arrive at a middle ground for operation. This is something that is conspicuously lacking in conflict.

Dialogue is comparatively more peaceful. By its nature, dialogue involves civility. Solving problems amicably leaves parties not haunted by their woes or foes since disturbing issues can be discussed and sorted out. Since dialogue is closer to satisfying results, dialogue can lead to longer-lasting social change. Change is not change unless it is sustainable,
and change is not sustainable unless it is digested and internalized by at least many of those that it is supposed to affect.

Dialogue thus leads to more effective planning of social projects. There can be an overflow of ideas regarding what should be done, but the interesting point is that the absence of aggressive conflict allows room for a more relaxed atmosphere of reflection to think things through much more carefully in order to bring about the best possible results and effect the changes needed for society to progress.

It is perhaps due to the above points that dialogue will (expectedly) result in more long lasting social change. If issues are decided by all parties involved, and parties have had enough time, peace, and security to weigh a decision, then such decision will expectedly be an enduring one.

Dialogue is likely to pack more constitutionality. Apart from the fact that it is in dialogue that constitutions are drafted and legislated, most constitutions would rather advise the use of dialogue to resolve social issues. No constitution is likely to sanction conflict (especially in terms of aggression) as a routine method for addressing social issues.

It is evident that dialogue produces much more positive outcomes for change and development. As a result of dialogue, people buy into social change: it is not forced upon them. This seems the distinguishing factor: whilst conflict (especially aggressive conflict) can occasion quicker social changes, how long such changes can endure? The kind of change occasioned by dialogue, supported as it were by common agreement, points to a greater potential to endure, the kind of durable changes that seem constitutive of development, whatever sense of development we mean in the social and human realms.

Demerits of the Dialogue Approach

Proponents of dialogue argue that not everything in life is dialectic (see Odimegwu 2008, 106). This may be right, but this does not mean that everything in life can be resolved using the traditionally congenial model of dialogue.

First, the difficulty with dialogue increases with the numerical increase in participants, making dialogue a somewhat difficult undertaking with large numbers. It is not possible for millions of people to negotiate directly, so representatives are often used, and this is the prime difficulty with modern representative democracy. The selfish desires of representatives, and thus the level of congruence between representatives and those they are representing, can result in less than ideal representation. In particular, representatives are not immune to inducements aimed at personal or caucus interest rather than general well-being.

Second, more seriously, congenial dialogue can be used precisely to resist social change. Thanks to the capacity for maneuver, intrigue, and rhetoric, dialogue is often a cover for delayed bureaucratic processes in which justice is delayed. In his drive for racial equality, Martin Luther King Jr. (1963, par 19) had argued that the most dangerous kinds of racists are not the radical racists, but the moderates, those who employ dialogue to wear you down in the guise of “friends” advising you to give up fighting for racial equality, since racial superiority is so formidable that you should “wait for the right season.” This group of racists (which usually involves the educated, academics, and intellectuals) employs dialogue, but dialogue with the motive of delaying social change, dialogue that can argue for order at the expense of justice. Despite its benefits (and frequently because of them) dialogue proceedings can be subtly dragged, most ostensibly by those whose interests will not be
served by dialogue. Bureaucratic hurdles could mean that one might need to write a letter (or series of letters), and/or to be referred to one officer or the other in a dribbling manner. Schemes like these are created to enable an issue to lose its urgent significance. This is where a conflict perspective looks quite attractive as a measure to speed up social change.

Even sincere dialogue can be a painstaking process. Since each party needs to be heard and their issues addressed, there is no opportunity to rush the mediation process. It behooves on mediators to reschedule further meetings should the current one reach a stalemate, in order thus to remove excuses for boycott or conflict.

Third, the congenial nature of dialogue offers a setting for all forms of deliberative manipulation. It is within dialogue that various argumentative fallacies can take place, prominent among which are ad hominem, straw man, appeal to sentiment, appeal to popularity, appeal to popular sentiment, grand standing, equivocation, illegitimate appeal to authority, pseudo-precision (mathematical mystification), misplaced vividness, irrelevant/misplaced statistics, and so on. In fact, deliberation could well slide down the path of sentiment, emotions, and selfish agenda. Deliberation (and thus dialogue) is not a purely rational activity. It can suffer from extraneous factors like being impressed with (and influenced by) the social prestige of some participants, superior persuasive or cunning skills, and power play. Very importantly, the majority can get it wrong. Dialogue is often an avenue for the minority or the weak (in material or deliberative terms) to be dominated by the rich, the learned, or the majority. The peace and conduciveness of the atmosphere of dialogue can also afford adventurists the opportunity to play the politics of buying opinion and the politics of numbers through lobby and even bribery. “Truth” is much more liable to be hidden in a congenial atmosphere. The best way to keep much of these malpractices out of dialogue is by incorporating some sort of conflict into dialogue, as I shall soon show. Such incorporation, as I shall argue, will also rid dialogue of much of the ineptitude for which it is often abandoned for outright and aggressive conflict.

**RECONCILING THE PERSPECTIVES**

It is obvious to anyone who reads the above that dialogue is preferable to conflict, but this preference is by no means satisfactory. The preference is informed by the severity of the demerits of aggressive conflict, but there is little satisfaction in this preference because there is a critical dimension to conflict that drives human progress, as well as because the congenial nature of what we traditionally call dialogue potentially accommodates corrupt maneuvers and manipulation by dubious parties, which can result in the kind of congenial existence of corruption or conservatism that gives rise to the temptation for quicker change through aggressive conflict.

These said, it becomes clear that reconciling the perspectives to social change is needed, but this means finding a model of dialogue that is more critical than congenial and that can double up as a model of conflict that is more constructive than destructive. These in turn mean that we must clarify which components of conflict are destructive and which are constructive. It seems that this distinction has not been seriously made. I will thus clarify both conflict and dialogue models that appear (1) constructive, (2) somewhat identical, and (3) simultaneously rid of the weaknesses for which their traditional counterparts are undesirable.

To recall, Coser (1956, 197) argues that conflict drives social change because it prevents the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity. The
problem with the submissions of Coser and fellow conflict proponents is that they fail to
distinguish what they precisely mean by “conflict” and, as a result, all sorts of incompatible
positive and negative qualities are attributed to the term. Since this clarification has not
been made, I may attempt it as follows: Conflict is broader than aggression. Central to
conflict is the conflict of interest. Conflict of interest is a natural result of divergences in
people’s interests, which is what makes conflict an inevitable and necessary ingredient in
life. Interests are not just economic, but emotional, political, social, and ideological. These
forms of interests can conflict in various ways, from love to ideological interests. As an
example, social change is itself a potential platform for ideological (and possibly economic)
conflict between progressives/liberals and conservatives. But this is the crucial distinction:
it is often the mishandling or abuse of conflicting interests that produces other forms of
conflict like hostility and aggression. Likewise, these other forms of conflict, such as
aggression and hostility, can be made to disappear often simply by reconciling or adjusting
interests that conflict.

While conflict of interest arises naturally from the rich diversity in humanity, much of
aggressive conflict is man-made. This kind of thinking about conflict should engender new
perspectives to the phenomenon: when parties find that their interests are opposed or
competitively positioned to one another’s, they are standing in paths of conflict, paths that
need adjusting. Nature often crosses parts of interests across one another at opposing or
competing points, but these crisscrosses can be resolved and reconciled without resorting
to aggression. Thus, if conflict of interest is basic to human life, responding to conflict of
interest by parties whose interests are conflicting does not necessarily need a resort to
aggression. This is because the diversity that produces conflicts of interest could be what
drives human civilization. Specifically, we have conflict when the (natures of the) goals of
two or more parties appear to be mutually incompatible (or are yet to be adjusted to become
compatible), but we have aggression when one or more parties decide to hurt or harm the
other or others.

I beg to use an example from politics. When various parties or individuals vie for a
political position, they are in a situation of conflicting interests, since they pursue goals that
appear to be mutually exclusive (assuming there is only one open position). There are
a number of ways that any of them can pursue this goal, which I will categorize into levels 1 to
3. Level 1 is that she can seize power through a coup or fight physically (militarily) for it.
Level 2 is that she may not directly resort to physical violence, but may employ verbal and
psychological aggression by using propaganda to destroy her opponent’s name through
digging for scandal, history of mismanagement, and other unhealthy antecedents. Level 3 is
that she can focus on advertising her plans for constructive leadership and development to
the masses instead of focusing on assassinating her opponent’s character or looking for
reasons about why her opponent should not be voted for.

Level 1 is physical aggression, level 2 is verbal aggression, and Level 3 is non-
aggressive, but is still a way of responding to conflicts of interest. What Coser and his
fellow proponents do not point out is that it is the level 3 component of conflict that drives
social change and progress. Specifically, level 3 is the constructive component of conflict
while levels 1 and 2 are the destructive components. Implicit in level 3 is the desire to
improve, since our aspirant would want to think seriously about her plans for development.
To be sure, the three components or levels can be combined, but that will come at the cost
de of clashing two opposing desires: the desire to inflict damage on an opponent will serve to
douse the desire to self-improve with assurances that inflicting damage on opponents will swing votes my way. Also implicit in level 3 is the lesson that interest conflicts can be handled with decency and decorum, and this lesson goes beyond politics to much of what we do with others.

Importantly, while level 1 is an example of physical aggression and level 2 of verbal aggression, level 3 is a more rational response to conflict. In particular, there are both rational and emotive ways to undertake level 2: rational verbal aggression will be to deploy various logical arguments and even fallacies to harm an opponent, while emotive verbal aggression will be to descend to the use of insults and invectives. So while level 3 is rational and non-aggressive, level 2 is aggressive and this aggression could come in both rational and emotive ways. Level 1 is just aggressive: there is no rational component in mere physical aggression.

With the help of Aristotle’s components of persuasion, I will further clarify these distinctions. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (2004, Bk. 2, 69) categorized the components of persuasion into three: word or logic (which I will term “reason”), emotions and experience (which I will call “emotive component” or “attitude of delivery”), and character (which Aristotle calls “ethos”). I have stated these components in my own order (logic, emotions, and character), which is a reverse of Aristotle’s (character, emotions, and logic), since I will prioritize the components in the strength of this order (the rational, emotive, and character components).

Every verbal delivery has a rational and an emotive component, but the relative strengths of these components vary according to the logical force of the delivery and its attitude of delivery, or the intentions of its speaker. In regard to my earlier distinction between approaches to conflicts of interest, if our political aspirant chooses level 3 (focusing on her own political manifesto), the rational component of her response is something that anyone could be proud of, and her emotive content or attitude of delivery is non-aggressive because she does not aim to hurt the image (perceived character) of any of her rivals.

If, on the other hand, our political aspirant aims at level 2 (to denigrate her competitors’ perceived character), she may do this rationally (since her allegations and findings about their negative antecedents may actually be true), but the emotive component or attitude of her delivery is to hurt their perceived character, or to “lower their face” and make them lose credibility as sources of good governance or even of credible information. This is because we listen not just to the logical force and emotive delivery of people’s demands, but also respond to what we understand as their perceived expertise, character, and trustworthiness. “Expertise” refers to having a range of specific skills in an area, and “trustworthiness” refers to the ability of people to believe a person to be honest. It has been argued that humans have an unconscious tendency to rate a source or transmitter of information in relation to the information in question, and the rating correlates to the willingness of the receiver to attribute truth and substance to the information (Hovland et al. 1953, 21; Eisend 2006, 2).

If our political power-seeker degenerates by using invectives on her rivals, then the rational component of her delivery is almost entirely wiped out, leaving just the desire to inflict emotional and psychological damage, since there is no rational component in hurling insults at fellow participants. The same conclusion follows if she resorts to level 1 (physical aggression), with the exception that this level aims to inflict physical and material in addition to emotional and psychological damages.

The political example of level 2 is not by any means representative of verbal aggression. In individual relations, people can respond to conflicts of interest by saying things to hurt
others. This kind of verbally aggressive behaviour includes insulting or swearing, sulking or refusing to talk about an issue, stomping or walking out on someone, doing or saying something to spite, and even threatening physical aggression. The problem with this kind of communicative behaviour is that it begs for similar responses. Possibilities include a cycle of retaliatory responses that can degenerate in communicative quality or in physical aggression. In fact, the bridge between verbal and physical aggression is the threat of physical aggression, as well as the obligation to fulfill this threat. Excepting the possession of exceptional self-control by at least one participant or party to emotively aggressive verbal conflict, a retaliatory cycle of verbally aggressive attacks is expected to move, either immediately or gradually, in the direction of such threat. This is why it is better to avoid verbal aggression in verbal conflict.

The above point seems to be strongly supported by empirical research. In a quantitative survey of 6,002 persons, Jan Stets (1990, 508) discovered that the causality from verbal to physical aggression in marriage is, not just positive, but significant. The finding was that there is virtually no one who is physically aggressive without having been verbally aggressive as well, which leads to the conclusion that people are generally physically aggressive only after they have become verbally aggressive. Although the time lag between the two is not certain, it is clear that verbal aggression induces negative feelings that fester until they find expression either in further verbal aggression or in physical aggression.

In more than 50% of the cases, verbal aggression occurs without physical aggression (although delay mechanism can explain some of these, as the physical aggression can come later). Importantly, findings also show that whenever physical aggression occurs, it generally does not occur without verbal aggression. These, along with other findings, show that verbal aggression is necessary for physical aggression, but verbal aggression is not sufficient for physical aggression unless accompanied by factors such as growing up in a subculture where aggression is likely to be condoned, or experiencing economic strains (Stets 1990, 505). Important for my thesis here is that, although verbal aggression is not sufficient for physical aggression, it is a necessary condition. If we are to imagine that subcultures of physical aggression are (to be consistent with the results of the study) ultimately also cultures of verbal aggression, then verbal aggression comes even closer to becoming the greatest contending condition for physical aggression.

The connection from verbal to physical aggression is quite established, but what about the movement from non-aggression to verbal aggression? Stets (1990, 504 and 514) argues that this may be caused by a redefinition of the self as aggressive, and once this redefinition has occurred, other possibilities like verbal and physical aggression may occur. Although Stets (1990, 505) focused on relationships between verbal and physical aggression in marriage, the study is actually significant for social relationships in general, since those who are aggressive to nonfamily members are also shown to be aggressive to family members (Fagan et al. 1983).

I will grant, at this point, that incidents of physical aggression without verbal aggression abound, such as cases where physical harm is already premeditated and cases such as assassinations or premeditated assault. But even such cases can be remotely traced to conflicting interests. First, such aggression can be provoked by the communicative mismanagement of conflicting interests. Second, cases that are provoked by just conflicts of interests (and unprovoked by any communicative or verbal aggression) are likely perpetrated by people who grew up in subcultures that are likely to condone physical
aggression, since such history is shown to be the only factor that can complete the number of other factors necessary for physical aggression to occur. But subcultures where physical aggression is likely condoned also happen to be subcultures where verbal aggression is high, since the relationship between the two is not just positive, but significant (Stets 1990, 508). Even psychopathy has been linked to a history of witnessing physical and, ultimately, verbal aggression (Weiler and Widom 1996, 253-57; Lang et al. 2002, 93 and 96-99).

It is clear from empirical studies such as Stets’s that much of physical aggression is related to verbal aggression. But an alternative theory has suggested that verbal confrontation is a way to “let off steam” or to release hostility or grudge before it accumulates. Rather than repress negative feelings toward someone, which may build up over time and result in possibly physical aggression, this theory argues that a person may vent them soon after they emerge. This theory is called the catharsis theory (see Coser 1956, Simmel 1955, Berkowitz 1962, Buss 1961, and Sprey 1979). Although this theory has been opposed by research like Stet’s, I think that the confusion about this theory is that scholars have not considered how subjects choose to vent their feelings. In my view, the catharsis theory is sound only on the condition that such “letting off of steam” is done without resorting to verbal aggression, since the result of verbal aggression is established regardless of whatever its motivation might be.

Yes, individuals must vent feelings of hostility to prevent these from festering, but it seems, to my mind, that the best way to do this is to employ indirect or euphemistic language. To use indirect or euphemistic language is to accomplish the double task of venting one’s feelings of anger and frustration whilst simultaneously avoiding direct attacks on a person, which involves the wise preferences for mild, innocuous, and agreeable expressions in place of offensive, harsh, embarrassing, unpleasant, blunt, and vulgar ones. In this regard, we can borrow a leaf from the Akans of Ghana, who built a quite extensive network of norms that effectively discourage verbal aggression. Samuel Obeng (1994, 38) has argued that the Akan takes conversation as being governed by the maxim of manner. The Akan is concerned not only about what is said, but also about how it is said. Kofi Saah (1986, 369) remarks that among the Akan “a person who uses blunt language instead of euphemism (presumably in potentially inflammatory situations) is regarded as not being able to speak well.” From the perspective of the Akan, language acquisition is free but language usage is constrained and conditioned by the sociocultural norms, values, and conventions of the society (Agyekum 2010, 1).

The severity of the Akan cultural normative discouragement of verbal aggression can be seen in these proverbs: *Ano watiri a esene naatini* (“A slip of the tongue is worse than a slip of the foot”) and *Asem tese kutwa, wopepa a, enko* (“Speech is like a scar: it never disappears even when wiped or cleaned”).

Obeng writes (1994, 40):

So powerful and “deadly” is the spoken word that conversational participants adopt various strategies in order not to step on one another’s toes or threaten each other’s faces. . . . conversational participants use, singly or conjointly, such effective communicative strategies as displaying reluctance, hesitation, or delay with “well,” to signal that a forthcoming move is face-threatening. . . . The Akans have several social maxims on the concept of *anim* “face,” and *animka* (“face-say,” i.e., insulting one or embarrassing one in the presence of others) is almost always avoided.
In fact, one of the best ways to understand the Akan worldview on language behaviour is to study their verbal taboo system, where tabooed linguistic categories include the use of invectives, which is meant to include both dysphemism and verbal abuse (Agyekum 2010, 1 and 109). Kofi Agyekum (2010, 110) has remarked that to ensure peace Akan culture provides linguistic disarmament, which takes the form of prohibition, inhibition, and restriction of invectives, since these aim to denigrate, humiliate, and condemn the target. These prohibited utterances are raised to the level of sacred negativity, whose most important punishment is a social loss of face. This is because uncomplimentary utterances make the speaker lose his respect before the public, disgracing him and possibly his whole family, and the Akan expression for disgrace is *animguasee*, literally “to lower the face” (Agyekum 2013, 13).

The culture is also replete with apologetic expletives to blunt the effect of critical suggestions, like *mepa wo kyew* (I beg you), *mesere meka* (I beg to say), *sebe* (excuse me, please), and other disclaimers used to warn other interactants of an imminent (apparent or real) profanity or any possible impression of irrelevant or offensive intent in the use of language (see Yankah 1991, 56 and Obeng 1994, 41). Although there are situations where directness or candor is preferred to indirectness, utterances which communicate difficulty or whose verbalization can cause face-threat are verbalized indirectly and find expression in strategies such as euphemisms, metaphors, innuendoes, proverbs, circumlocutions, and hyperboles (Obeng 1994, 42, and 64).

Since language must be linked to culture, these show, in my opinion, that the Akan culture must be very discouraging of aggression (verbal and physical) between individuals, and this offers crucial insights into the management of conflicting interests. First is that a purposeful cultural stranglehold on freedom of attitudinal delivery makes it virtually impossible to redefine the self as aggressive. This constraint against aggressive self-definition is evident in the ideas of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., in confronting situations of conflict or aggression (although these are examples of individually motivated self-restraint rather than culturally motivated self-constraint). Again, these fit with my distinction between the rational non-aggressive and the rational and emotional aggressive approaches to conflict. For us to make the most of conflicts of interests, we must stick to rational and non-aggressive approaches, since these approaches do not essentially rob us of the effectiveness of asserting our interests.

One would have thought that I must recommend a descent to aggression in dealing with tyrannically minded individuals and tyrannical systems, but it is not so simple. We must make a concession to aggression as a last resort (after dialogue) to psychopaths like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, and so on. Even regarding tyrants, dialogue must be offered first, and aggression chosen only when it has been ascertained that they clearly are dialogically impoverished. But there are cases where aggression has also been *interlaced* with dialogic opposition to achieve successful social change, especially where aggression alone by the marginalized cannot overcome the oppressor, cases such as dethroning colonialism in many countries and Apartheid in South Africa. In addition, there are also cases where persistent but non-aggressive or nonviolent campaigns have dethroned very formidable systems of oppression, such as the campaigns of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. It all seems to depend on the psychopathic composition of a leader (or leaders) and the response that such composition ultimately boils down to. But one interesting point is that persistent but non-aggressive opposition can reveal the primitivism and moral inferiority of tyrannical orientations, even to some tyrants. Such self-disclosure
appears to punish their self-esteem and has a much greater potential to change their approach to the world than counter-aggression can ever do. It seems to me that the persistent promotion of the idea of critical but non-aggressive opposition has the effect not just of driving innovation, but also of generally reducing tyranny-mindedness in the long term.

A second insight is that culture can be made to become a very significant constraint to the “redefinition of self as aggressive.” Societies can collectively decide, in both traditional and modern ways, that aggressive self-redefinitions are not socially encouraged. In this regard, if traditional culture is waning in influence, it can be substituted with modern social norms and social policies. Specifically, freedom of expression cannot extend to freedom in the use of invectives and insults. I will dare to argue that freedom of expression should also not extend to harmful or hurtful communication that is masked as seemingly rational arguments (bearing in mind a distinction between constructive and destructive criticisms).

Most importantly, the non-aggressive rational approach to conflict, as proposed here, rhymes with an agonistic model deliberation. This model has been proposed by Andre Bachtiger (2010) and deployed in some of my earlier writings (see Ani 2013). This deliberative model derives its configuration from agonism, which seeks to harness much of the positive benefits of conflict, competition, critique, confrontation, and challenge while seeking to mitigate their demerits (Ani 2013, 16). It is a theory that acknowledges that some level of political tension is always necessary to prevent complacency and conformism, and that nature must make provision for a confrontation of differences. We can thus see an agonistic dialogue as the attempt to even up the congenial nature of dialogue by introducing dispassionate inquiry similar to cross-examination in court. This should serve to check deliberative manipulation by unearthing tacit assumptions, wrong premises, and unsound conclusions. In this way, it inches dialogue from the kind of traditional congeniality that makes it vulnerable to manipulation, and provides the critical edge that makes it difficult to practice bribing, manipulation, status-worship, and intrigue. Again in this way, it is beneficial to minority groups whose views could otherwise be tactfully ignored in a congenial dialogue. This is because the best way to truth is through a critical process. Criticality is also more effective than congeniality in inducing the transformation of opinions and preferences (whether this transformation is immediate or gradual). I do not propose agonistic dialogue as the sole defining nature of dialogue, but at least as a moment in it, since it is congeniality that serves to dispose participants to a context that is somewhat non-aggressive.

Someone would have to play the devil’s advocate in agonistic dialogue (that is, the role of someone who disagrees with majority opinions and assumptions), and I am convinced that this role rests on the shoulders of minorities in any deliberative setting. This role will serve to heighten majority awareness of overlooked problems and serious flaws in policy proposals (Bachtiger 2010, 23, 29). This is because agonistic moments have the potential to shake up majority opinions or preferences that are either unreflected or dubious. In this way, agonistic dialogue serves to unleash the essential parts of any deliberation by counteracting cognitive biases and thus preventing dialogue from sliding into the too-congenial model that can really shy away from critically engaging issues in the name of “peace,” and from sliding into the congenial ineptitude for which dialogue is often abandoned for outright aggression. We should also expect agreements produced through the inclusion of this instrument in dialogue to be qualitatively superior to agreements produced under a totally congenial model of dialogue which is vulnerable to manipulation.
Under conflict situations, however, the devil’s advocacy is already at play, since each party is the other’s devil’s advocate. Thus, what is needed in conflict is the restraint from aggression, much more than efforts towards agonism. If we can keep aggression out of conflict, then we can envisage the atmosphere where better arguments can prevail. The only component that will be lacking in comparing this to agonistic dialogue will be the will to seek common ground. But this will can be suggested or introduced from within the parties to conflict, or from neutral parties if the will is lacking among the parties to conflict.

Agonistic dialogue can accommodate verbal conflict, but the boundary between agonistic moments of dialogue and verbal aggression is the introduction of uncomplimentary language. If there is an introduction of verbal aggression, then it is no longer agonistic dialogue. In sum, we can argue critically all we want about one another’s proposals and interests, provided that no one resorts to verbal aggression. Restraints from such behaviour can be built into social norm and accompanied with deterring punishment. One of the most effective punishments (as shown by the Akans) is the loss of face: I think that the easiest way to secure adherence to social norms such as these is to hang the consequences of their violation on social esteem.

Overall, dialogue must incorporate some critical edge while conflict must be approached critically but non-aggressively. The former will rid dialogue of much of the ineptitude for which aggression is preferred, while the latter provides more dialogic ways of handling conflicting interests that make much of aggression unnecessary. This conclusion salvages what conflict theorists defend about the value of conflict by distinguishing what precisely society gains from conflict and, simultaneously, retains the preference for dialogic approaches to conflicting interests and social change by introducing a critical or agonistic component that rids traditionally congenial dialogue of much of its weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

This study lends support to the World Health Organization’s ideology of reducing physical violence. I support its thesis that violence is not inevitable, but I have striven to show that what causes violence, namely, the conflict of interests, will always remain. The happy dimension is that conflict of interests is not a sufficient cause of aggression, but needs humanly culpable decisions to translate to aggression. Thus, humanity has to begin to find ways not just to reduce already occurring aggression, but to put socially restraining instruments in place. This can be done through cultural and social policies of communicative decorum and restraint.

An opinion has been advanced that the world trend of physical violence is on a long-term decline (see Eisner 2013). While we may be thankful for this, a more fragmented view of the world will show that it covers up a lot of disturbing surges in violence in some parts of the world. This is because it (long-term reduction in violence) applies more to places that may have seen long histories of the bloodiest forms and scales of violence, and where people are gradually realizing that much of the fumes spent in physical conflict can actually be burnt up in more deliberative ways. It is not the same case in some other parts of the world where violence is increasingly on the upscale.

The value of information is the reason for the superiority of adversarial deliberation over physical confrontation: verbal exchanges (if unaccompanied by verbal aggression)
can inadvertently produce information that can be sobering, or even educating, on actors, but verbal and physical aggression cannot produce this (with the exception of the mere information or insight about who is stronger, more insulting, or more destructive).

It is not just that human interests will always conflict, it is beneficial for humanity that this occurs, since it is what supplies the diversity of thought, and is part of the larger code of diversity that equips humanity with intellectual resources that are larger than those of a single individual. Without conflict of interest there will be no diversity, without diversity there will be no pluralism, without pluralism there will be no tension in social dynamics, without a charged social dynamic there will be no competition, without competition there will be too little stimulus for self-improvement, and hence there will be too little stimulus for social development of any kind. If this fact is appreciated, then the conflicting nature of human interests must be seen from more joyful perspectives. I have argued that aggression is not an inevitable response to conflicting interests. To be sure, aggression itself will not disappear, given the imperfections of human nature. But aggression can be greatly moderated. The extent that agonism is preferred to aggression is the extent to which the benefits of conflicting interests can be reaped in less costly ways.

NOTES

1. I will later maintain that it is not the traditionally congenial kind of dialogue that can effectively do this.
2. For this Akan term, see Agyekum (2010, 13).
3. These items of verbal aggression are taken (with minor modifications) from Stets (1990, 506).
4. Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) and Stets (1990, 505-13) identify history of witnessing violence as the only factor that can complete the number of factors necessary for the decision to commit physical aggression.
5. I thank Mr. Richard Nyarko, the librarian of the Classics library of the Department of Philosophy and Classics, University of Ghana, for giving me this proverb. Incidentally, the proverb is also mentioned in Obeng (1994, 43).
6. To Mahatma Ghandi and, ultimately, Jesus Christ, we owe this lesson, which has been effectively utilized by Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. In spite of witnessing and experiencing gross atrocities against himself and his people, and of losing much of his life to incarceration, Mandela's forgiveness to the perpetrators of apartheid had more capacity to crush what was remaining of the tyrannical attitude of the White minority than any counter-offensive by the Blacks could ever have done.

REFERENCES


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