**Chapter Three**

**Managing Conflict from a Theoretical Perspective**

**Chapter Summary**

As we state at the beginning of this chapter, understanding theories can help up understand our conflicts better so that we can adapt to them more easily.  Psychodynamic theory, or example, help us understand that aggressive impulses result from internal conflict between the id and the superego, which produces frustration and tension.  The internal conflict can arise from tension, stress, insecurity, anxiety, hostility, sexual urges, or depression.  Pschodynamic theory explains displaced, misplaced, and overblown conflicts.

Attribution theory helps explain retaliatory behavior - we respond the way we do because we assume we understand why other people behave as they do.  Making internal attributions for others often results in name-calling and assigning blame.  We make external attributions to explain other's behavior when we don't like it an external attributions when we do like what we see.  Meanwhile, we do the opposite for our own behavior.

We can discuss uncertainty theory at two levels.  Conflict creates uncertainty within the relationship in which is occurs, and uncertainty also exists to different degrees within the particular conflict.  Uncertainty in the conflict situation occurs when we have insufficient information to understand another's motives, goals, or behaviors or when we do not understand another's behavior.  Uncertainty theory helps explain false conflicts.

According to social exchange theory, partners determine the value of their relationships.  Social exchange theory explains how people rate their relationships in terms of what they are giving and getting out of them.  Partners make the two comparisons to determine their level of:

1). relationship satisfaction (based on previous experiences) and

2). relationship commitment (based on rewards/costs of alternatives)

Systems theory also deals with relationships.  A system has some purpose - it is goal-directed and adapts to its environment - a type of self-maintenance of self-regulation.  Thus the system maintains itself (homeostasis) in pursuit of a goal.  Conflicts happen as people adjust to the demands of other people in the system or to the demands of the environment on the system itself.

Sometimes people will say that a theory sounds reasonable but doesn't work in practice.  Good theories are those we can put to use.  The theories presented in this chapter are part of a conflict manager's toolbox - they help to make sense of conflict behavior and guide us in the competent choice of conflict management strategies.

**Learning Objectives**

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

● explain the key concepts and assumptions that identify factors that play an important

role in interpersonal conflict according to each theory.

● explain key principles that describe how conflicts develop according to each theory.

● identify the type of conflict explained by each theory.

● demonstrate how one should manage or resolve interpersonal conflicts according to

each theory.

**Chapter Outline**

**[Objective #1: Explain the key concepts and assumptions that identify factors that play an important role in interpersonal conflict according to each theory.]**

**[Objective #2: Explain key principles that describe how conflicts develop according to each theory.]**

**[Objective #3: Identify the type of conflict explained by each theory.]**

**[Objective #4: Demonstrate how one should manage or resolve interpersonal conflicts**

**according to each theory.]**

I. Theories allow us to carry skills from one situation to another and to apply them appropriately within situations; a **skill** is a behavior one learns, which means that the person can improve it. Theories allow us to understand what the appropriate time is.

II. Intrapersonal Theories of Conflict

A. Psychodynamic Theory

1. **Psychodynamic theory** says that people experience conflict because of their intrapersonal (internal, psychological, emotional, mental) states. Displaced and misplaced conflict (where the conflict is acted out with the wrong person or over the wrong issue) and overblown conflict (where the conflict receives more attention than it really deserves) are the types of conflicts that are best explained by this theory

2. The id is the unconscious aspect that “contains everything that is inherited, present at birth, or fixed in the constitution.”

a. The id contains the libido, the source of instinctual energy, which demands discharge through various channels.

b. The id operates on the “pleasure principle,” a tension-reduction process in which tension from a bodily need is translated into a psychological wish in order to reduce the tension.

c. The id seeks pleasure and avoids pain; it seeks only to satisfy its needs without regard for the cost of doing so.

2. Opposing the id is what Freud called the *superego*, containing both the ego ideal and the conscience. The ego ideal is an internalized idea of what a person would like to be. The conscience contains morals and other judgments concerning correct and incorrect behavior

3. Mediating between the id and the superego is the *ego*, governed by the “reality principle,” which attempts to “postpone the discharge of energy until the actual object that will satisfy the need has been discovered or produced.”

4. Effects identified by psychodynamic theory

a. Anxiety is a tension that occurs when people perceive danger in a situation. b. Repression is another defense mechanism that occurs when we try not to

think about our situation.

c. Frustration results from the internal battle between the id and superego that often erupts into conflict with others. Frustration can originate from many sources, for example, tension, stress, insecurity, anxiety, hostility, sexual urges, or depression.

B. Attribution Theory.

Attribution theory states that people act as they do in conflict situations because of the inferences they make about others based on their behavior.

1. Internal attributions about another person (she wanted, he hates, she’s stupid, he’s evil, she’s angry, etc.), it often results in name-calling (you cheat, idiot, lazy, good for nothing, etc.) and assigning blame (it’s all your fault).

2. External attributions for oneself is a way to avoid blame (it’s my parents’ fault that I am this way, I can’t help that I didn’t go to the right school) and to avoid giving credit to others where it is due (your spouse must have done it for you, you got the job because you graduated from the right school, you must have had connections, etc.).

3. If I do something impressive, I like to take the credit for it (aren’t I great!), but

when it is nasty, I try to blame it on someone else (she made me do it). This is called the attribution error.

C. Uncertainty Theory

1. Uncertainty in the conflict situation occurs when we have insufficient information to understand another’s motives, goals, or behaviors or when we do not

understand how another is responding to us

2. Uncertainty theory helps explain false conflicts, which occur when at least one person in an interdependent relationship thinks that there is a conflict but after talking to the other(s) involved, finds there is no conflict

3. People reduce uncertainty in conflict situations in one of three ways. First, they may choose to trust the other, although the ability to trust depends on past behaviors. Second, they may reduce uncertainty by taking the perspective of the other person. And third, they may reduce uncertainty by engaging in “imagined interactions,” or thoughts about what they might say and what the other might do in a conflict situation

III. Relationship Theories of Conflict

A. Social Exchange Theory

1. Social exchange theory states that people evaluate their interpersonal relationships in terms of their value, which is created by the costs and rewards associated with the relationship

2. The comparison level (CL) is a standard with which people determine how satisfactory or attractive a relationship is

3. Comparison level for alternatives (CLalt) tends to be applied when a third party enters the picture. Third party intervention may lead a person to examine the current relationship and perceive inequity in it, in turn creating conflict