Basic Understanding of Conflict  
Definition Causes and Types of Conflict  
  
BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF CONFLICT

The word “conflict” is as old as mankind. This is because the word has been in existence in all spheres of human life since the inception of the world. In the recent past, the world socio-political environs have been on the boil despite the colossal amount of human and material resources expended on global peace and conflict management by several nations, states, regional organisations and the United Nations.   
  
Historical Background and Conceptual Definition of Conflict  
  
The word “conflict” is derived from the Latin word *confligere*, meaning to “strike together.”  
  
Lexically, according to *Webster Dictionary, Vol. 1, 1971,* conflict means: to strike, to fight, struggle  
or battle, clash, contention, confrontation, a controversy or quarrel, active opposition, strife  
 or incompatibility, to meet in opposition or hostility, to contend, to be contrary or to be at variance.  
  
Conflict also means contradiction arising from differences in interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations, beliefs, perceptions and tendencies. Although, conflict is a normal, natural and inevitable phenomenon in any interactive situation of human life, contradictions exists at all levels of the society – intra – psychic/personal, interpersonal, intra – groups, inter – group, institution, intra – national and international. Conflict is not necessarily negative in itself. It is often a by – product of social change and may lead to constructive transformation.  
  
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.  
  
Quicy Wright (1990:19) defines conflict as opposition among social entities directed against one another, it distinguished competition and defined it as opposition among  
social entities independently striving for something of which the resources  
are inadequate to satisfy all. Competitors may not be aware of one another, while they are parties to a conflict.  
  
Two points which are directly related to conflict analysis and management can be deduced from this definition. Conflict and competition are two points of a continuum on which conflict represents aggravated competition. In order words conflict arises when disagreement emerging from competition cannot be resolved. It follows therefore that conflict management has to begin  
with and include management of supposedly simple competition. The other point that can be inferred from Wright’s definition is that conflicts are themselves processes that tend to degenerate from non-violent to violent and from crisis to full-scale war.  
  
Conflict take on a wide variety of forms and have been classified based on the intensity or scale  
of violence, structural and character of parties in conflict (such as class, ethnic, groups, religious group, racial group, and so on) and manifesting a distinct spatial character (such as national, regional, inter-state or international). However, non-violent conflict has the potential to become violent if the regulatory mechanism is ineffective.  
  
Wright also opines that war is a type of conflict, thus, by understanding conflict we may learn about the probable characteristics of war under different conditions and methods most suitable  for regulating, preventing, and winning wars. Wright proceeds to give two senses in which war could be understood, that is, in the legal sense, war is considered a situation during which two or more political groups are equally entitled to settle conflict by armed force. Whereas in the sociological sense, which is of ordinary usage, war refers to conflicts among political groups carried on by armed forces of considerable magnitude.

Kriesberg (1973:17) simply defines conflict as “a relationship between two or more parties who believe they have incompatible goals.”

Stagner defines conflict as “…a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceived as being obtainable by one or the other, but not both… each party is mobilising energy to obtain a goal, a desired object or situation, and each party perceives the other as a barrier or treat to that goal.”

Ross (1993 6:xiv) notes that: “If disadvantaged groups and individuals refuse to consider open conflict, they deny themselves what sometimes  
is their most effective means for bringing about needed change”. Rose therefore saw nothing wrong in conflict, he saw it as a natural and inevitable human experience and as a critical mechanism by which goals and aspirations of individual and groups are articulated, it is a channel for the definition of creative solutions to human problems and a means to the development of a collective identity. What Ross is trying to infer is that without conflict we cannot have change.  
  
Similarly, Laue (1990:256-7) notes that:

*Conflict is not deviant, pathological, or sick behaviour per-se. It is not the opposite of order.  
There is orderliness in conflict, although conflict can become disorderly. It can be a very helpful and useful part of society. What to be feared is destructive conflicts (that is, conflict that have started producing negative results) rather than conflict itself.*  
  
Action Aid (1994) and Hoivik and Meijer (1994) see conflict as “incompatible behaviour between parties whose interests are or appear to be, incompatible or clashing.” Two things could be taken from these simple definitions. The first is that conflict emanates from (social) relationships. The conflicting group must groups must reside in close proximity whether physically or psychologically.  
  
Causes of Conflict  
As earlier mentioned, conflict is inevitable and it keeps occurring in every individual life, either at home, work, social outings or even when we sleep in our bedroom without interacting with anyone. Although, we are familiar with those inexhaustible things that causeconflicts, but in this  
context, they can be categorised into four namely:

•conflicts over resources  
•conflicts over psychological needs  
•conflicts involving values  
•conflicts over inadequate information

Conflicts over Resources  
  
These types of conflicts are usually easy to identify because they can be seen and are more potentially easy to resolve. This conflict occurs when two or more people are competing for  
inadequate (or perceived to be inadequate) resources over a period of time. The competition may assume negative or destructive dimension when the available resources are not evenly and judiciously distributed. The relatively deprived would always struggle to improve their lot. This view agrees with the Marxian theory of conflict, which posits that the more the rate of unequal  
distribution of scarce resources in the society, the greater is the basic conflict of interest between its dominant and subordinate segments. He also says that when practices of dominant segment create “alienation dispositions” the more the subordinate segments of a system become aware  
of their collective interests and question the distribution of scarce resources, the more likely they are to join in overt conflict against dominant segment of a system. Resources that cause conflict include: landed properties, money, vehicles, and company ownership/shares among others.

Conflict over Psychological Needs  
  
Conflicts over psychological needs of groups and individuals are conflicts which cannot be seen but affect the psyche of the individual and group self-actualisation, need for individual and group  respect, attempt to project one’s group to be better than the others. With particular reference to Maslow’s theory, he points out that when an individual psychological need is achieved or satisfied, such an individual becomes dominated by a drive for the other unsatisfied needs through a process he calls “Fulfillment Progression”. Example includes structural factor, politics, personality clash, and ethnicity.  
  
  
Conflict Involving Values  
  
  
Contradicting value systems such as religious beliefs, ideological positions, and general worldview is another factor responsible for social conflict among the interacting parties. Conflict involving values are the most difficult to understand and resolve because most times people could die for what they believe in. According to Weaver, who likens culture to an iceberg, he says “internal culture”, is implicitly learnt and difficult to change. That is part of culture  
that is below the waterline in the iceberg analogy. It includes some of our beliefs, our values and thought patterns, attitudes, non-verbal communication and perception. Beliefs are interrelated and form “belief system”, which because they are learnt in life, are difficult  
to change. Examples of values laden conflicts include the Cold War, terrorism  
(suicide bombing), religious conflicts such as 1980 Maitatsine crisis, the 1991 Bonnke crisis in Kano, the 2002 Beauty Pageant crisis. Others include the September 30, 2005 Cartoon crisis over a Danish newspaper, Jyllands Posten, published cartoons caricaturing Prophet Mohammad,  
the most recent of all the religious crisis in Nigeria is the *Boko Haram* crisis that has killed an estimated tens of thousands of people.  
  
  
Conflict over Information

The last but not the least of the factors causing conflict in any society is “manipulation of information”. The pivotal role of information in societal conflict cannot be over-emphasised, they  
can either be manipulative or constructive. Especially in a widespread conflict situation, the role of information becomes more crucial, difficult and dangerous. When the information system in a society is tampered with, there is bound to be conflict. The information system can be tampered with in different ways. This can be either by feeding people with lies or giving the right information at the wrong time. In our contemporary societies, the quantity and quality of information vary dramatically and are dependent on wide range of factors, from level of literacy  
to social cohesiveness and stability to available technology. Central to the availability and quality of public information is the media (print, audio and audio-visual).  
  
Also, in deeply divided societies, the media can also shape opinion and decisions related to the nature and scope of conflicts, as well as the potential alternatives to conflict, where social, political and economic conflict have degenerated into widespread violence, the role of information in mitigating the effects of violence or in presenting alternatives can be crucial. Because communication is an integral part of conflict, it comes as no surprise that those participating in organised violence often use the media to attack opponents, and “spread disinformation or misinformation” and “rally external and internal support.”  
  
Some of the communication barriers that are capable of distorting meanings are physical distance, language, and the listeners’ value judgement.  
  
TYPES OF CONFLICT  
It is important that we know types of conflict we encounter in our day-to-day activities. There are numerous kinds of conflicts but we will limit ourselves to the following:.  
  
a. Intra-Personal Conflict: This type of conflict occurs within an individual. Examples of such are use of time, choice of partner, moral questions, goals and aspirations.  
  
b. Inter-Personal Conflict: This refers to conflict between two or more individuals over an issue.

c. Intra-Group Conflict:  
This refers to conflict between individuals, or faction within a group.  
  
d. Inter-Group Conflict: This refers to conflict between groups such as club, class versus class, family versus family.  
  
e. 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.  
  
f.International Conflict: This refers to conflicts between nations. This could be for ideological reasons, territorial claims, and political competition.  
  
  
Classification of Conflict

Ted Robert Gurr, in his article “A Comparative of Civil Strife” and Quincy Wright in his paper “The Nature of Conflict” rightly argue that the level of violence rather than its absence or presence is a better criterion for classifying conflicts.

Wright for instance distinguishes between “ordinary” conflict (which involves small-scale violence usually at the individual and group levels) and war, which is carried out by armed forces and involves violence of considerable magnitude.  
  
Similarly, Gurr distinguishes between “turmoil,” which includes both non-violent and small-scale violent conflict and rebellion or internal war. The point in this latter classification is that notwithstanding their peculiarities, conflicts differ largely in degree rather than kind and should therefore be analysed in terms of continuum which has non-violent conflict at one end and violent ones at the other. This enables us to pay close attention to the possible escalation or worsening of  
conflicts, sometimes a simple non-violent/violent classification appears to shape the other.  
  
  
Another popular classification categorises conflict into structural and non-structural conflicts. Structural conflicts which tend to be endemic are those which are predisposed by the innate character of the polity. Typically, they result from “unjust repressive and oppressive sociopolitical structure”. Structural factors also include inequality among groups in obtaining access to socioeconomic and political privileges and benefits such as education, income distribution, unemployment, and control of political power, as well as low levels of national integration which  encourage “zero-sum” context for state power.  
  
Defined in such terms, Wherp, in his work “Conflict Resolution” opines that most conflicts in Africa are endemic by definition to the extent that the predisposing factors are not embedded in the political system. They result from specific policies or actions by the state or groups and do not  
generally last for too long.  
  
The third classification of conflicts is based on the character of the parties in conflicts. Thus, ethnic and religious conflicts (which are most prevalent in Africa) tend to be the most important bases of identity for most individuals and as such attract strong loyalties to the groups involved.