ments by which particular disputes can end. Here, interests associated with social structure complement the interpretations arising out of psychocultural dispositions.

Interests and interpretations motivate actions in such different ways that an adequate explanation for societal differences in conflict behavior is one which considers both mechanisms. Resource scarcity, whether absolute or relative, finds expression in group and individual interests. When overt conflict develops and what form it takes when it occurs depend on the relationship among the disputants, their interpretations of each other's motives, and their own fears. An explanation of a cultural pattern of conflict can begin with either the interests or interpretations involved, but to be comprehensive it must at some point consider both elements. For example, high conflict among the Mae Enga (and other highland New Guinea peoples) is surely related to land scarcity, but the intensity and persistence of local fighting is only comprehensible in light of the psychocultural dispositions linking the land to the core of one's identity and rarely remitting trust and security outside the clan.

In every society interests and interpretations are organized in particular ways that reflect and shape its culture of conflict. If the language of conflict in any society emphasizes unique features, my analysis points to important common elements as well, which I shall consider in the next chapter, a discussion of the concept of the culture of conflict.

In closing, I draw on my cross-cultural analysis to develop three insights about conflict. First, the culture of conflict is a useful tool for understanding societal level differences in conflict, emphasizing both how culture shapes conflict behavior and how conflict can be understood as cultural behavior. Second, just as medical diagnoses frequently focus on pathology, social analysis can easily examine only problems. The results of the cross-cultural study provide an opportunity to reflect on the positive lessons from low-conflict societies. Through discussion of low-conflict societies, I hope to suggest how some of their institutions, practices, and norms may be relevant in other settings. Third, the cross-cultural theory of conflict with its emphasis on social structural interests and psychocultural interpretations has important implications for the management of individual disputes. In particular, I suggest that constructive conflict management is most likely when both interests and interpretations are effectively addressed.

Conflict as Cultural Behavior

The culture of conflict is a society's configuration of norms, practices, and institutions which affect what people enter into disputes about, with whom they fight, how the disputes evolve, and how they are likely to end. It is a product of social structural organization and psychocultural dispositions. Culture is an emergent concept, something which appears on the aggregate but not individual level in the sense that a single person cannot have his or her own culture; rather, culture is what is shared by people living in a society. Although any society's
culture of conflict has unique features, the analysis here has emphasized a small number of general patterns.

The concept of the culture of conflict is relevant to understanding both conflict and conflict management. Although theories of conflict have many implicit hypotheses about what constitutes effective conflict management, and despite the fact that approaches to conflict management are based on often unarticulated hypotheses about the roots of conflict, theories of conflict and approaches to conflict management are too rarely brought together. The concept of the culture of conflict directs attention to how societal level institutions and practices affect the course of particular conflicts. Despite the fact that different processes operate at the societal and dispute levels, culture links the two.

Culture affects conflict behavior, but conflict can also be viewed as cultural behavior. All conflict occurs in a cultural context. Knowing something about the cultural context in which a conflict occurs tells us a lot about its roots, its likely course, and its management. This study identifies two critical sources of cultural differences in conflict—social structure and psychocultural practices.¹

Culture is a way of life transmitted (with modifications) over time, and embodied in a community’s institutions, norms, and accepted practices. It provides critical tools by which groups and individuals operate in and understand their social worlds. Culture is broadly seen in worldviews that influence action, whereas a social community (less abstract than culture) uses more direct methods to shape the behavior of its members (Price-Williams 1985).

The goals and procedures of community institutions are linked to culturally shared notions of appropriate behavior. In terms of conflict, this refers to shared expectations about how to respond to particular kinds of events, how others in the community are likely to react, and what are reasonable goals and approved ways of pursuing them. Culturally shared rules can guide behavior even in the absence of institutions to enforce them. Even in as basic a conflict as Axelrod’s prisoner’s dilemma tournament between computer programs, culture is present in the definition of what constitutes winning and in the payoff matrix, and changes in either of these produce different outcomes.

1. This does not deny the effect of individual differences within any cultural community. Group members who are more—or less—assertive, ambitious, or pugnacious in a setting often make a difference.

Conflict is cultural behavior, therefore, because culture shapes so many of its key elements. Conflict can take place outside a culturally shared frame of reference; when it does, the absence of common assumptions makes it especially difficult to contain. In such situations one party may use its own cultural assumptions to try to understand what another has done or is likely to do, often with disastrous results (Cohen 1991). At other times a group decides that an adversary’s values and behaviors are completely at odds with its own and therefore behaviors toward it are not subject to any of the inhibitions on within-group conflict.

Culture is critical in the development of in-group and out-group identities, providing the metaphors and associations to distinguish allies and enemies. Through participation in day-to-day events, groups associate affectively salient experiences around which identities coalesce. Critical differences between groups are not found in the objective dissimilarities between such experiences so much as in small disparities that can take on great emotional meaning.

Cultural differences can mark the political polarization of a community and at the same time provide signals that help people to lead their lives with a minimum of overt conflict. In Northern Ireland, Boyle and Hadden note:

Ulster people [do not] spend [all] their time arguing, abusing each other or fighting. On the contrary, they are naturally reserved and wary on first acquaintance. That is because it is important for them to establish on which side someone else stands. When two Ulster people whose communal identity is not self-evident meet, each immediately sets about discovering—without, of course, asking—whether the other is Protestant or Catholic. Since the difference between members of the two communities is not instantly apparent, as it would be in societies divided by race, colour or language, they use a series of more or less accurate cues: surnames . . . ; Christian names . . . ; schooling (perhaps the test if it can be got at); the ‘h’ test (Catholics tend to say ‘haitch,’ while Protestants tend to say ‘itch’); or just the attitudes that may be disclosed on a whole range of sensitive issues. The point of this elaborate process is to enable both parties to avoid saying or revealing something that may prove embarrassing or offensive or may lead to disagreement on some fundamental issue. The desire to avoid having to embark on an argument that both sides know cannot be resolved is as good an indication as any of the stubbornness with which each clings to its basic political beliefs. (1985:58)
Culture shapes how individuals understand their social worlds, how they classify people, evaluate possible actions, and sanction certain responses but not others. Conflict reflects cultural priorities but can also be used to alter them. Culture is also political because its control over the definition of legitimate actors and actions favors certain people and groups.2

Generalizing societies (where internal and external conflict are at similar levels) and differentiating societies (where internal and external conflict are at different levels) offer two contrasting cultures of conflict. While more preindustrial societies are generalizers than differentiators, the fact that differentiation is associated with increased complexity and stronger cross-cutting ties means that both cultural styles might occur in many settings. What the data analysis could not address are the conditions giving rise to the development of each style or the dynamics of its perpetuation. The two groups of societies are most readily distinguished in terms of their structural features. However, it is reasonable to expect important psychocultural practices involved in the maintenance of generalization and differentiation as well. This question is worthy of more systematic analysis.

The Low-Conflict Culture

The data analysis in chapters 6 and 7 highlights differences between low- and high-conflict societies. Throughout the discussion, however, there has been greater emphasis on those societies with high levels of conflict because it is easier to account for an existing or problematic phenomenon than an absent one. Yet a low level of conflict is not simply the absence of a high level of conflict. The culture of conflict in low-conflict societies can and should be described and discussed on its own terms. I first discuss low conflict societies, building on the data analysis from the earlier chapters, while noting that in some low-conflict societies, conflict is not dealt with very effectively. For this reason I then introduce the notion of the constructive conflict society, a society defined

not in terms of low conflict level, but in terms of conflict management processes which promote integrative solutions that meet the underlying needs of all parties.

High- and low-conflict societies are most clearly distinguished by their psychocultural features, whereas structural features are important when we consider differences between internal and external conflict. A model of the low-conflict society can provide both theoretical and political insights. Theoretically, one seeks to better understand the institutions and practices common to low-conflict communities. Politically, increased discussion of low-conflict communities in a world where the dramatic cases of death and destruction get the lion’s share of attention may counter the sense that high conflict is inevitable and suggest how specific distinctive institutions and practices found in low-conflict settings may have relevance elsewhere.

The low-conflict society is not one without disputes and differences, but more often one where differences that arise are managed in such a way that extreme rancor, polarization, and outright violence are avoided.3 Such a society is most distinctive in terms of the psychocultural features which permit it to develop institutions and practices which handle disputes in certain characteristic ways. The common structural features characteristic of low conflict societies are less obvious, however.4 Low-conflict societies are not simply those with less wealth and hence fewer resources for people to fight over, for the data analysis found little relationship between overall conflict and measures of wealth or complexity.5 Nor are low-conflict societies more likely to be centralized,

3. I prefer the term low-conflict society to peaceful society for several reasons: it suggests the notion of a continuum rather than a dichotomy and allows that all societies have at least some conflict. In addition, peace is often juxtaposed to war and open fighting whose relative absence I see as just one feature, albeit an important one, of low-conflict societies.

4. Many claims about low- versus high-conflict societies have a tautological character. For example, high conflict is often explained in terms of cultural or ethnic diversity, whereas other cases where the same diversity exists but the level of conflict is far lower are ignored. As already discussed, Northern Ireland’s high level of conflict is explained in terms of differences between Catholics and Protestants without regard for the many nations in Europe (and elsewhere) where the incidence of overt Protestant-Catholic conflict is far lower.

5. Under certain conditions there may be a negative relationship between material abundance and conflict, to the extent that the scarcities producing the
powerful states that limit internal fighting, although this has been the case with the Buganda and the Aztecs. Koch (1974) says that conflict among the Jale of New Guinea frequently escalates rapidly because there are no effective third parties to step between the disputants, but the analysis here finds many low-conflict societies that lack these powerful third parties and many cases of high conflict levels despite the presence of third parties.

Psychocultural Conditions

Low-conflict societies have a psychocultural environment that is affectionate, warm, and low in overt aggression, and relatively untroubled by male gender identity conflicts. These patterns, established in early relationships, are likely to produce dispositions facilitating the peaceful resolution of disputes. The low level of overt conflict these dispositions engender means that fewer violent events provide models of appropriate action and the idea that nonviolent action can be efficacious is more strongly reinforced.

A secure self-identity that promotes interpersonal and social trust is probably a crucial disposition in the low-conflict society, and it facilitates the management of conflict in several ways. Secure and trusting individuals are less likely to interpret conflict situations in extreme terms, thus increasing the likelihood of more moderate, less escalatory responses to events. Greater trust means a lower sense of social isolation, less fear of abandonment, and a stronger sense that effective action can make things right. Conflict situations tend not to be viewed in intensely personal terms, facilitating third party involvement in developing solutions, and the acceptance of compromises. Finally, a strong disposition to empathize with (if not necessarily accept) the concerns of others enhances the tendency to work with others toward mutually acceptable solutions (White 1984).

Lest the reader think that I have moved from data-based analysis to utopia construction, let me hasten to add that these characteristics are relative, not absolute. Disputes in low-conflict societies can certainly be intense and bitter, but the point is that they are less likely to lead to violence and destruction, which then make constructive solutions difficult to achieve. Certainly there can be anger and bitterness accompanied by displacement, projection, and externalization. But in the end, these processes are less intense because conflicts produce less of a threat to the fundamental existence of one’s self or one’s group.

Structural Trade-Offs

The psychocultural dispositions found in low-conflict societies apply to both internal and external conflict. The structure of societies low in each form of conflict, however, is quite different. Societies with low levels of internal conflict are internally integrated and their extensive cross-cutting ties discourage bitter, enduring disputes. Multiple lines of social cleavage offer alternative sources of identification and attachment, lessening the relative importance of any single social identity.

Strong cross-cutting ties produce a relatively large number of potential third parties who can step between disputants when conflicts arise. These third parties act because their own interests are threatened when a dispute remains unresolved, and they can invoke the interests they share with the disputants or those which affect the wider community, putting the specific issue of contention in perspective. In a dramatic but apt example of this phenomenon, Turner (1957) vividly describes how the Ndembu of Zambia respond to the periodic stress caused by the conflicting principles of virilocal residence and matrilineality through intense ritual activity which unites previously divided individuals and groups. North American Plains Indians also use intense ritual activities at such emotionally charged times as the onset of the

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7. Turnbull (1961) describes conflicts among the Mbuti, for example, where intense emotions are expressed; but few of these cases end in violence producing permanent injury and damage.

8. Extremists in polarized societies use this maneuver in reverse whenever they fear that moderates on both sides may be moving toward accommodation. A bombing or some kind of dramatic terrorist action rekindles the sense of threat to each community’s existence and creates a climate in which continued public discussion between moderates is not viable.

6. Deutsch (1973) uses the term “benevolent misperception” to refer to ways in which disputants make assumptions of each other’s cooperative motives and good intentions.
hunting season to bring together kinship-based and other local groups who could easily come into conflict during the coming months.9

Cross-cutting ties lower the intensity of conflict psychologically in addition to affecting interests. The existence of interpersonal or institutional links among groups sharing common interests can make the other’s demands seem more reasonable, or at least less threatening. Cross-cutting ties produce nuanced, less extreme images that facilitate a reaction to the substance of a demand rather than to a caricature of its sender, preventing potential adversaries from seeing each other as non-human. Where fraternal interest groups are weak, for example, the contrast between images of one’s own kin group and those of others is probably far less than in those societies where such groups are strong.

A parallel psychological question concerns the affective significance accorded such ties in relation to material security and emotional needs. Low-conflict societies not only have greater overlapping ties than high-conflict communities, but these ties are also affectively more important in the low-conflict society. The selective emphasis, de-emphasis, or invention of all social ties (not just kinship) is important. In low-conflict societies, the value of attachment to others may result in relative overvaluation of links beyond the local community, whereas in high-conflict societies the opposite is the case.

But if cross-cutting ties lower the severity of internal conflict, they may embolden a society facing an external enemy (often to the point of foolhardiness). Murphy’s (1957) classic description of the internally peaceful yet externally fierce matriloc al Mundurucu of Brazil is a well-known example of this phenomenon.10 LeVine (1965) offers a second apt case, that of the pastoral Kipsigis of East Africa where kinship and age-based organizations produce widespread social links within the tribe but fierce conflict with outsiders. Not only do strong within-group ties build unity, thus facilitating joint action, but LeVine also suggests that this is associated with highly polarized images which exaggerate insider-outsider differences and justify subsequent aggression.

Societies with low levels of external conflict are less complex socioeconomically and are more isolated. Yet it is hardly desirable that societies should move toward simpler technology or greater isolation in order to lower levels of conflict. Instead, it may be that the best we can do is be aware of how increased complexity increases the likelihood of severe conflict and try to actively guard against its effects.

Increased complexity brings a greater capacity to develop enduring links within and between societies. Strong cross-cutting ties within a society lower internal conflict, and strong ties between groups in different societies can have the same effect on external conflict. The argument for building significant ties between societies is similar to that of Haas (1964), Mitrany (1966), and other functionalists who saw this as the route to European integration. Functional linkages among societies on their own, however, are insufficient to build constructive conflict relationships, yet they can be a crucial ingredient when accompanied by relative equality between the parties, appropriate political leadership (Lindberg and Sheingold 1970), and a conducive psychocultural environment.11

The Intersocietal System

In building a model of the low-conflict society, it is important to remember that a prosperous society living with aggressive neighbors in a hard-to-defend location is likely to find itself under attack at some point, no matter what its internal characteristics. As discussed in chapter 8 in relation to the Teda, conflict and cooperation are discussed not only in terms of the properties of the individual states, but in terms of those of the intersocietal system (Waltz 1959; Midlarsky 1975; Zinnes 1980).

For conceptual and political purposes, anthropology created the myth of the isolated (almost pristine) traditional society that could be

9. Gluckman (1955) describes rituals of rebellion in which members of a community are permitted, at fixed occasions, to attack the ruler in ways that both vent deeply felt frustration and renew support for existing authority.

10. Although the multivariate analysis (chapters 6 and 7) does not support Murphy’s hypothesis that matriloc al and patriloc al societies significantly differ in their levels of internal versus external conflict, it does show that strong overlapping identities are negatively related to internal conflict and positively related to external conflict—as his theory suggests at the general level.

11. Interaction between groups does not necessarily improve intergroup relations. When scarce resources, threat, and inequality are perceived, for example, interaction can raise rather than lower tension. The most positive changes occur when members of different groups see themselves as pursuing a greater common goal (Sherif et al. 1988).
understood entirely on its own terms. In fact, however, migration, fighting, trade, and other exchanges between nonwestern preindustrial societies were extensive in most of the world long before western colonial contact (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992). Few societies were sufficiently isolated historically that the activities of their neighbors could be ignored. Even the island societies of the Pacific mastered ocean travel and conducted trade and warfare over great distances. Isolation in the precolonial period was relative, not absolute, and perhaps severe only in the most remote Arctic, mountain, or desert areas.

D. White (1989) and others (Divale 1974, for example) examine intersocietal interactions generally, and patterns of external conflict in particular, as a source of changes in a society's internal social organization and level of internal conflict. In a highly speculative analysis, White suggests that a society's location in the world system affects external disputes, which in turn promote internal disputes. From this perspective, low-conflict societies are likely only in certain settings. These communities need either to have relatively peaceful neighbors (as part of a local security system), to be located in an environment where they are not vulnerable to attack or from which flight is a viable option, or to be so much stronger than their neighbors that no one dares attack them.

The finding here that preindustrial societies are much more likely to be generalizers than differentiators is consistent with the argument that regional cultural systems reflect the internal properties of particular societies and patterns of interaction among them. A society's regional context can affect conflict by encouraging changes in internal social organization either through functional adaptation or intercultural borrowing. The plausibility of the hypothesis that changes in interests, dispositions, and internal conflict patterns can develop, in part, as a response to external forces points to the need for more serious investigation of this question in a variety of settings.

The Constructive Conflict Society

The term "low-conflict society," a quantitative label, is certainly useful, yet we need to characterize a society's conflict management style qualitatively as well. Deutsch's (1973) concept of constructive (as opposed to destructive) conflict at the individual dispute level can be fruitfully applied to the societal level as well. Deutsch focuses on the kinds of exchanges between parties in a conflict, the attention given to their concerns, the search for creative solutions to conflicts, and the degree to which conflict management speaks to the needs of disputants—all pertinent questions about the conflict management styles of different societies.

Constructive conflict management is characterized by cooperative processes (not just attention to outcomes) that focus on the ability of different parties to define shared interests and to communicate openly in order to establish empathy between the disputants. An eventual legitimation of both sides' interests and a convergence of points of view results—what Deutsch (1973) calls "benevolent misperception." Communication and perceptions are central explanatory factors in his scheme and are prerequisites for resolving differences of substantive interests. Constructive conflict management, Deutsch argues, is more likely in situations where the power of the parties is relatively equal, although he offers suggestions as to how weak parties can bolster their negotiating position (1973:393–399). Deutsch suggests that third parties may be crucial in developing cooperative conflict procedures and in helping parties to reach constructive outcomes. One indicator of constructive conflict societies is probably that third parties are much more available than in destructive conflict societies. Finally, he argues that it is easier to go from cooperation to competition than the reverse (Pruitt and Rubin 1986). Constructive conflict patterns may be fragile and reestablishing them in a society after a period of intense destructive conflict may be difficult.

The psychocultural dispositions and social structural conditions found in low-conflict societies facilitate constructive conflict management because they enhance effective communication and shared identity leading to the resolution of substantive differences in interests. In so-

12. White's hypotheses about the impact of external conflict and incorporation into the world system on internal conflict merit serious consideration, yet his data analysis—using inadequate measures, questionable procedures, and a tiny sample—does not provide much useful evidence.

13. Divale (1974) suggests that societies with high levels of external warfare, for example, tend to become matrilocally, whereas internal warfare promotes patriarchy. Ember (1974), however, presents convincing data against Divale's hypothesized sequence. Without temporal data I can only speculate about the relationship between changes in socioeconomic complexity, cross-cutting ties, contact with other societies, and external violence.
sieties where the prevailing view of the world is of effective cooperative action, rather than life-and-death struggle, the exchanges and compromises necessary for creative problem solving are far more likely to occur.

High-conflict situations are rarely constructive and are often characterized by an escalation of hostile actions producing a polarized community, a radicalization of leaders, and little room for a middle group between the extremes (Coleman 1957; Pruitt and Rubin 1986:7). Differences of substance, which may be open to negotiation early on, are often transformed into differences of principle which make any compromise feel like defeat. In such situations disputants recognize few constraints on their actions and resort to violence easily.

Low-conflict societies are most likely to have constructive conflict management because the dispositions of disputants are most conducive to creative joint problem solving and open communication. Yet low levels of conflict may occur when power inequalities among the disputants are large and the weaker party is unable to press its case effectively. We have little reason to believe that the constructive conflict management as Deutsch describes it occurs very often in hierarchical societies like the Buganda and the Aztec, where authorities intervene to impose solutions on less powerful disputants. Another low-conflict situation lacking in constructive conflict management is found among the Cayapa (described in chapter 8) and similar societies, where levels of conflict are apparently very low because people are so fearful of interpersonal interaction that they avoid exchanges and interactions needed for creative problem solving. Briggs' (1975) description of conflict among the Utke Eskimo also reveals the dynamics of low conflict in the absence of the constructive conflict pattern. The Utke are so overwhelmed by what first appears to be nurturance—but is really a powerful combination of affection and aggression—that few adults are capable of significant relationships in which powerful emotions are expressed. Overall conflict levels among the Utke are very low, but, as with the Cayapa, this is due not to constructive conflict management but rather to the avoidance of any interaction.14

Finally, there are many dispute-level examples of constructive problem solving even in societies not easily characterized by construc-

tive conflict management processes. In such situations, it is useful to ask why constructive conflict management is limited to certain contexts and how constructive techniques may be extended to other domains. An initial hypothesis is that such techniques are most likely to occur in societies with moderate, or even moderately high, levels of conflict in small, interdependent, local groups with well-established positive interpersonal relations. Localized kin groups are typical here, but certainly such patterns are found elsewhere, where there is an equation of group and individual interests, or the ability to perceive the short-run group interest as serving the long-run needs of the group.

Both interests and interpretations are important in the description of the culture of conflict in societies characterized by low levels of conflict and constructive conflict management processes. The psychocultural features of these societies make polarization of disputants and rapid escalation of conflict less likely and increase the possibility that the interests of all will be addressed. In such situations, the core identities of participants are rarely threatened directly, making it easier for them to develop some understanding, if not acceptance, of the opponent's demands and to consider compromises and third-party intervention. In these societies, the long-term relationship among disputants is at least as significant as the substantive differences in any specific dispute (what Axelrod [1984] calls the shadow of the future).

Conflict and Conflict Management15

The perspective developed here reveals real limitations of some common proposals to improve conflict management. Changes in legal procedures or institutions that manage disputes, for example, are rarely going to be successful in isolation.16 The proposal that disputants need only "get to know each other better" is similarly doomed. My analysis suggests that changes in conflict management procedures are most

15. The topic of this section is a central theme in Ross (1993), which uses the theory developed here to analyze conflict management.

16. New Guinea provides a striking example of the way change may alter institutions but fail to address underlying psychocultural dispositions or social structural interests. Precolonial warfare gave way to a short peaceful period under colonial rule, which was followed by a return to warfare and violence in the postcolonial period (Gordon and Meggitt 1984). In Ross (1993) I discuss this case as a failure of conflict management.

14. Some of these elements, in less extreme form, are found in the discussion below of the use of fear as a socialization mechanism among the Semai (Ross 1993).
effective when they are associated with efforts to address both the disputants’ substantive interests and underlying psychocultural interpretations.

Interest-based approaches to conflict management emphasize strategies that bridge substantive differences and package outcomes in ways that benefit all. In contrast, psychocultural approaches focus on altering disputants’ hostile suspicions as a step toward dealing with substantive differences. Effective conflict management must address both interests and interpretations as significant sources of conflict.

The cross-cultural theory of conflict presented here explains societal-level differences, and has significant implications for understanding differences in the management of individual disputes both within and between societies. The most effective way to address interests and interpretations in order to make conflict management more constructive, of course, varies from context to context. In some cases underlying interests and the social structural conditions which give rise to them take priority; in other cases, increasing the emphasis of addressing disputants’ shared interpretations of the world proves the best route to make a society’s culture of conflict more constructive.

Current strategies of conflict management address interests and interpretations quite differently, as a brief comparison of joint problem solving and third-party decision making, two commonly used modes of conflict management, reveals. Joint problem solving consists of the principal disputants acting together to resolve a dispute; it can include direct bargaining between the parties as well as decision making with third party assistance, as in mediation, arbitration, or negotiation. In contrast, in methods such as adjudication or administrative decision making, known as third-party decision making, representatives of the wider community invoke shared norms to impose binding decisions on the disputants.

Third-party decision making works on the assumption that differences in interests are real and can be effectively resolved through reference to certain abstract principles like law or community norms without great regard for the larger context of a dispute or how disputants view each other. Focusing on the substantive interests at stake, outside parties, who represent the community’s authority (which the disputants accept), decide among competing claims and back their decisions with sanctioned force. As a conflict management strategy, the approach focuses on past behavior more than future action (although this may be involved), and the process addresses the substantive differences among the parties rather than the more subjective background of the conflict.

Joint problem solving, in contrast, emphasizes perceptions and dispositions (such as low levels of trust or threats to identity) as the source of many conflicts, and addresses these subjective elements to create a climate in which creative problem solving can occur. Differences in interests are not denied but are viewed as surface manifestations of the more basic conflict or as symptoms of a dispute as much as the cause. In addition, joint problem-solving strategies focus less on the interests parties have in resolving past differences and emphasize instead their interests in living together in future harmony. Interests, then, are often seen as somewhat flexible and subject to redefinition so that resolving interest differences hinges, in part, on how the parties view each other and themselves. From this perspective, if antagonistic perceptions rooted in deeply held worldviews are altered, resolution of differences in interests may follow.

Each method addresses certain sources of conflict more readily than others: joint problem-solving may overlook the essential role of differences in interests in a conflict and overemphasize the importance of the interpersonal bonds and images created between disputants, especially when large communities are involved. In contrast, third-party decision making sometimes fails to address underlying psychocultural interpretations and may offer “solutions” to a dispute that do little to address its underlying sources.

Assumptions about the psychocultural aspects of conflict are embedded in third-party dispute management strategies, just as assumptions about interests inform joint decision making. What is striking, however, is how poorly developed each of these assumptions is and how they differ from the assumptions made about the same factors in the cases of the other dispute management method. In some cases assumptions about sources of conflict which underlie different procedures appear to contradict each other. Genuinely constructive dispute management procedures address both sets of factors in a comprehensive view that sees structural and psychocultural roots in almost all serious conflicts.

Dispute-Level Lessons

Whereas a societal-level analysis of conflict focuses on dispositional and structural factors in their most general form, at the dispute
level it is crucial to identify more proximate manifestations of interests and interpretations to avoid invoking factors that are too remote, mechanical, or reductionistic. Neither social structural interests nor psychocultural dispositions defined at the societal level provide useful answers to such questions as:

Why was a particular interest pursued?
Why did a dispute escalate at the time it did?
Why were certain incompatible demands made by each side?
Why were a certain set of dispute management methods used and with what effect?
How did the interests and interpretations of disputants change in the course of a conflict?
How might the conflict have been managed better than it was?

Explaining the course of particular conflicts means identifying the precise interests and interpretations involved and trying to understand how they connect to more general forces.

This consists of more than just identifying specific interests and interpretations involved in a conflict. Dispute-level analysis of conflict also pays particular attention to the process by which a conflict unfolds, trying to understand its origin, development, and management and examining changes within any dispute. Societal level analysis, in contrast, focuses on continuities across disputes in a society. How, then, can interests and dispositions which are seen as relatively unchanging at the societal level help explain change at the dispute level?

If interests are seen only in terms of the social structural conditions that produce them, then adjusting interests during conflict management seems to be a contradiction, or leads to the idealistic request that parties simply set their interests aside in order to achieve agreement. In many situations, however, the overlap of interests among disputants is frequently greater than initially recognized because disputants have different priorities even when contesting a common concern (Rafia 1982). Furthermore, the choice for each disputant is almost never between keeping everything or having to share it with others. Rather, it is between what can be obtained through alternative action strategies including noncooperation (Fisher and Ury 1981). Often the latter, in fact, presents unattractive options. Thus, social structural conditions broadly shape interests, but more proximate events modify, reorganize, and prioritize them, and shape what actions are actually taken.

Similarly, although disputants' interpretations of conflict situations are linked to dispositions rooted in early socialization, interpretations in specific disputes are not fully determined by such distant events. For one thing, psychocultural theory identifies how dispositions are subject to change under certain conditions, if and when the fundamental sources of anxiety are addressed. Consideration of more proximate psychocultural data than socialization experiences is necessary in considering specific conflicts. Even if good data on child rearing for major actors are available, we would turn first to data on beliefs and behaviors most clearly associated with the events to be explained. Psychocultural dispositions are important in making sense of conflict and conflict management, and while the cross-cultural theory of conflict ultimately links these to early developmental experiences, more proximate manifestations of psychocultural dispositions are required in order to understand any single dispute.

Rather than altering psychocultural dispositions, constructive conflict management strategies can selectively emphasize specific dispositions, and linkages among dispositions can be reorganized. The mechanisms underlying psychocultural processes involve the invocation of analogies, metaphors, and other connections linking early experiences and images to later experiences. In cultures where there is a high predisposition to define in- and out-groups in dramatically different terms, to see the actions of others as threatening and provocative, or to identify with few beyond one's inner circle, conflict management cannot alter the inner psychic structures. It can, however, provide alternative psychoculturally appropriate analogies, metaphors, and images which may be more compatible with constructive conflict management.

Here I draw on the principle of psychocultural complexity and the notion that the organization of dispositions is as important as the presence of any particular disposition. Therefore, although groups and individuals tend to emphasize certain dispositions, reorganization and changes in emphasis are also possible. Psychocultural dispositions

17. As an individual experience, the change in dispositions shares key assumptions with psychoanalysis.
18. I want to suggest here an approach focused on the system of interacting dispositions—in the same way that family systems therapy focuses on the interactions among members of a social system, not the characteristics of any single member in isolation (Bowen 1978).
and interpretations can be incorporated into strategies of conflict management without changing the fundamental worldviews of all parties in a short time—a most unrealistic goal, to say the least. A more modest but achievable aim would be a degree of affective and cognitive reorganization, with results in both being more important than the magnitude of change in either one. Such reorganization could involve an expansion of who is included in the label “we,” stress metaphors associated with past cooperative successes, or offer a vision of mutual gain that effectively challenges a current scenario of animosity. When disputants have a long history of hostility, achieving this is difficult, and the involvement of skilled third parties can be especially helpful. Altering participants’ interpretations of a situation can be achieved without necessarily addressing their childhood experiences but cannot ignore how culture selectively reinforces dispositions first developed at that stage.

Conclusion

This book has examined conflict and violence cross-culturally and has identified psychocultural and social structural factors which explain both differences in overall levels of conflict and particular patterns of conflict and cooperation. The culture of conflict refers to the complex ways a society’s institutions, practices, and norms produce a pattern of conflict. It also includes culturally shared ideas about valued objects and interests, about ways to pursue them, about appropriate responses to the actions of others seeking the same valued items, and about past experiences relevant to understanding conflict behavior.

This concluding chapter has explored two extensions of the argument from the cross-cultural study. Explicit consideration of societies characterized by low levels of conflict and constructive conflict processes will, I hope, deepen awareness of their existence and extend our understanding of their internal dynamics. These societies are not defined simply by the absence of conflict but also by the presence of psychocultural dispositions and structurally defined interests that promote the management of disputes in essentially constructive and peaceful ways. Understanding and analyzing such cases demonstrate that high levels of conflict are not inevitable and that particularly effective practices may be applicable in other settings.

Last, I have considered ways in which the theoretical framework of the cross-cultural theory of conflict also provides a framework for the analysis of the management of individual disputes. Interests and interpretations, I suggest, are important in social conflicts, and effective conflict management needs to address both. Conflict management cannot necessarily alter deeply rooted social structural patterns or change basic psychocultural dispositions in every dispute. It may, however, recognize the role played by underlying interests and dispositions and try to address these directly so that we may in the future manage conflicts more constructively than we do at present.