

THEORIZING THREE BASIC EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF CONFLICTS: A SITUATIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA

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Conflict theory has downplayed the role of emotions or categorized them as individual, cultural, or irrational phenomena. This paper argues that emotions grow out of situational interactions and that accumulated levels of emotions, emotional energy (EE), fuel the agency of conflicting parties. Drawing on theory of EE and positive emotions, three emotional dynamics of conflicts are proposed: (1) positive EE, such as confidence and trust, promotes action; (2) negative EE, such as righteous anger and resentment, drives conflictual action; and (3) loss of EE dispirits actors in shame and hopelessness. Research questions exemplified by the Arab Spring are suggested relative to three themes: mobilization of collective EE, emotional dynamics influencing political elites, and violent and nonviolent conflict escalation.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world in which social and political conflicts emerge in sudden and unexpected ways. Within a few weeks in 2014, we witnessed a sudden rise in conflict as Russia intervened in Ukraine “to take back” Crimea. The uprisings known as the Arab Spring (2010-11) also exemplify a sudden onset of overt conflicts. Emotions are often considered as phenomena in need of control; we talk about putting a lid on them before conflicts escalate and run wild. Commenting on Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, Sweden’s Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt said, “We all have to do whatever we can in order to have those emotions that are now circulating attenuated . . . [and] through diplomacy there are efforts to have the situation

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