

Maria Arpa

Neighbour conflict as a microcosm of
what is practiced by government

This essay sets out to describe and assess a conflict between Amanda James and Jonathan Smith using the Hocker-Wilmot conflict assessment guide. The purpose is to identify and reflect on the nature of the conflict, the feelings and needs and the strategies the parties have adopted to protect themselves and get their needs met. It also sets out to examine the power relationship and the context in which the conflict occurred. This information could serve to identify gaps in information and help focus attention of the specific aspects which, if changed, would transform the conflict and contribute to resolution.

The conflict was brought into mutual awareness when The James family received a letter from their housing officer stating there had been complaints from neighbours about anti-social behaviour.

Amanda James's 14 year old son began to play loud music and brought home a dog as a pet. The music was being played late on midweek evenings and all day at weekends. The dog became a nuisance by fouling the footpath and jumping into next door's garden. There had also been a long standing problem with Ms James leaving heaps of rubbish in her front and back gardens but this had never been addressed before although it was apparent that resentment had built up over time.

The conflict originated when the James family moved into a council house on the street after the previous occupant left. The house is the sole council house on the street and the previous occupants told the other residents that they had bought their house from the council and had sold the property to move to a different area.

At first the residents welcomed the new family and meals were shared over the garden fence with immediate neighbours. It eventually became clear that the James family were not owner occupiers and were, in fact, council tenants and were living on benefits.

The residents became concerned about rubbish being left in the front and back gardens which they deemed to be unsightly, a health hazard and lowering the tone of the neighbourhood. This was widely talked about by the residents but never addressed directly with Ms James. This was due to Mr Smith not wishing to ruin his friendship with Ms James so he used avoidance as his conflict style by saying nothing. When the noise nuisance started and the newly arrived dog became a problem the neighbours put pressure on Mr Smith to take action. This pressure manifested as a letter to the council demanding action about their tenants.

This coincided with the arrival of Mrs Smith as a new member of the community.

The Housing Officer wrote immediately to the James family asking them to desist from Anti-Social Behaviour. The James family, upset by the tone of the letter and the neighbours' failure to address them directly, ignored the letter and carried on playing music and leaving rubbish outside. Thus both parties were using avoidance as a conflict style.

This created a pattern of behaviour where Mr Smith continued to send letters to the council which escalated to petitions, demands for eviction and the backing of local Councillors and the James family continued to play music and leave rubbish outside. As the son grew older his choice of music developed into rap music with lyrics containing profanities and offensive language.

A further development was the start of enormous arguments between Ms James and her son. These arguments would go on for hours into the night with shouting, cursing and physical violence often resulting in the police being called sometimes late at night.

The conflict continually escalated with no periods of calm between conflict. The potential to transform the conflict lay in working with the Smith family to remove their enemy images sufficiently to engage in a dialogue with the James family.

Since the Smith family were outcome oriented their behaviour was likely to be maladaptive in conflict situations. The conflict setting as a neighbour dispute seemed to be driving an outcome focus.

Therefore both parties were using stronger and stronger strategies to get their needs met with no consideration for the other sides needs.

On discussing the conflict with the parties they had very different ideas on each other's goals. The Smith family stated their goal as wanting to enjoy their home in peace while the James family cited the Smith's goal as wanting them evicted.

The James family stated their goal as wanting to be treated as equals while the Smith family cited the James goal as wanting to do as they please.

Underlying this was the James's belief that the newly arrived Mrs Smith was racist and snobbish.

The parties experienced their dependency as sharing a garden wall and a party wall and therefore being forced to co-exist. The James's believed that Smiths had the power to get them evicted and were attempting to

redress the power issues by pretending that they didn't care and continuing the behaviour which upset the Smiths.

Underlying this it was clear that Mr Smith had a friendship with Ms James prior to Mrs Smith coming on the scene. It appeared that Mrs Smith felt powerless in the historical relationship between Ms James and Mr Smith and was using the conflict to try to regain some power. Her behaviour could be described as manipulative, while Mr Smith's behaviour was passive and Ms James behaviour was aggressive.

Mrs Smith quickly established herself as a model resident and was able to gain more power from aligning herself with the other residents, highlighting the James behaviour as anti-social and inciting dislike of the James family in the other residents.

Mr Smith was appeasing his wife by instigating complaints to the council in order to demonstrate to her that no sexual relationship had taken place between himself and Ms James and that there were no sexual feelings present in the here and now.

The behaviour of Mrs Smith in relation to other residents contributed to authorization of her social position and this contributed to the construction of the power relationship and highlighted to Ms James her unmet need for equality.

Mr Smith was feeling frustration and annoyance and needing simplicity, peace and harmony but his wife's behaviour triggered an inner conflict between loyalty to his wife and wanting friendship with his neighbour. His strategy to meet his need for peace was to choose loyalty to his wife and to take out his annoyance and frustration on the council as an avoidance tactic serving to please his wife and conveniently avoiding contact with Ms James either positive (likely to upset his wife) or negative (likely to upset himself).

Mrs Smith was feeling frightened and threatened by the close presence of someone who knew her husband before she did. Her need was for safety in that she was scared that she had 'competition' from her neighbour.

Ms James was feeling hurt and disappointment that her former friend had abandoned her and powerless in her exclusion from the social setting. Her need was for listening, love and respect. She could not get those needs met from her friend so she was attempting to get those needs met by her son who himself was in need of empathy as the named 'troublemaker' of the conflict.

Ms James's son was feeling isolation, sadness, distress, shame and fatigue from the empathy collision that resulted in constant arguments between him and his mother.

Mr Smith acted as a defensive attacker preferring to lay down the law and take quick action with threats of eviction in the hope of forcing the council into action. Mrs Smith was more subtle preferring to manipulate her husband the other residents but not actually strike out herself.

Ms James's acted as a full on enemy taking on the role she had been cast in. She could keep going in order to outdo and exhaust her opponent.

Overall the conflict style was competitive with each party competing to win. The tactical option to use the council as the third party served as both avoidance and attack. This, in fact, escalated the conflict as Ms James wanted the Smiths to speak to her directly.

It is useful to observe the wider social conditions in which this conflict and many others like it emerge. When housing organisations give people tenancy agreements there are rules of the tenancy which the tenant must adhere to in order to retain their tenancy. This creates a power relationship rather like master/servant because the tenant must obey the rules or something will be taken away.

The law actually provides tenants with many rights so that they can ensure some security of tenure, for example, in case of hardship. The law also stringently monitors housing organisations to ensure they are fair in their dealings. Problems arise when tenants get into conflict with their neighbours and this leads to 'anti-social behaviour'. The tenancy agreement does not provide for relationship breakdowns between neighbours so when the complaints come the housing officers focus on the behaviours which may be specific to the tenancy agreement as a means of solving the problem and because that is what is in their remit.

So, they tell people to turn the music down, clear up the rubbish or clean the common areas without giving any consideration to the relationship breakdown that underlies the behaviours.

Furthermore, the housing officers respond to these problems using domination culture language which seeks to threaten and punish people for their wrongdoings. This further supports the myth of the master/servant relationship and so a cycle of conflict between authority and public is maintained and perpetuated.

Therefore when Mr Smith complained to the council, their response was to threaten the tenant with eviction and an ASBO.

Given that Ms James's need was for equality, this threat would serve only to disempower her more, putting her into fight or flight mode. Since there can be no 'flight' from housing when you are on benefits the only other option is 'fight'.

So her strategy for empowering herself and redressing the equality balance is to make her presence felt by continuing to behave in the same way since under such a threat, to change behaviour on demand would be to concede and therefore lose and become even less equal.

The conflict between the authority and the public further continues when people in Mr Smith's position hand over their power to authority to sort out the problem. That this is encouraged in society further disempowers people from looking at their internal resources and realizing their full potential to live as peaceful human beings in harmony.

I have attempted in this essay to look at a neighbour conflict not just from the personal perspective but also from the wider social point of view. Social learning theory is based on the hypothesis that aggression is not innate or instinctual but actually learned through the process of socialisation.

This hypothesis is the contention of the *Seville Statement*. We learn aggressive behaviour at home, in school, and by interaction with the environment. Interaction in society helps to focus and trigger stored aggression onto enemies. This is an important concept, particularly when the conflict is ethno-national or sectarian in nature. In this case the conflict is a microcosm of what is repeated in the wider world by governments.

Social learning theorists have tried to understand the relationship of the individual in their environment and how this relates to group aggression. In this case the whole street siding with Mrs Smith against Ms James.

Socialisation into a violent environment is the precursor to aggressive and anti-social behaviour in the teen and early adult years. Children who grow up watching their parents and neighbours being hassled by the police, housing officers or other statutory agencies become scared that they will never be heard or command respect from others and so the unmet needs develops into a strategy of repeat behaviour. In the case of Ms James's son, my belief is that only a compassionate intervention will stand any chance of helping him to grow up and behave differently to his mother and the neighbours.

(2012 words)

Bibliography

Morton Deutch and Peter T. Coleman, eds.,
The Handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and Practice
San Francisco: Josey Bass Publishers 2000

Marshall Rosenberg.
Nonviolent Communication: A language for life.
Puddledancer Press 2000

Manfred A. Max-Neef
From the Outside Looking in: Experiences in 'Barefoot Economics'
(Paperback)
Zed Books; New edition September 1992

Bernard Mayer
The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution
Jossey Bass May 2000