

Theories of Conflict
The Non-conscious Mind
Classroom Discussion Prompt

When turning from an examination of the body to an examination of the non-conscious, strategic and relational mind, it can be helpful – and thought-provoking, to engage students in a discussion of the following question:

“When it comes to conflict, do you believe that people are essentially *rational* or essentially *non-rational*?”

[Note: I recommend you purposefully use “non-rational” and avoid using the word “irrational” since the latter has a strong pejorative feel to it].

Tips:

- Have students discuss the question in small groups and then return to the large group to debrief.
- Take a forced-choice vote. No abstentions and no equivocation.
- Promote a debate where both sides state their arguments

There is not a simple right or wrong answer here, but it teases out people’s underlying assumptions when they view or work with others in conflict. Often, people equate “non-rational” with bad and “rational” with good. I suggest this is an oversimplification that impacts how conflict practitioners view, judge and thus treat parties in conflict.

The non-conscious mind is an essential part of who we are as humans. If you use the primary text, the three sample theories (system-one thinking, displacement, and social identity theories) describe mental processes that are neither good nor bad, but simply “are.” Engage in a discussion of how conflict practitioners can better help parties in conflict by developing greater insights into the non-conscious dimensions of conflict experience.

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