

Realistic Conflict Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will discuss realistic conflict theory (RCT) and the following aspects:

1. Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT)
2. Limited Resources
3. Zero-Sum
4. Superordinate Goals

1. Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT)

Realistic Conflict theory (RCT) is a theory of conflict that explains conflict as a result of competing goals and competition for limited resources. This theory is a way of modeling and describing conflict and has the following aspects:

- Limited Resources
- Zero-Sum
- Superordinate Goals



TERM TO KNOW

Realistic Conflict Theory

A theory of conflict that explains conflict as a result of competing goals and competition for limited resources.

2. Limited Resources

As stated in the definition of realistic conflict theory, competition for **limited resources** is a crucial aspect of this approach to conflict.

A limited resource is a physical or other type of resource existing in limited quantities that must be divided between users. The scarcity of these resources can be either real or perceived.



EXAMPLE On a global scale, you might see a conflict over oil in which two nations are fighting or threatening to fight each other because they believe there's a scarcity of oil. They both want the same resource, perhaps in the same part of the world.

➞ **EXAMPLE** On a local scale, we often see empty shelves in supermarkets before a blizzard because people need to stock up before the storm, and the stores are not supplied in a way that allows unusually large numbers of people to all buy basic supplies at the same time. Basic supplies then become a limited resource, at least until the storm passes.



TERM TO KNOW

Limited Resource

A physical or other resource existing in limited quantities that must be divided between users.

3. Zero-Sum

That last example leads us to another idea: a limited resource or perceived limited resource that people are in competition over.

This tug of war usually occurs because people assume there won't be enough. This is called **zero-sum**, or an assumption that for one party to gain, the other must lose, thus yielding a net gain of zero.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Let's go back to the idea of a long line for a new product. If you are in line, and someone else is behind you, there's the assumption that if there aren't enough products for everyone, that person will have to lose because you are getting there first.



TERM TO KNOW

Zero-Sum

An assumption that for one party to gain, the other must lose, yielding a net gain of zero.

4. Superordinate Goals

The only way to overcome a zero-sum is with a **superordinate goal**, which is a mutual goal seen by two parties as more important than either party's individual goal.

➞ **EXAMPLE** There is some available land around a lake in a highly desirable area to live, and many people are vying for a piece of this limited lakeshore property. More and more development is going up, and fairly soon it becomes clear that the community is over-developing this land.

The actual lake that everybody wants to live right next to is becoming polluted; it's not turning into the piece of property or the environmental experience that everybody expected to have upon moving there.

People then come together and decide they need to enforce some zoning restrictions. Thus, the need to preserve the land becomes a superordinate goal that supersedes meeting any one person's individual goal of living right on the lake.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A boss decides to give a bonus to the worker who has the best production rate. Unfortunately, this incentive leads to a lot of competition between the employees, and the workplace becomes a negative environment.

The boss then suggests that they all work together and revisit this bonus on a team basis. The big bonus will be divided equally if the team can reach a certain goal; this now encourages the team to work together.

There's a higher need for preserving unity among the workers when striving to meet the company's goals, and the individual bonus wasn't quite doing that. Encouraging cooperation, not competition, is the superordinate goal here.



BIG IDEA

It's important to see that conflict resolution processes in and of themselves are superordinate goals because the goal of these processes is to bring conflicting parties together in order to reach a resolution that meets the needs of both parties.



TERM TO KNOW

Superordinate Goal

A mutual goal seen by two parties as more important to achieve jointly than meeting either of their individual goals.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how **realistic conflict theory** is applied through the concepts of **limited resources, zero-sum, and superordinate goals**. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

Limited Resource

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Realistic Conflict Theory

A theory of conflict that explains conflict as a result of competing goals and competition for limited resources.

Superordinate Goal

A mutual goal seen by two parties as more important to achieve jointly than meeting either of their individual goals.

Zero-Sum

An assumption that for one party to gain, the other must lose, yielding a net gain of zero.