
MANAGING HUMAN SUPERIORITY COMPLEX AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT: A MEANS TOWARDS CONSOLIDATING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Superiority Complex represents the thinking and attitude of holding oneself or one's group superior or better than others. Attitudes of superiority often lead people to treat those perceived as inferior in derogatory or demeaning ways. This attitude manifests itself in many forms such as racism, sexism, anthropocentrism, and religiocentrism. The natural results of this wrong perception are tension, conflict and war. However, not only do humans end up as casualties in these conflicts, the environment suffers too. To break this destructive cycle, this paper suggests the need for a moral sensitization of honest self-introspection, and cooperation. The paper concludes that cooperation, unity in diversity, and care for the environment are important values in achieving a more humane world.

Keywords: Conflict, Environment, Superiority Complex, Cooperation

Introduction

With the increasing advocacy to address environmental degradation

and the need for environmental preservation, it has become pertinent to increase the scope of investigation to cover those causal factors that are contributing to the environmental challenges being faced currently. One of the major factors identified in this paper is conflict. Conflicts too do not just spring up out of nowhere. Certain factors easily predispose a person or group towards violence. The paper also identified different offshoots of superiority complex such as racism, ethnocentrism, religious extremism, and sexism as predisposing tendencies towards conflict. This paper recommends self-introspection and cooperations important values that are capable of preventing and managing conflicts and environmental degradation better.

What Is Superiority Complex?

The term “superiority complex” is a coinage attributed to the psychologist- Adler Alfred. He started by observing that humans are social beings and it is through social interaction with the environment and with others that individuals build their unique personality. However, due to the limited resources in existence, the individual finds himself/herself struggling with others to survive. This struggle is made more complicated as the individual realizes that he is plagued with several limitations and deficiencies. These deficiencies according to Adler could easily result into feelings of inferiority. Hence, one of the basic human drives according to Adler is the struggle to overcome this inferiority complex, part of which involves identifying with groups that would ensure the security of

certain social interests. This becomes the basis for forming social groups with same social interests. These feelings of inferiority could readily lead to attitudes of shyness, timidity, cowardice, insecurity, submissiveness, and complaints. Improper management of these desires could lead individuals to focus more on themselves and less on others. And so, in trying to manage this inferiority complex, some tilt to the other extreme by trying to cover it with feelings of superiority (Feist, 2007: 32).

Superiority complex is a state where an individual believes or becomes attached to certain mindsets, complex notions, or ideologies that create feelings of being better than others (Adler, 1930: 395; Desmond, Kwabena, & Vincent, 2018: 6689). It depicts a state of exaggerated or inflated sense of self-worth or importance (Holland, 2019).

One of the characteristics of superiority complex is aggressiveness. Aggressiveness forms part of humanity's survival instincts. But aggressive behaviour often operates with a trigger- either through words or action. In the case of those with superiority complex, they tend to be hyper-aggressive, making it difficult for them to maintain amiable inter-personal relationships. Desmond Ayim-Aboagye *et al.* (2008:7), observes that such “*individuals who see themselves as better than other individuals in content (biological content as a human being) ...externalize these mental ideas or repressed feelings by causing troubles or disturbances to other individuals they*

consider as less human or as animals.”

Another toxic characteristic of superiority complex is the tendency to denigrate others in order to assert one's feeling of superiority. Thus, there is the natural tendency to underrate other's achievements, which is usually earmarked by harsh criticism, gossip, slander, and other unkind words (Zarkasy, 2020: 59). Also, people with superiority complex tend to set highly idealistic, fictional, and unrealistic goals that are not feasible to achieve, in a bid to become better than others. As such, they tend to be particularly dogmatic people (Feist, 1993: 367).

The factors that are responsible for superiority complex are both internal and external. Internal factors include the drive to overcompensate for real or imagined inferiorities and social interest. In the first instance, it serves as a defense mechanism to conceal inferiorities. Due to this, they tend to belittle anyone who does not acknowledge or treat them as the superiors that they believe they are. Regarding the social dimension as an internal factor to superiority complex, it is generally believed that humans are social beings. Since social groups are formed on the basis of protecting common interests, it is natural for individuals to see each social group or community they choose to identify with as an expression or extension of themselves. Hence, persons not only tend to project superiority at an individual level but also project their own social groups as superior (Adler, 1930: 400).

External factors include triggers from wrong or bad treatment from other people. For instance, a child who was over pampered and protected by the parents could grow up seeing the world from a narrow perspective where they expect people to always promptly respond favorably to their whims and desires (Adler, 1917: 56). Similarly, a child who was unloved, ill-treated, or unwanted could grow up having feelings of inferiority. This could then result in an excessive drive to cover up these feelings of inferiority by acting superior (Adler, 1994: 70).

Offshoots of Superiority Complex and Their Relationship With Conflict

As we have previously discussed, superiority complex does not only occur at the individual level, it also occurs at group level. More so, it expresses itself in many forms, such as racism, religiocentrism, and ethnocentrism. Due to the tendency of individuals or groups with such a mindset to malign others, conflicts are bound to happen, sometimes leading to wars.

Racism and Conflict

W.E.B. Du Bois noted that the growth of capitalism and global racism put the colour line as one of the central problems of the 20th century. While the fight against racial inequality also advanced in that same century, the 21st century has witnessed an intensification of racism, which has manifested itself in several wars and genocide. Genocide as a term was forced into being due to the racist hate and

killings that marred the last century. Genocide is now understood to be “the coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (Totten *et al.* 1997: xxiii). Israel Charny further warns that:

There needs to be a growing consensus on the part of human beings and organized society that penetrates the very basis of human culture that mass killing is unacceptable to civilized peoples, otherwise the prevailing momentum of historical experience will continue for generation after generation that genocide is a phenomenon of nature, like other disasters, and this view of the inevitability of genocide as an almost natural event will continue to justify in the sense of convincing people that nothing can be done. (Totten *et al.* 1977: xxxix).

Genocide and war are too horrid to be taken for granted. Though some now consider these happenings to be natural and unavoidable, a worse state is when we are now too comfortable with these realities that we no longer see them for what they are or even ignore them when we notice them. Such a sensitization and attitude, which has been fueled by global inequality, reveal that global racism has advanced beyond the confines of mere racial hierarchical stratification and institutionalization of segregation, to a point of detention, marginalization, and annihilation of those seen as inferior via genocide. Through this means, racial inequality manifests itself through genocide and war.

Violence lies at the heart of global racism. Frantz Fanon (1963: 41), while discussing oppression under colonial ruling, pointed out how divisions which were created by colonialism paved way for the perpetuation and acceleration of violence on both sides of the colonizer and those who were colonized. As such, racial divisions and differences, reinforced through colonial differences, are central to the accumulation of conflict and violence during and after the colonial period: “Manichaeism (division of the universe into opposites of good and evil) goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes” (Fanon 1963:42). Under such a dehumanizing sensitization, Fanon (1963: 43) argues that the violence, springing from elimination of everyday life, the sense of self, and sense of identity under colonialism continues to plague such societies even post-colonialism, by incorporating colonized lands into a new sensibility of exploitation.

Religiocentrism and Conflict

Religiocentrism refers to an attitude whereby a person considers his/her religion to be superior to any other religion. This usually manifests itself in positive attitudes towards adherents of same religion while being negative or critical of those in other religions (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens, 2015: 168). This attitude of negativism, harsh criticism, or hostility towards those of other religions commonly springs from a feeling that the truth of one's religion is absolute and superior, and every other religion is false in part or whole, and therefore inferior. This is the basis for which

adherents of a particular religion often try to convert others to their religion. While this attitude of seeing one's religion as superior is almost unavoidable within religion, it is the way we see and interact with those of other religions that often result in conflicts.

At the heart of religion is the consideration of God as the final and ultimate authority. As a result, those who engage in destructive violence under the banner of religion often do so with the justification of obeying the final and ultimate authority in the universe. No religion is free from the tendency towards violence in their bid to “obey” or “defend” their God. And so, it can become a tool that is politicized for personal agenda, radicalized into fundamentalism or manipulated by terrorism.

Common causes of religious conflict usually have their roots in the understanding of the nature of God, the description of the adherent's responsibility towards God and others, and the interpretation of the authority and inerrancy of beliefs (Sidel, 2007: 5). This is usually reflected in a complex interplay of political, socio-economic, ethnic, cultural and religious interests and biases (Arendt, 1970: 4).

Nigeria, a country that is inhabited predominantly by the adherents of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional religion exemplifies how religiocentrism fuels violence. Over the years, we have witnessed conflicts between Christians and Muslims leading to loss of several lives and properties (Ushe, 2015: 117). A good example is

the several bombings that were associated with the Boko Haram group, particularly within 2011-2015 (Paden, 2015: 3). One of the movement's rhetoric stated that its mission is to actualize God's kingdom on earth by ensuring that the poor get justice, which can only be realized through the inflexible application of sharia law. According to them, every other religion, including the state is an idol and an affront to their belief in the one God that deserves all worship. This explains their vexation towards western education because they believe that the state is a byproduct of Western education and values, which are all against the will of Allah. Some of these bombings destroyed fertile lands, damaged roads and drainage systems, and left an eye sore that turned many good lands into wastelands (Campbell, 2014: 2).

What about the several ugly homicides/genocides associated with clashes between Muslim herders and Christian farmers? With these farmers displaced from their aboriginal settlements, the Muslim herders often offer the land to their cattle for grazing, without any care for the sustainability of the land. As soon as the land has nothing else to offer, they move to another land. This has orchestrated the degradation of the environment in several regions (Amadu, 1989: 11). The Northern and Middle-Belt regions are most particularly affected. Sometimes, these conflicts in the Northern parts often initiate reprisal attacks by Christians in the Eastern regions against Muslim Northerners, leaving a trail of dead bodies, damaged lands, and destroyed properties (Dzurgba, 2006: 23). Looking at these

examples out of several kinds happening across the globe, it seems that while religion itself may not be the problem, the attitude of practitioners and interpretation of religion can sometimes engender conflict, and these conflicts often harm the environment.

Ethnocentrism and Conflict

Ethnocentrism has to do with the belief that one's culture, values, and modes of adaption are superior and better than others, thus evaluating other cultures from the standpoint of one's culture. This usually results in a negative, critical and contemptuous attitude towards those of other ethnic extractions (Kasomo, 2012: 1). It is argued to be a universal phenomenon, coeval with the human race (Horton & Hunt, 1968: 44). As regards its origin, three theories are often proposed- structural, constructive, and psychological. The structuralist theory holds that ethnocentric tendencies are not innate in humans but are due to certain circumstances and conditions (Mafeje, 1971: 5). Constructivism believes that the ethnocentrism is a product of social construction. While the psychological theory traces its origin to the several bonds, attitudes and thought patterns that are developed overtime by virtue of being born in a particular place, culture and people (Freud, 1947: 18).

As much as ethnocentric tendencies and the consequences are universal, Africa is one of the regions with some of worst cases of ethnocentric violence. This is due to several factors such as the origin of several ethnic groups, values, attitudes, culture, colonialism,

politics, prior evangelization of Africa, and Neo-colonial forces, cutting across several social and economic interests (Kasomo, 2012: 2). Overtime, these forces sowed the seeds of several stereotypes that have budded into the rather unfortunate realities that we are witnessing today. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the bloodbath of the Biafra Nigerian Civil War are all examples that readily raise alarm to the conflict tendencies latent in ethnocentrism.

Conflict and Environmental Degradation

Having discussed how offshoots of superior complex result into conflict, we discuss here how these conflicts have far reaching implications even on the environment. According to Timberlake and Tinker (1985: 9) there is a growing awareness of the relationship between conflicts and environmental degradation. **Sibanda Henry (n.d.) argues that:**

Environmental degradation is more a result of social conflicts, which have not been recognized, than of bio-physical conditions and actions on the environment, and hence there is a low rate of success in most of the projects set up to arrest environmental degradation... unless it is recognized to what extent environmental degradation is a result of conflicts, the world will keep battling with the wrong issues and fail to make progress on the environment management front (p. 31).

The impacts of war on the environment are mostly devastating. These impacts can be categorized as either unintentional (i.e.

collateral damage), due to hostile necessary military actions; or they can be premeditated and calculated to deprive enemy forces of the basic environmental resources needed for survival (Westing, n.d.).

Prior to any war, preparations for war often engender some level of environmental degradation. Building and managing military forces require a lot of resources. This may include radioactive metals and other hydrocarbon consuming machinery. This is besides the several resources that training military personnel consumes. The vehicles, vessels, aircraft, buildings, and other structures all require energy, and this in turn end up releasing undue amounts of CO₂ in the atmosphere (Weir, 2020).

In the heat of war, several dams, nuclear plants, and chemical facilities have been compromised, leaving a trail of long term effects on the environment such as deforestation, soil erosion, drop in the levels of ground water, ozone layer depletion, water pollution, and the likes. In other cases, the use of land mines and other types of bombs that leave a residue of bomblets (undetonated submunitions) and other radioactive elements constitute great obstacles to post-war refurbishment, besides other disastrous human alterations. The impact on the environment could even get to catastrophic levels when unconventional warfare involving biological, chemical or nuclear forces are engaged (Westing, n.d.).

A good example is the conflict that occurred in Lebanon from 12

July- 14 August, 2006. The aftermath of this hostility left about 1,200 dead, 4,400 in critical conditions, over a quarter of the population displaced, and destroyed several national infrastructures. But beyond these catastrophic impacts, the conflict severely devastated the delicate environment of the nation. A power plant that was bombed in Jiyeh resulted in about 15,000 tons of oil spilling into the Mediterranean Sea. This caused several wildfires, water pollution, air pollution, and destruction of several aquatic life and habitat. This had a huge adverse impact on the nation's environment, economy, and health (Sarrafet *al.*, 2010: 3).

The degradation of the global biosphere by the civil society is already a cosmopolitan concern, adding the extremities of war circumstances to the situation is only gradually drawing us to the precipice of a huge global fallout and collapse. Moreover, this will even engender a crazy cycle where the battered environment, now less in its resource, will orchestrate fierce competition for scarce resources- often leading to further conflicts that will still destroy the environment, and the cycle continues, with the situation getting worse after each cycle, unless addressed (Barnett, 2000: 282).

Conflict Resolution and Environmental Sustainability

In this paper, we identified several expressions of superiority complex as one of the primary causes of conflicts in the world today. We further discussed the relationship between conflicts and its role in environmental degradation. This entails that environmental

degradation is a symptom of deeper societal maladies. Treating the symptoms while leaving the root causes would only bring about a superficial relief that will not be enduring. So, rather than focusing on addressing environmental concerns directly, we want to consider how managing and preventing conflicts, especially those associated with various manifestations of superiority complex, could help to forestall environmental degradation having their roots in conflicts.

Preliminary steps to be taken in curbing superiority complex related conflicts would include acknowledging and accepting that one has bias or hostile tendencies towards others based on differences related to personal or group identities (Adekanye, 2021). Since this tendency is strongly linked with the general human instinct of survival and preservation, it would be safe to say that we are generally susceptible to these tendencies. It usually takes an enlightened, conscious, and disciplined effort to minimize how these biases influence our thinking and treatment of others. Hence, honest self-introspection is necessary to determine if one has been/is being unrestrained in being hostile to others due to differences. This is in line with Socrates' injunction that "Man Know Thyself". Tendencies to watch out for include arrogance, exaggerated opinion of oneself, believing that one is always right, feeling that those different are inferior, intolerance, feeling that one is always better than others, a proclivity to use any means to get others to accept our position, etc. It is only when there is an acknowledgement and acceptance of such proclivities that one can seek for a change in mindset and attitude.

Imbibing the mindset and attitude that all human beings are fundamentally equal would also mitigate the motivation for various conflicts. The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads that "...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (United Nations, 1948, p. 1). It further emphasizes in the first article that, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood" (United Nations, 1948, art. 1). Once we are able to understand that we are all from the common stock of humanity and as such, inherently equal, it would reduce the tendency to see others as inferior just because of accidental differences such as colour, tribe, nationality, religion or race. It will also breed a healthy ground to accept and appreciate diversity and differences without division and opposition.

Differences in personality and beliefs, both at the individual and group level are realities that cannot be avoided. This often results in disagreements due to incompatible interests and goals. This is why tolerance becomes another key factor in conflict resolution. Tolerance does not entail attributing equal value to every argument. Rather, it suggests the willingness and openness to also consider the opinions and perspectives of others, and the need to respect differing points of view even when we do not agree to them, to the degree that they do not constitute a threat to the common good. John Stuart Mill

argues that we must allow for conflicting perspectives to flourish, as this will allow for the needed dialogue and exchange of opinions required for us to discover our own reality (Gillmor, Barron, Simon, & Terry, 1990: 42). McCroskey (1992: 172) averred that “people with a high tolerance for disagreement are relatively conflict resistant, whereas people with a low tolerance for disagreement are highly conflict prone.” Whereas disagreements and differences are inevitable, tolerance becomes the salt that seasons the communication in order to avoid potential frictions that will result in avoidable conflicts.

In areas that are already in conflict, dialogue becomes a viable tool for intervention. In recent times, dialogue has featured among the buzzwords in global politics. Nation states are beginning to emphasize the need for dialogue and mediation. Jonas Gahr Støre (2011: 13) insightfully notes that “...engaging in dialogue with a group and its members is not the same thing as legitimizing its goals and ideology. Used skillfully, engagement may moderate their policies and behavior.” Describing various usages of the term, Pernille Rieker (2015: 1) posits that:

Dialogue is often used as a synonym for more formal negotiations between two or more parties in a conflict where the aim is to reach a negotiated agreement; further, it is commonly used to refer to the more informal processes ('back-channel diplomacy') of communication among opposing parties, leading up to such

negotiations; and thirdly, the term is used quite extensively to describe the broader peace building processes, grassroots initiatives, and bottom-up policy approaches that aim at avoiding the escalation of a conflict or crisis, but which rarely have an explicit ambition of reaching a concrete negotiation phase.

Whichever way we want to look at dialogue as a concept, it is often applied with consideration to the context and particular conflict in question. It takes into consideration power relations and where necessary, may require the mediatory role of a third party. Often times, great misunderstandings underlie conflicts. Dialogue therefore comes in to provide an amiable platform where the parties involved can both share their own side of the story as well as hear themselves out. This is usually followed by a bargaining and negotiation process geared towards arriving at a compromise or agreement that will ease the tension and allow for better working relationships between the parties with minimal friction.

Conclusion

We see that environmental degradation is not an isolated phenomenon. It involves a complex interplay of factors that ought to be treated as a whole. Hence, while it is important to confront environmental depletion head-on, it is equally important to all cut off other causal factors from their roots. This paper identified conflicts, especially springing from the excesses of superiority complex as one of the major factors affecting environmental depletion. Self-

introspection, equality, tolerance, and dialogue therefore, become means of preventing and managing conflicts, so as to curb environmental depletion resulting from conflicts.

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