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Thinking about Communication and Conflict

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Goals and Purpose of this Volume

Organizational conflict is ubiquitous, as are written works about it. However, these written works are scattered and fragmented, and most do not offer a central focus on communication (with the notable exception of Putnam & Roloff, 1992, who bring a communication focus to negotiation research). Most books on organizational conflict focus on negotiation processes, usually with a prescriptive bias. This collection is an attempt to focus on communication, providing a well-rounded view of organizational conflict in three broad categories: ways of thinking about organizational conflict, individual processes in organizational conflict, and interaction processes in organizational conflict.

Previous books have focused primarily on negotiation and, in particular, on conflict *resolution*. The underlying assumptions are that conflict is negative and destructive, and if we could only apply certain principles we could eliminate it from organizations—thus "rescuing" organizations from certain destruction via conflict. Although this approach does recognize the inevitability of conflict, the implication is that the elimination process must be repeated with each new conflict. Along with assuming conflict is a necessarily negative force, past volumes on conflict have been positivistically biased and reductionistic. It is time for another viewpoint to enrich the positivistic literature on conflict and organizations. This volume represents an attempt to focus on non-reductionistic views of conflict, individual and interactive processes of conflict, conflict *management* (as opposed to *resolution*), and the constructive nature of conflict—aiming at understanding rather than prescription. Folger, Poole, and Stutman's (1993) double entendre "working through conflict" is embraced. Not only do organizational members engage in communicative acts to "work through" conflicts, they also achieve task accomplishment "through conflict." Conflict, if handled appropriately, is an important vehicle through which the work of organizations gets accomplished. Negotiation and bargaining are discussed in chapter 2 and throughout the book because these are the formal communication processes by which organizational members commonly deal with conflict.

Finally, the title of the book is quite explicitly and purposely "Conflict *and* Organizations" as opposed to "Conflict *in* Organizations." While at first glance this may seem minor, it specifically avoids the implicit "container metaphor" for organizations, most eloquently discussed in the ongoing work of Ruth Smith (Smith, 1993). We want to avoid the implicit assumption that organizations are "containers" within which communication processes occur. Such assumptions have profoundly shaped our thinking about organizations as "things" rather than as dynamic processes in and of themselves. The title is thus consonant with the general approach of the book as a postpositivistic, nonreductionist, and "postmodern" text.

These two introductory chapters in part 1 serve the basic function of providing the reader with a background in the study of organizational conflict. This chapter offers an extensive discussion of conceptual and definitional issues and their implications. The second chapter provides a discussion of major theoretical approaches to organizational conflict and concludes with an overview of the book as a whole.

Conceptualizing Conflict and Communication

Defining Conflict

Social conflict has persistently been difficult to define. Conflict literature is replete with conceptual and terminologic confusion. Such confusion leads to a fragmented literature with inappropriate applications of theoretic structures to particular types of social conflict (see Nicotera, 1993, 1994) and much disagreement among scholars as to what antagonistic social phenomena should even be defined as conflict (Fink, 1968). Fink (1968) accomplishes what is perhaps the most cogent and comprehensive treatment of the problems inherent in defining social conflict.

In 1968, Clinton F. Fink was affiliated with the MSU Center for Research on Conflict Resolution. Although the piece discussed here is over twenty-five years old, it cannot truly be judged as "dated." The difficulties discussed by Fink in defining conflict are still problematic. This piece is reviewed here with the express purpose of highlighting the fact that conflict researchers are *still* struggling with these issues decades later. This is particularly important since Fink cites sources from the 1940s. The problems he outlines have been wrestled with by several generations of social scientists and are still unresolved. His 1968 article remains the single most informative source for wrestling with the definition of social conflict. The theoretic perspectives taken in this book have the potential to shed light on some of the problems Fink outlines. Although old, the piece is still quite useful and insightful. No one, before or since, has provided the insight to these issues that Fink offers.

In an exhaustive literature review, Fink (1968) argues the case for a broad "working definition" of social conflict: "any social situation or process in which two or more social entities are linked by at least one form of antagonistic psychological relation or at least one form of antagonistic interaction" (p. 456). In leading up to this broad conceptualization, Fink lays out in great detail scholarly disagreements as to levels of theoretic and definitional generality. Fink's essay makes abundantly clear that without a conceptually consistent definition of conflict any theorizing will be inherently flawed. Without conceptual and terminologic clarity, theories of conflict will remain fragmented from each other. Fink explores the generalist, specialist, and gradualist approaches to conflict theory. Along the way, he explicates several conceptual disagreements among the three schools.

According to Fink (1968), scholars who call for a generalist approach argue that a general theory is necessary for integrating scientific knowledge about conflict. This viewpoint necessitates a multidisciplinary approach and also implies that direct study of a specific kind of conflict cannot provide sufficient information on which to build an adequate general theory. According to this view, a special theory (e.g., of interpersonal, intraorganizational, community, interethnic, class, or international conflict) is inherently inadequate because it is not informed by comparison with other special theories nor subsumed under a general theory.

> The scientific value of a general theory thus lies in its ability to provide greater understanding of each particular kind of conflict than can be provided by the relevant special theory, and consequently to provide a better account of the entire domain of conflict phenomena than could be provided by the total set of special theories. (p. 413)

Fundamentally, this amounts to a positivistic stance. Scholars who have argued for a generalist approach are seeking an overarching set of generalizations or covering laws within which to make sense of the particulars of specific subdomains of the phenomenon of conflict.

Objections to the generalist view include the specialist or idiographic argument that each particular kind of conflict would be inevitably overlooked by general theories. Since each conflict is unique in itself, all conflicts must be treated as such theoretically (Fink, 1968). Essentially, this is a post-positivist argument. The basic assumption underlying the argument is one of the idiosyncratic nature of conflict. Generalizing from one type of conflict to another is seen as unwarranted by the very nature of the phenomenon. Rather, the specific and grounded understanding of a given kind of conflict is seen as capable of providing greater understanding than a general theory.

Fink (1968) identifies another argument against the generalist approach, calling this second objection the gradualist argument. Specifically, the gradualists point out that with the specialists' discussion of a special theory for each *class* of conflict phenomena, "the entire discussion is shifted into a nomothetic framework" (p. 414). In other words, any generalization at all leads logically to a general theory. A general theory is considered both attainable and desirable. The gradualists differ from the generalists, however, in that their strategy for the construction of a general theory lies in the use of "middle range theories." Their inductivist approach calls for successively more general levels of theoretic integration, using special theories to gradually build a general theory (Fink, 1968). Striking the balance between the generalists and the specialists, the gradualists essentially make a neo-positivist argument. They agree with the generalist approach of striving toward a general theory, but depart from the positivistic hypothetico-deductive approach. They argue that the approach to building a general theory should be nomothetic-inductive. (For more information on such a neo-positivist approach, see Daniels & Frandsen, 1984.)

Fink argues that the adequacy of the generalist argument depends most crucially on assessment of the current state of knowledge. He concludes that special theories must be advanced simultaneous to the process of gradually integrating them into a more general framework, with the ultimate goal being a general theory . . . and everyone is right.

A general theory, according to Fink (1968), is most needed in order that we might systematically classify conflict into types, so that the domains for special theories are unambiguously defined. Among other variables, conflict has been categorized according to parties (interpersonal vs. international), structural levels (intercommunity vs. intercultural), bases/causes (economic vs. ideological), and outcomes (constructive vs. destructive). Such categorization becomes unwieldy in that we are faced with innumerable taxonomies, none of which can be meaningfully subsumed under or even compared with another. According to Fink, a type of conflict may be "prominent in one scheme, secondary in another, and ignored in still others" (p. 422). Furthermore, each scheme varies in the total number of main types identified (from four to eighteen or more), and schemes with the same number of types differ widely in the specific types listed. Until scholars can reach agreement on a classification of social units, a satisfactory categorization of conflict types is unattainable. Fink argues that this terminological and conceptual confusion precludes the construction of both general and specialist theories. Fink's basic point is that without a clear definition of conflict, no theorizing can be adequately conducted.

Several long-standing social theories can and do influence special theories of conflict (e.g., Marxism and game theory) (Fink, 1968). Still, special theories cannot be meaningfully integrated because they are neither conceptually nor terminologically consistent. Fink concludes with an argument for a broad conception of social conflict which subsumes all domains of social antagonism. Whereas some scholars (e.g., Coser, 1956) argue that conflict is behavioral, others (e.g., Dahrendorf, 1958, 1959) contend that even latent antagonism should be subsumed under the domain of conflict. Although scholars may argue in such ways for broad or narrow views, all agree on the need for conceptual distinction. Another area of disagreement centers around forms of struggle such as competition and rivalry. Some scholars argue that these are not conflict (e.g, Mack, 1965), whereas others argue that they are special types of conflict (e.g., Dahrendorf, 1958, 1959; Doob, 1952). A broad view, according to Fink (1968) encompasses all kinds of social struggle and antagonism. A broad view implies a larger empirical domain and additional substantive content for a general theory. Fink does not argue that we need one theory to account for all subsets of conflict, whatever they may turn out to be, just that we need a single definition for this class of phenomena. Hence, his definition, "any social situation or process in which two or more social entities are linked by at least one form of antagonistic psychological relation or at least one form of antagonistic interaction" (p. 456), leaves the field open for systematic classification. More importantly, it allows for many different kinds of psychological antagonisms and antagonistic interactions to be defined as conflict and to be discussed as part of the social phenomenon which everyone and no one seems to be able to define. It is within this rubric that communication scholars have operated, seeking to discover the role of communication in conflict. As such, communication scholars usually limit their definition of conflict to situations involving interaction. Within the study of organizational conflict, the antagonistic relationships of interest are defined in terms of interdependence and goal compatibility (Putnam & Poole, 1987).

Conflict and Communication

Citing Fink (1968), Hawes and Smith (1973) attempt to sort out the answers to the conceptual-definitional question of conflict as a means of understanding the role of communication. Rooted in a system-theoretic view, Ruben (1978) argues that assumptions about the nature of communication necessarily lead to different conceptualizations of conflict. Whereas Hawes and Smith (1973) see the definition of conflict as an essential means to understanding communication, Ruben (1978) contends that the definition of communication is an essential means to understanding conflict. In the next few pages, arguments from these two views are compared to illustrate that communication and conflict are interdependent. One is not simply the means by which we are to understand the other; rather, they simultaneously define each other. Since it is impossible to simultaneously construct conceptualizations, the starting point is arbitrary. In practice, any conclusions about the nature of one carries implicit assumptions about the nature of the other.

Conceptualization. Hawes and Smith (1973) discuss the conceptualization of conflict along three dimensions or bivalued continua: Goal, strategy, and time. In their discussion of goals, Hawes and Smith delineate prospective and retrospective approaches. The more common prospective approach assumes individuals have clear and direct goals and intentions. When the intentions of two or more individuals are contradictory, a state of conflict ensues. Scholars differ in definitions of conflict according to whether or not these contradictory goals must be accompanied by overt behavior. Still, the crucial assumption is that goals direct behavior. Individuals are cognizant of their goals, and they act to achieve their goals. Therefore, conflicting goals result in conflicting behavior (Hawes & Smith, 1973).

The retrospective approach (Schutz, 1967; Weick, 1969) posits that goals become meaningful only after behaviors are manifest. Individuals view conflict retrospectively, and communicative behavior defines the nature of a conflict process. There are two crucial aspects of this view. First, the dimensions and implications of a conflict can only be known retrospectively. Second, individuals define a conflict by the particular communicative behaviors enacted. The difference between the prospective and retrospective approaches is that in the former a conflict is defined by goals, whereas in the latter conflict is defined by behavior.

Hawes and Smith point out that most scholars define conflict somewhere on a continuum between these two extremes. Differences in approach to this dimension yield different conceptualizations which in turn yield different research results as to the role of communication in conflict.

Ruben (1978) argues that the conceptualization of communication as either linear or pragmatic will lead to different decisions as to what constitutes conflict. In Ruben's (1978) analysis, the two extremes of Hawes and Smith's (1973) goals dimension—prospective and retrospective—can be seen as stemming from linear and pragmatic views of communication, respectively. A prospective view of goals implicitly presumes a "Sender → Message → Receiver = Effect" view of communication. This linear view presumes that the meaning of the message (communicative behavior) is the same for both interactants. The receiver knows clearly from the sender's message that their goals are contradictory. As in a tennis volley, the receiver then becomes the sender, sending a message that clearly tells the other that their goals are contradictory; and conflict ensues.

Ruben's system-theoretic perspective rejects the linear view of communication, and thus the prospective view of goals in conflict. He argues for a pragmatic or transactional view of communication. Hawes and Smith's (1973) description of a retrospective view of goals presumes a pragmatic or transactional view of communication. A pragmatic view defines communication as "a systemic or transactional process involving the transformation of symbols as a means by which living things organize with one another and their environment" (Ruben, 1978, p. 203). Within this view, conflict must necessarily be seen as behavioral. Using Hawes and Smith's (1973) vocabulary, the unfolding interaction makes clear to the individuals that their behaviors are the manifestation of a contradiction in their goals.

Hawes and Smith's (1973) second dimension, strategy, refers to the resolution vs. the management of conflict. Typically, early scholars viewed conflict as a necessarily negative force. Hence, the *resolution* of conflict was emphasized as the preferable strategy. In the 1960s, conflict began to take on a positive and healthy aspect (Putnam & Wilson, 1982, also describe this shift). In latter years, conflict has been seen as functional and necessary (Mathur & Sayeed, 1983; Ruben, 1976) and useful to organizational goals (Mathur & Sayeed, 1983). Conflict began to be seen as able to promote cohesiveness (Coser, 1956), maintain power balances (Blake, Shepard, & Mouton, 1964), facilitate change (Darling & Brownlee, 1984; Litterer, 1966), and generate creative problem solving (Hall, 1969, 1973, 1986). With these assumptions came the focus on conflict *management*. The difference in these two extremes, according to Hawes and Smith (1973), lies in the assumption of the effect of conflict as destructive or constructive. The strategy dimension differs according to the scholar's assumption of the nature of conflict somewhere on the continuum between constructive and destructive.

In considering constructive vs. destructive outcomes, Ruben (1978) argues for a distinction between conflict and para-conflict (conflict-as-conceived, or the experience of conflict). Conflict occurs at the level of action. Para-conflict is symbolic; communication also occurs at the symbolic level. Although conflict characterizes all living systems, para-conflict seems unique to humans. Para-conflict represents the self-reflexiveness of human systems—our ability to symbolically conceive of our environment, our actions, ourselves, and the relationships among them. Ruben argues that no scholar who has studied communication and conflict has examined conflict-as-action. Rather, all scholars have studied para-conflict—"the symbolic process of labeling, categorizing, and abstracting experience, and the bio-behavioral consequences of those symbolic processes" (p. 210). The consideration of whether conflict is constructive or destructive, then, depends on the definition of conflict as a symbolic process or an action process. As a symbolic process, conflict is defined as constructive or destructive depending on *how it feels* to the participants (Ruben, 1978, citing Deutsch, 1969). Regarding conflict-as-action, Ruben (1978) argues that

> determinations as to whether conflict is good or bad, functional or dysfunctional, useful or not, should be based upon . . . the extent to which conflict serves a system's (individual or social) over-time adaptive ends vis a vis its environment. (p. 209)

Finally, although

> associated with feelings of stress or pain, [conflict] must nevertheless be viewed as a *sine qua non* of learning, creativity, biological and psychological growth and differentiation for the individual . . . so, also, should it be regarded as the lifeblood of social change, choice, and social evolution. (p. 209)

Hawes and Smith's (1973) third dimension, time, is related to strategy (Hawes & Smith, 1973). This conceptual-definitional dimension refers to the assumption of whether conflict is episodic or continuous. In the former, conflict is seen as a temporary disruption of a normally stable and harmonious system. In the latter, conflict is defined as a normal, vital, and integrating aspect of human association. "When viewed as an episodic phenomenon, conflict is a disruption to be eliminated. When viewed as a continuous phenomenon, conflict is a perpetual condition to be managed and maintained" (p. 425).

Ruben's (1978) view does not allow for an episodic conceptualization of conflict. From his perspective, communication is continual and inevitable. Tracing back to Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), one foundation of this perspective, one cannot not communicate. Through communication, a human system *adapts* its environment (Ruben, 1978). Adaptation is defined as the system's cyclic process of fitting itself to its physical and social environment. Conflict is defined as the discrepancies between the demands/capabilities of the system and the demands/capacities of the environment. Adaptation (communication) is constant; conflict and adaptation are inseparable. Thus, "conflict is not only essential to the growth, change and evolution of living systems, but it is, as well, a system's primary defense against stagnation, detachment, entropy, and eventual extinction" (Ruben, 1978, p. 206).

Hawes and Smith (1973) point out that different combinations of assumptions on their three dimensions lead to vastly different conceptualizations of conflict. They argue that the approach involving prospective goals, resolution strategies, and an episodic time frame is the most common in communication research. The opposite (retrospective goals, strategy of maintenance, and continuous time frame), they argue, is deserving of greater attention by communication scholars. Ruben's (1978) system-theoretic view embodies the retrospective, maintenance, and continuous time frame. More importantly, when taken together these two analyses of conceptual issues reveal that communication and conflict cannot be conceived of in isolation from each other. Much deeper than Hawes and Smith's (1973) analysis, an adequate conceptualization of conflict cannot rely on decisions made separately on their three dimensions. Although conceptualizations may indeed follow these dimensions, an adequate conceptualization of conflict must be grounded in a firm theoretic stance and must be considered as mutually dependent on a conceptualization of communication.

Operationalization. In considering the operational-procedural question, Hawes and Smith (1973) identify five dimensions along which operational assumptions are commonly made: Rules, act, outcome, abstractness, and salience. The rules dimension refers to the structure of the tasks used in research to generate conflict behavior. The polar extremes of the rules dimension are cooperativeness and competitiveness. Different tasks require different balances between these two extremes. Hence, the conflict behavior generated will differ according to the rules dimension.

The act dimension refers to the amount and type of communication required for completion of the task. According to Hawes and Smith, this dimension usually varies according to the degree of unrestricted communication permitted. On the outcome dimension, correct outcome tasks have only one correct outcome, verifiable by external criteria. Creative outcome tasks do not have one correct outcome; criteria for judgement of the outcome must come from the interaction itself. The different demands of such tasks may generate different kinds of conflict.

The fourth dimension, abstractness, refers to the kind of information processing required for the task. Highly abstract tasks may generate different kinds of conflict than highly concrete tasks. Finally, the salience dimension refers to the degree of involvement in the task. Participants who feel highly involved may display different kinds of conflict than their uninvolved counterparts (Hawes & Smith, 1973).

Conclusions

All of these theorists point to seemingly insurmountable difficulties in the definition of conflict. Hawes and Smith (1973) conclude their discussion of the study of communication in conflict by identifying two implicit and unwarranted assumptions that plague research in the field. The first assumption is that conflict results from insufficient or ineffective communication. Communication itself then becomes a panacea for resolving or managing conflict. The second is that the mere expression of conflicting interests interferes with the resolution or management of conflict. Research conducted under the hold of one or both of these implicit assumptions cannot reveal the process or function of communication in conflict. Findings of such research are inherently biased by these tacit a priori assumptions.

Ruben's (1978) arguments reveal that the operation of such implicit assumptions is probably symptomatic of an atheoretic approach to research. When an atheoretic approach embodying unwarranted implicit assumptions is combined with the variety of conceptual and operational choices made (implicitly or explicitly) in research, it is no wonder that the literature on communication and conflict is fragmented, contradictory, and inconclusive. "The role of communication in conflict will not yield to easy and simple description largely because differing entering assumptions lead to different theoretical stances and different research results" (Hawes & Smith, 1973, p. 435). Ruben's (1978) article makes it clear that a theoretic stance should precede and guide entering assumptions, not vice versa.

Moreover, the phenomenon itself is so multifaceted that agreement among scholars on theoretic, conceptual, and operational issues is unlikely. Fink's (1968) treatment of the area makes this abundantly clear. Ironically, it is exactly the enigmatic nature of the phenomenon of conflict that has so fascinated generations of scholars. As producers and consumers of conflict research, we must remain vigilant to conceptual and operational issues. Producers of the research should make such issues explicit and theoretically well grounded. Consumers of this research should be critical of researchers' treatments of these issues—interpreting research in light of such critical examination. With such vigilance, we may yet be able to discover the role of communication in conflict.

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