Conflict Resolution Developing a Research Methodology
Marcus L. Ambrester

One of the most difficult of all social science areas of investigation resides in conflict and conflict resolution. Consider the problem from the perspective of the would-be researcher who wishes to observe the phenomenon at its source. Choose an academic setting; not the breeding ground for high conflict but, nevertheless, a convenient point of departure for our anxious researcher since this is his/her home base. S/he chooses a speech and theatre department in a mid-size university and decides to investigate the internal conflict situations extant in this department. How would s/he actually go about the task of investigating conflict and its resolution? Would s/he interview each member of the department? Would s/he learn much through such investigation? Would s/he meet with groups—the whole department? the staff? Why would such an investigation be fraught with problems? We shall examine some of the inherent problems in any ongoing conflict research project.

1) Masking is a major means for dealing with conflict.
Most individuals find ways to mask their reactions to stress producing messages. In other words if someone makes a remark which angers you, you often mask your reaction so that the other person does not know you are hurt or angry. Deutsch's studies confirmed that competition breeds competition. (Deutsch '73 p 367). One of the primary forms of competition is masking. We learn to play our cards close to our "vests."

2) Conflict is considered a "personal weakness" by many persons.
In our initial interviews we have discovered that many people feel that involvement in conflict reflects some "weakness" in them. They are therefore often reluctant to talk about conflicts. They would prefer to avoid the conflict altogether. Guetzkow and Gyr's research confirms that groups with high "affective conflict" (interpersonal conflict characterized by extreme frustration) ignore critical issues to seek any form of resolution. This action results from an extreme avoidance of the conflict itself.

3) People often discuss content as a means of avoiding relationship problems.
Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson have clearly delineated this problem of confusion of the "content" message with the "relationship" message. Oftentimes a member of a staff can make another member's life miserable by griping over minor points about "where his desk is" or "how he uses the telephone." Such minor but frequent gripes can be a way of avoiding the relationship conflict—which may inhere in extreme dislike or extreme fear of the other. If asked about this phenomenon most persons would deny any knowledge of an "underlying" problem.

4) It is far easier to feign compatibility than act in ways which might create conflict.
In their highly regarded concept of "groupthink" Janis and Mann suggest that overly cooperative orientations create a climate which leads to unreflective decisions. Many groups become habituated to the creation of such a climate and suppress all potential conflicts in an effort to keep things "smooth."

5) Differentiation (raising the issue in conflict and seeking clarification, rationality, and severity of difference) may create a climate to solve problems but it also often creates animosities.
Swenson (1973) suggests that relationships suffer when group members disagree on important issues. This factor of personal animosity is commonplace. Individuals attach issues to their own ego strength and take attacks on the issue as personal attacks. Such behavior often results in a stalemate on the issue and a rift between individuals or group faction which can result in the dissolution of the group itself.

6) "Trained Incapacities" create a climate which reduces the necessary flexibility to resolve conflict.
The term "trained incapacity" was coined by Kenneth Burke. He uses the term to refer to habitual patterns of interaction which may be appropriate in one setting but totally inappropriate in another. The "Insurance lady" in Paddy Chayefsky's movie script entitled "Hospital" walks through the emergency room getting insurance information. In one scene she attempts to interrogate a man on a stretcher who is already deceased. Such trained incapacities become commonplace in many situations and form the basis for escalating rather than deescalating the conflict. One of the major problems in studying such a phenomenon inheres in both the individual's inability to recognize a personal "trained incapacity," and the researcher's ability to accurately diagnose the habitual process.

7) Individuals do not like to talk about conflicts.

Most persons both like to forget past conflicts and are equally reluctant to discuss them with a third party (particularly a researcher who is a stranger). They would rather forget these events than "dwell" on them and they feel that discussing them with a stranger makes them particularly vulnerable (subject to the evaluation of the interaction by the researcher). Furthermore, individuals often feel that they have dealt "unfairly" or been treated "unfairly" in a conflict situation and they do not wish to acknowledge either posture.

Obviously, the above premises partially explain why research into conflict has been "objective" or "corrective" while largely skirting the issue we might wish to call the anatomy of conflict or perhaps the rhetoric of conflict and conflict resolution. Our attempts to formulate a means for addressing this concern are the basis for this treatise. However, before we explore our attempts to develop a research methodology and provide some of our findings from our preliminary research efforts, we must examine the primary perspectives from which conflict has been examined previously.

The most definitive work regarding the categorization of research methodologies and techniques has been accomplished by Folger and Poole in their 1984 text, **Working Through Conflict**. In their chapter, *Perspectives on Conflict* they designate five areas through which conflict has been examined: (1) Psychodynamics theory; (2) Field Theory; (3)Phase theories; (4) Experimental Gaming and (5) Styles. We will briefly examine the basic methodology of each of these perspectives, point to some of the limitations, and proceed to a discussion of our research as an additional means of discovering the characteristics of conflict and conflict resolution.

Psychodynamic theory refers to those theories which originated with Freud's concept of intrapersonal turmoil among three warring entities—the "id," the "ego," and the "superego." From the Freudian perspective we are constantly in conflict between our most basic needs manifested in the "id" and our social introjects, accumulated by the "superego." Such conflicts are manifested in various ways, by various individuals. Freud was interested in discovering the means by which the "id" circumvented the repressions of the "superego." His monumental works have served as the basis for most psychodynamic theory concerning neurotic and psychotic behavior. Such internal conflict is of interest to the psychologist and psychiatrist; but may offer few insights into conflict in the social context of "normal" life.

Several psychodynamic theories have emerged in humanistic psychology and in other fields that address the concept of internal conflict. Among them are theories by Frederick Perls, Eric Berne, Charles Zastrow, Albert Ellis, and Ambrester and Strause. The Ambrester/Strause model attmepts to synthesize the communicative aspects of the other models in an effort to offer a means of depicting our self-persuasion process during personal conflict.

Such inquiry into conflict is useful as a means of discovering the nature and complexities of our internal rhetorical wrangle; but it offers little overall insight into the anatomy of interpersonal conflict. Nevertheless, this area of investigation is still viable and needs further exploration as a means of linking intrapersonal conflict to social interaction.

Field theory was given birth by Kurt Lewin and some of the most beneficial group dynamics theory has been based in Lewin's work. His chief contributions related to conflict inhere in his idea that everyone operates in a "life space" (individual's normative concepts) and a psychological field which involves the atmosphere of a group. Climate refers to the quality of the field as a whole.

Morton Deutsch's work in field theory has provided more insight into the nature of group and social conflict. The key term for Deutsch is interdependence, which he divided into two forms—contrient and promotive. Contrient interdependence involves a climate in which the individuals in a group perceive that everone's gain will be the other's loss. Promotive interdependence describes a climate in which the individuals in a group perceive that gains for one person will equal gains for the others.

Deutsch argues that contrient interdependence promotes competition whereas promotive interdependence fosters cooperative behavior. "Competition," Deutsch states, "breeds competition and cooperation breeds cooperation." (Deutsch '73 p. 367) Deutsch's two major assumptions concerning conflict are as follows: (1) climate influences conflict behavior and (2) generalized perceptions of interdependence arise from interaction.

Limitations of field theory as Folger and Poole point out are that Deutsch "...*isolates one feature of the conflict situation, interdependence, and derives his entire analysis of cooperative and competitive processes from this feature.*" A second limitation inheres in an "...*overemphasis on perceptions.*" (Folger and Poole, p. 19) Nevertheless, the field theory perspective has provided insights into the nature of group interdependence and the role played by perceptions in the creation and resolution of conflict.

Phase theories attempt to establish the various stages or phases through which any conflict will pass. The best known of the phase perspectives is that of R.J. Rummel who identified the following five stages in conflict: the latent stage, the initiation phase, balancing power, balance of power, disruption.

The latent stage refers to a pre-conflict stage which is always extant in human interaction. By virtue of our varying attitudes, values, objectives, etc. there is always potential for conflict. A "triggering event" brings on the actual first phase, the initiation phase in which potential differences become the basis for interaction. In the "balancing power" stage the individuals "spar" with each other in an effort to assess the willingness of the other

to use power, threats, and rewards. The combatants confront the issue in an effort to reach accommodation. The resolution leads to the "balance power" stage in which the combatants come to understand the consequences of the outcome and adjust to the realities of the situation. This stage produces a set of expectations by the participants and may last a long period of time. The stage becomes disrupted as significant changes occur in circumstances, goals and attitude change. Rummel labeled the final stage the "disruption" stage in which the individuals come to the realization that conditions are conducive to conflict and confrontation. Rummel's analysis, therefore, presupposes that conflict runs in cycles from the latent stage to balance of power and then is reactivated (perhaps over different issues) in the disruption phase.

Rummel's phases represent only one of many such theories. Kiesling, '73, Morley and Stephenson, '77, Walton, '79, and Ellis and Fisher, '75, all have suggested that conflicts can be segmentalized into phases or stages. While this research is valuable in its own right, it is, nevertheless, highly limited as a methodology for studying or even characterizing conflict. In the first place, there is little practical import in attempting to observe and label the various staged in a conflict. Second, the superimposition of, phases in a conflict situation may distort the observers ability to clearly ascertain the most salient aspects of the conflict. Third, phase theories suggest that a "logical" sequence or patern will emerge in any conflict situation. Poole, '81, found that groups often fail to follow a set sequence of phases. Finally, phase theory is highly simplistic. Not only are conflicts more complex than the theory suggests; but also the idea of charting the stages may represent a process of drawing a map that fits no territory.

Nevertheless, we do not want to overlook the positive aspects of phase theory. Conflicts are often cyclical and phase theories help us observe and identify cyclical escalations. Also, when used in a flexible manner, studying the phases in conflict can offer further insights into the anatomy of interpersonal conflict and attempts at resolution.

Experimental game theory, similar to exchange theory, has been the most studied and utilized area of conflict investigation. Perhaps the fact that gaming is a short-hand measure of resolving the complex problem of conflict, gaming strategies and techniques have proliferated to the point that any single review of the extant conflict resolutions games would represent a monumental study in its own right. Nevertheless, although experimental gaming techniques are astronomically porportioned to other conflict research methodologies, Folger and Poole have essentialized the key assumptions in gaming theory. They are as follows:

1. The structure of a game is composed of choices (options) available to players and the rewards or costs (payoffs) they receive from selecting a given choice.

2. The choices available to players are limited in number, and players know what these choices are.

3. The payoffs associated with a given move depend not only on the player's choice, but also on the choice made by the other.

4. Players know the payoffs associated with each combination of choices and these payoffs are interesting and meaningful to them.

5. A player's choice is determined by calculation of payoffs (rewards and costs). Rational game behavior consists of the selection of choices that yield favorable outcomes, either the maximization of gain or the attainment of a beneficial norm, such as distributive justice.

Gaming theory is epitomized in the "classic" game called "The Prisoner's Dilemma." This game is designed to teach the participants that cooperation and trust are preferable to doubt and competition in the interpersonal situation. The game as most persons know is set-up accordingly:

1. If A remains silent and B remains silent, then A's outcome is +1 and B's outcome is +1.

2. If A remains silent and B confesses, then A's outcome is -2 and B's outcome is +2.

3. If A confesses and B remains silent, then A's outcome is +2 and B's outcome is -2.

4. If A confesses and B confesses, then both have outcome of -1.

Besides the basic stances in the game itself there are opportunities for variations. If one adds the potential for communication between the prisoners, for instance, the dynamics of the interplay adds new dimensions to the game. Gaming techniques, therefore, offer multilevel opportunities to participate and examine conflict and its resolution from the outset to the completion.

Pruitt and Kimmel (1977) have identified three forms of experimental games. Matrix games are those which resemble the "prisoner's dilemma." Negotiation games simulate formal negotiation over a specific problem and award points for the "quality" of the agreement. "Coalition" games involve more than two players and encourage the formation of coalitions and bargaining to defeat other coalitions. These games have a numerical base and are scored accordingly.

Although gaming theory is extrememly useful in the study of conflict and conflict resolution there are limitations to its usefulness as Wilmot and Wilmot ('78) point out. These authors allege that gaming theory fails to take into account the variety of options available in a real situation. A second problem is represented by most of the games we have reviewed—they oversimplify. A person may be a great monopoly player and yet be a very poor business person. Gaming gives an oversimplistic view of situations and probably offers little carryover. Finally, much gaming theory coorelates competition with "unhealthy" conflict. In real life we are often involved in competitive situations which demand that we operate in competitive fashion. Such a perspective makes gaming appear quite unrealistic in many situations.

The fifth perspective on conflict is called **style**. Blake and Mouton, '64, created the concept and identified "style" as the "position" or "role" an individual assumes in a conflict. Folger and Poole point out that five styles have emerged in the course of theoretical writings in this area. The five styles are identified as follows: competitive—high in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness: accomodative—unassertive and cooperative; avoiding—unassertive and uncooperative; collaborative—high in assertiveness and cooperation; and compromising—intermediate in assertiveness and cooperation.

Style research has provided valuable insights into the nature and function of role behaviors and conflict. The chief findings have helped to clarify the settings in which the various styles would be most appropos. When viewed as rhetorical devices which can be employed in conflict situations style theory seems quite appropriate. However, when a designated style is assigned to an individual (by virtue of a categorical test) the methodology can become more destructive than helpful. Assigned a "style" by a categorical measure, the individual may act out a self-fulfilling prophecy based on the style assigned him/her by the test.

After examining the studies in conflict and conflict resolution, we resolved to attempt an exploration of the rhetoric of conflict. In other words, we decided to try to develop a means to discover and employ strategies which allow individuals to handle conflict. We acquainted ourselves with other literature than that surveyed by Folger and Poole. There exists an enormous body of conflict resolution material in the area of humanistic psychology. Such luminaries as Carl Rodgers, R.D. Laing, Bach and Wyden, and Bandler, Grinder, and Satir have attempted to explore the nature of conflict in the family setting. Many valuable insights and hypotheses have emerged from the research and writings of these scholars. Nevertheless, a crucial question remains unexamined. How do "normal" people in their day to day situations deal with the conflict which occurs in their lives? What kinds of strategies do they develop which allow them to cope and maintain a reasonably normal existence? These are the nagging questions which caused us to begin searching for answers.

As we stated at the outset of this paper, conflict is a very difficult phenomenon to observe. Ideally, we reasoned, that the best possible means to study the phenomenon would be to become a part of that which we were attempting to analyze. For example, to study conflict in families we would have to live with various families and attempt to discover the methods used to deal with conflict. The same would apply if we wished to observe conflict as it occurs in the professional setting. We soon discovered through our ruminations why most researchers have relied on some artificial means of studying conflict or have resorted to the use of anecdotal evidence to support or reject their hypotheses. The task of studying conflict as it occurs is monumental to say the least. Not only that, it is likewise impractical. Would you, for instance, be willing to allow an outside observer to live in your home for an extended period and study the nature of the conflicts which occur? And if one chooses to research in this manner and even finds a workable means for so doing, can s/he ever know when s/he has attained a representative sample?

Recognizing the impracticalities inherent in our desire to know more about the rhetoric of conflict and its resolution, we devised a questionnaire designed to afford initial insights into the nature and function of conflict from the perspective of the individual. Utilizing the current research findings and the best advice from hundreds of students in interpersonal communication classes at the University of Tennessee, we designed the following questionnaire to be used with students from interpersonal communication classes who were willing to volunteer their time to talk about conflict in their personal experience. Over the past three years we have conducted approximately two hundred and fifty such interviews with students who range generally from 18 to 24 years of age and are attending the University of Tennessee. All students (with the exception of 20 students from a class entitled **Business and Professional Speaking**) were volunteers from our course entitled *Interpersonal Communication*. Their majors varied widely across the University community, but the highest concentration of majors came from the following fields—"Business—marketing," "Communications—public relations,

advertising, journalism, broadcasting," "Home Economics—tourism, food, and lodging, social work, home and family;" "Agriculture—forestry, pre-veterinary science, ornamental horticulture" and "Psychology."

Since we emphasized in class that this study was independent of class work and would not affect their grades positively or negatively, we believe the group of interviewees came of their "own accord" as much as one can hope for under such circumstances. The interviewers, without whom this study would still exist in the mind of the experimenter, were as follows: Joan Akard—graduate student in interpersonal communication with a masters in divinity; Kim Householder—law student, with a rich background in speech communication; Mary Lisa Rickman—teacher in the Nashville public school system; and Mimi Macabee—public relations specialist, employed by a firm in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. In identifying our staff for this project, we do not wish to suggest that the project is finished—far from it. We are in the preliminary stages of the development of a vehicle to study and observe the rhetoric of conflict resolution. The questions which we devised are propedeutic to the overall investigation. Perhaps, as poet E.A. Robinson suggested in another context, we are "...*Trying to spell God with the wrong blocks.*" Therefore, we are attempting to recognize throughout our ongoing investigation, that the only flaw in our research may be the flaw we created. In other words, we are attempting to discover the validity of our research as we engage in our research—such, we trust, is the true nature of phenomenological investigation. The point to be made is that while our questions may appear to be valid they represent no more than the parameters we set for ourselves in seeking to investigate conflict and conflict resolution. therefore, we may make radical changes in our methodology as we learn the "right" questions to ask. We, therefore, offer the following questionnaire which we used as a basis for our interviews with students, coupled with some of our preliminary findings from our research efforts.

Interview Questions on Conflict/Resolution

1. Classify yourself as a (1) Heavyweight, (2) Middleweight, (3) Lightweight.

2. With whom do you fight/have conflict?

3. What do you fight/argue/have conflict over most? money, children, politics, friends, concern, love, sex, etc...?

4. How frequently do you experience frustration which could lead to conflict with this person?

5. How often does this frustration become verbalized?

6. Then what happens...?

7. Would you give an account of one of your conflicts? (line by line, blow by blow)

8. How long does an open conflict last?

9. What happens to terminate the conflict? (Do you run out, he/she clam up, etc...)

10. Does termination represent successful or unsuccessful attempts at resolution?

11. Is the conflict ever resolved—how? If not, what happens to it?

12. How do you feel during and after the conflict?

13. How important is winning for you?

14. How often do you win?

15. What emotional strategies do you employ?

16. What rational strategies do you employ?

The questions we devised, as we suggested, are not sacrosanct—they are designed for alteration as we learn more about the rhetoric of conflict resolution. Therefore, a general discussion of our findings would be more beneficial at this point than an actual recounting of the responses to each question.

At the outset of each interview respondents were asked to classify themselves in terms of Back and Wydens ('68) categories of heavy weight middleweight or lightweight. We explained the classifications as follows: (1) the heavyweight—a person who had rather "fight than switch"—one who enjoys a verbal battle and sometimes even starts a fight to increase the excitement of the moment; (2) the lightweight—one who is opposite the heavyweight. S/he will do almost anything to avoid a confrontation. To fight is to become devastated, immobilized, or increasingly vulnerable, so the lightweight chooses to avoid such confrontations; (3) the middleweight can initiate or avoid a conflict. If confrontation is necessary s/he will face the problem and attempt to reach a solution with as little conflict as possible.

The majority of our interviewees (57%) classified themselves as middleweights. A surprisingly large percentage (32%) classified themselves as lightweights, while a smaller percentage (10%) identified with the heavyweight category. One percent of our interviewees were unwilling or unable to classify themselves in any of the three categories.

Several of our preliminary findings bear discussion:

1. Most persons prefer to avoid or suppress hostilities.
   Among those interviewed a vast majority prefer to avoid conflict at all costs. They prefer various avoidance techniques to the wide variety of confrontational techniques.

2. The most prevalent and "severe" conflicts occur in intimate relationships.
   While a few persons include fellow workers in their lists of those with whom they fight, most list family and lovers. This is hardly surprising since Frederick Perls ('72) suggests that we release our hostilities on those who are least likely to reject us.

3. People fight most frequently over content rather than relationship issues.
   Among our subjects, 89% mentioned content related issues such as money, religion, destination, etc. as their major area of conflict. When queried about the content, relationship concerns tend to emerge—such as "He wants to make all the decisions, She really doesn't seem to care, They treat me like a little girl." This preliminary finding seems to validate the concept that Watzlavick, Beavin, and Jackson propose, that we use content arguments to mask realtionship problems.

4. Although most of our respondents do not like to classify their conflicts as attempts to "win" 79% can easily designate a percentage of times they win in a given situation.
   Most of our respondents argue that winning is not the key issue for them; but that same group comments that they win from 50% to 85% of the time.

5. Most of our interviewees find conflict unrewarding.
   Among those interviewed 71% state that at the conclusion of a conflict little or nothing is resolved. These persons view conflict as a counterproductive phenomenon in which individuals exchange hostilities and finish with little gained and much lost.

6. Among those who find satisfactory solutions, conflict is considered a positive process.
   The minority of our subjects reported satisfactory solutions emerging from conflict, and they believe that conflict is a means of "clearing the air" and "improving relationships."

7. Conflict produces strong feelings.
   Almost all our respondents reported that feelings were heightened during the course of a conflict. The majority reported heightening of negative feelings, while a few individuals classified the process as exhilerating.

8. The strategies employed vary widely; but there are some commonalities.
   The most frequently reported "emotional" strategy is guilt-induction. Contrary to Maxwell and Schmitt's findings ('67) that threat and other "punishing activities" are unlikely strategies, we have found that at the intimate level these are the most employed strategies. "Logical" strategies include pleas for consistency, uses of evidence, and appeals to "follow my train of thought."

These preliminary findings represent only a small sample of the wealth of information we are accumulating through our study. We are now beginning to discover the questions we need to ask in order to examine the anatomy of conflict as it exists at the individual level. We believe that we have tapped a mainstream that will eventually lead us to the development of a rhetoric of conflict and conflict resolution.

Notes

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