Four Perspectives on Conflict Management: An Attributional Framework for Organizing Descriptive and Normative Theory [1]

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Diverse explanatory conflict models and intervention strategies reflect key perceptual/attributional choices. Two key choices are used as organizing devices to identify four broad perspectives upon conflict: external process, external structural, internal process, and internal structural. Diagnostic concepts and intervention strategies from the literature are summarized to illustrate each perspective.

Observers have commented upon the disorganized state of organizational conflict literature (52, 78) and of conflict literature in general (30). This disorganization shows itself in divergent definitions of "conflict", fundamentally different sets of explanatory variables, and recommendations of equally diverse strategies for managing conflict.

As a sample of this diversity, "conflict" has been defined as the condition of objective incompatibility between values or goals (6), as the behavior of deliberately interfering with anoth-

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er's goal achievement (68), and emotionally in terms of hostility (56). Descriptive theorists have explained conflict behavior in terms of objective conflict of interest (4), personal styles (10), reactions to threats (25), and cognitive distortions (57). Normative recommendations range over the establishment of superordinate goals (71), consciousness raising (20), selection of compatible individuals (69), and mediating between conflict parties (83).

This article attempts to organize the richness and diversity of the organizational conflict literature so as to be useful to scholars and practitioners. Its approach is not to value one approach over another, explicitly or implicitly, but rather to legitimize the value of different approaches by placing them in a larger perspective.

Rather than a new conflict model, something more encompassing is needed — a meta model of conflict management. One meta model identifies two key assumptive or attributional choices which run through the diversity of existing models. These assumptive choices are used as organizing principles to identify and differentiate four basic perspectives on conflict behavior. These four perspectives are used as integrative mechanisms to identify commonalities which cut across the diversity in conflict definitions, independent variables, and interventions. Each perspective is an equally important component of conflict diagnosis and intervention, whether conflict is between individuals, groups, or broader organizational subsystems.

The scope of this meta model can be clarified by examining the steps involved in managing a conflict. Conflict management is viewed as containing three major interrelated events: (a) perceiving/experiencing unacceptable conflict, (b) diagnosing the sources of the conflict, and (c) intervening. These events are similar to the sequence of conflict management and planned change activities discussed by Robbins (63) and Lippitt et al. (44) and to the events or stages in the conflict models suggested by Pondy (59) and Thomas (78). Within the conflict management cycle, this article is not directly concerned with

initial judgment of the acceptability or dysfunctionality of a given conflict — for example, whether there is an optimal level of conflict (63) or whether a given conflict-handling behavior is functional in a given situation (79). These complex functionality issues deserve further explication elsewhere.

This article addresses the subsequent causal attributions (40) involved in diagnosing sources of the conflict and anticipating the leverage of different interventions. The four perspectives developed are applicable regardless of why a given conflict has been judged as dysfunctional — whether one would prefer to escalate or de-escalate the conflict, to establish collaboration or heighten competition, etc. The specific interventions cited from the literature are slanted towards de-escalation and collaboration only because of the past emphasis within that literature (63).

It is important to distinguish between (a) the process through which a theorist or interventionist diagnoses a conflict and selects an intervention, and (b) the resulting diagnosis and intervention strategy. The four perspectives are concerned with the diagnosis and intervention strategy, not the process of arriving at it — which is necessarily an internal mental process. Thus the process of diagnosis should not be confused with the content of the internal process perspective described later.

Two Key Attributional Choices

A review of the conflict literature suggested that much of its diversity could be accounted for in terms of two specific attributional distinctions. These two distinctions also seem to be important attributional choices which theorists and practitioners make in trying to comprehend any behavioral phenomena.

The First Distinction: Process vs. Structural Analyses

Process and structural analyses appear to be fundamentally different methods of perceiving

and understanding phenomena. Thomas' (78) synthesis of dyadic conflict theory underscored the distinction, assembling much of that literature into two separate process and structural models of conflict behavior.

Process models of behavior place the parties in a temporal sequence of *events*. Behavior is assumed to be directly influenced by preceding events and anticipation of subsequent events. Structural models focus upon *conditions,* relationships between those conditions, and their influence upon behavior. At a given moment, those conditions are viewed as exerting forces upon behavior. Whereas a process model places parties in a sequence of events, a structural model places them in a web of forces.

A series of verbal threats, acts of physical aggression, and an exchange of evaluative remarks are events. When these events, or a party's anticipation of them, are seen as influencing that party's behavior, the behavior is being explained in process terms. Conflict of interest, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and skills are conditions — things which exist over a period of time. As such, they are structural constructs for explaining behavior.

The Second Distinction: Internal vs. External Sources of Influence

This distinction refers to two different loci for the origins of behavior. "Internal" models emphasize events and conditions *within* a party which influence behavior. Parties are seen as decision-making entities confronted with alternatives and choice points. Variation in behavior is assumed to be an outcome of differences in the processes and structures of this decision making. By contrast, "external" models focus upon events and conditions *outside* the party which shape behavior. As Bugental (15) notes, the implicit assumption is that parties are fairly interchangeable in their reactions to processes and conditions in their environment — that these processes and conditions are sufficient to explain behavior. Rotter (65) found systematic variation among individuals in their tendencies to attribute behavior to internal or external causes.

Assumptions, perceptions, motives, insights, decision-making styles, and anticipating the other party's responses are phenomena which occur within a party, and are therefore internal constructs for explaining behavior. Examples of external constructs are conflicts of interest, norms, an opponent's threats, an opponent's concessions, and third-party interventions.

The Four Perspectives

These two distinctions combine logically to identify four perspectives upon conflict, as represented in Figure 1: "external process", "external structural", "internal process", and "internal structural". Although this scheme was developed independently, it bears a strong resemblance to the scheme used by Clark and Krone (18) to classify their organization development interventions.

Subsequent discussion of each perspective will focus on diagnosis and on intervention strategies. But the four perspectives also help to explain the divergence in definitions of "conflict" in the literature (30): as behavioral interference, threats, or competition (external process); as conflict of interest or objective role conflict (external structure); as experienced frustration or the intent to injure or to interfere with an opponent (internal process); or as personal incompatibilities and antagonistic attitudes or predispositions (internal structure).

The External Process Perspective

This perspective emphasizes the causal effects of events which impinge upon a party from outside. A party's behavior is seen as a reaction to the behavior of other parties, in "stimulus-response" fashion, and this behavior in turn evokes a behavioral response from them.

Diagnosis

Sources of conflictful behavior are sought in other stimulus behaviors. More work needs to be done in classifying these behaviors and

Process vs. Structure: Behavior is caused by		
Internal vs. External Sources of Influence: Behavior is caused by events and conditions	events (Process)	conditions (Structure)

outside the party (External)	The *External Process* Perspective — behavior is shaped by events outside the individual:
	
	    threats
	    negative evaluation
	    encroachment
	
	Intervention strategy: "Interaction management"
		The *External Structural* Perspective — behavior is shaped by conditions outside the individual;
		
		    social pressure
		    conflict of interest
		    procedures
		
		Intervention strategy: "Contextual modification"

inside the party (Internal)	The *Internal Process* Perspective — behavior is shaped by events inside the individual:
	
	    frustration
	    strategies
	    defense mechanisms
	
	Intervention strategy: "Consciousness raising"
		The *Internal Structural* Perspective — behavior is shaped by conditions inside the individual:
		
		    motives
		    attitudes
		    skills
		
		Intervention strategy: "Selection and training"

FIGURE 1. The Two Distinctions which Define the Four Perspectives, with Some Examples of Key Diagnostic Variables and the Four Broad Intervention Strategies.

their effects. Conflict behavior has been asserted to be a response to competition (8, 41), threat (25), negative evaluation (34), encroachment (2), and coercion (62). Third party interventions also may be viewed as external events to which the parties react, as in process interventions discussed by Schein (66) and Walton (83).

Intervention: "Interaction Management"

Since the manner of interaction is seen as the basis of the conflict, the change agent's focus is on changing interactions. This change objec-

tive is non-substantive in that the change agent is not especially concerned with the content of the interactions (i.e., the issues of the conflict situation), but with specific behaviors used by the parties in negotiating or otherwise attempting to influence each other.

The class of interventions by which change agents attempt to achieve this objective is termed "interaction management". [2] Change agents

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[2] This term has nothing to do with the Interaction Management Program produced by Development Dimensions, Inc., Pittsburgh.

may intervene directly into the interaction to control behavior by acting as "referee" to stop unfair behavior, rephrasing statements to make them less provocative, acting as timekeeper and gatekeeper to insure equal time (83), and so on. They may also act as role models (3) to provide an example of effective modes of interaction. For example, a change agent may purposely be non-evaluative and descriptive. The crucial nature of the intervention in this case is the change agent's type of behavior. The parties may adopt similar behavior through identification with the change agent (58), thereby reducing defensiveness and facilitating problem solving.

The External Structural Perspective

The external structural perspective places the causes of behavior in conditions outside the parties. Conditions in the environment are seen as motivating, constraining, or channeling behavior.

Diagnosis

In a review of the literature on organizational conflict, Thomas (78) identified three clusters of external conditions which influence conflict behavior — conflict incentives, social pressures, and rules and procedures.

"Conflict incentives" is used in a broad sense to include the objectives of the parties and the manner in which satisfaction of those objectives is linked. Two central components discussed have been the stakes involved (11, 29, 31) and the conflict of interest between goals of the conflict parties (4, 23, 68, 71, 85).

Social pressures can be viewed as barriers (83) and forces. Thomas (78) differentiated between pressures from constituents (9, 50, 74) and "ambient social pressure" — social pressure from relatively neutral onlookers who enforce the norms of the larger organization (12, 45, 47) or culture (75).

Finally, the conflict parties can be viewed as interacting within a framework of rules and procedures which shape their negotiations — as well

as their opportunities to interfere with each other (68). The conflict behavior of the two parties has been linked to several aspects of established negotiating procedures — frequency of contact (84), barriers to openness (54), formality (49), and sequencing of issues (11). Explicit decision rules evolve to cover sensitive issues (28, 77). Various forms of mediation or arbitration mechanisms may be available when the parties deadlock (32, 70, 73).

Intervention: "Contextual Modification"

Change objectives focus upon alteration of external conditions which exert forces upon the parties. Interventions which seek to alter this external context of the parties' behavior are labeled "contextual modification". Methods to change the responsibilities of either party, formal and informal rules, job descriptions, incentives, budgets, control mechanisms, social pressures, etc., fit this category. These methods might include: (a) formally dictating a change in policy or goals of either or both parties, (b) mandating a negotiation session between parties in which they have to compromise their budget demands, (c) changing the composition of members belonging to either or both parties, (d) changing the social pressures which other bystanders exert upon the parties, and (e) instituting superordinate goals so that the parties benefit by cooperating with each other. Aspects of contextual modification are now receiving increasing emphasis as the field of organizational behavior leans more heavily toward organizational design (42, 43).

The Internal Process Perspective

This perspective seeks the source of behavior in the sequence of events which occurs within a party. In the case of individuals, behavior is seen as an outcome of the logic or "psychologic" (57) of perceptions, ideas, and emotions. Whereas the internal structural perspective emphasizes consistencies and personal fixities, this perspective emphasizes the moment-to-moment changes

in the individual's phenomenology and the choices which are made at any given moment. The individual is an ongoing process, rather than an object with stable characteristics (15), a view emphasized in humanistic psychology. When the conflict party is a larger social unit (a work group or organization), this focus expands to include the ongoing interpersonal decision processes within the unit which shape its behavior toward other units.

Diagnosis

Diagnostic efforts center upon understanding the sequence of internal events which are shaping the conflict episode. In his process model, Thomas (78) emphasized the importance of understanding the specific nature of the actual or anticipated frustrations which begin conflict episodes — i.e., the underlying concerns or agendas of the parties. That model also emphasized the importance of the parties' conceptualizations of the conflict situation — their definitions of the issues and their assumptions about possible outcomes.

The change agent operating from this perspective will want to understand the strategic and tactical logic of each party. Parties may adopt political strategies involving coalitions (15, 21, 33), interpersonal strategies involving games or ploys (7, 36, 60), bargaining strategies involving power (67) and so on. Occasionally violence may be understood as a deliberate and rational tactic under this perspective (55), although the parties may also realize the advantages of limiting or managing their conflict (19, 27).

Less rational decision processes also are important from this perspective. Conflict behavior may stem from misperceptions (9, 24), projection (35), selective attention and recall (22), polarization and stereotyping (57), and the inability to recognize alternatives (20).

Intervention: "Consciousness Raising"

Given the assumption that the parties' conflict behavior stems from their internal processing of decisions, the change agent's objective is to influence the parties' perceptions, cognitions, and emotions regarding the ongoing conflict. Such interventions are termed "consciousness-raising" interventions. Included are many traditional interventions used by the trainer of a sensitivity training group (13), where discussions of "here and now" experiences can lead to new appreciation of an ongoing interpersonal process, awareness of alternative behaviors and their effects, correction of perceptual distortions, and working-through of feelings. Also included are individual or joint counseling sessions aimed at helping the parties to recognize their frustrations and objectives, think through the consequences of alternative paths, and work through ambivalences about a course of action (20).

Although internal process or consciousness-raising interventions may result indirectly in altered modes of interaction between parties, decisions regarding external structural change, or long-run changes in a party's internal structuring, these are not the primary objectives of an internal process intervention. The primary objective is to improve the parties' internal processing of decisions regarding the current conflict episode. Although the term "consciousness-raising" carries connotations of neutral activities intended only to bring some phenomenon into awareness, these interventions may also involve advocacy and persuasion. Nevertheless, consciousness-raising interventions tend to be the most humanistic, in the sense of treating the parties as responsible decision makers.

The Internal Structural Perspective

This perspective seeks the causes of the parties' behavior in relatively stable characteristics within them, and in the manner in which these characteristics are organized. The parties' behavior is viewed as an expression of their make-up. This "personality" or "organization" is seen as a compelling influence upon behavior, predisposing parties to characteristic patterns of behavior.

Diagnosis

An explanation of the general status of a party's relationships with other parties is sought in terms of the party's characteristics, whether based upon instinct (46), culture and socialization (75), or other factors.

To some extent, a party's conflict-handling behavior may be seen in terms of habitual response hierarchies and styles (5, 10). Although trait theories are not currently in vogue, some research evidence indicates a degree of regularity in conflict-related behaviors. For example, Gormly and Edelberg (37) found evidence that an individual's assertiveness is reliable across situations.

The party's general behavior also may be understood in terms of stable underlying attributes which shape behavior: motives and needs (76), value systems (17, 24), information-processing limitations (38), characteristic defense mechanisms (1, 64), and diagnostic and problem-solving skills.

In diagnosing conflict in a specific relationship, attention may be focused upon incompatibilities between styles, needs, etc., of the two parties (53, 69, 83).

Intervention: "Selection and Training"

As in the internal process perspective, the change agent is concerned with altering things which are internal to the parties. But while the internal process perspective sought to influence decision-related events within the parties during a specific conflict episode, the internal structural perspective is concerned directly with changing the parties themselves — i.e., with making stable changes which will continue to influence the parties' behavior across a number of episodes. The emphasis is upon lasting change rather than facilitating a single here-and-now interaction. Change efforts are therefore likely to be more systematic, involving a *program* of interventions.

One approach to changing the conflict-handling characteristics of individuals in a given organizational position is through the selection of those people — through recruiting and screening managers for initial hiring and for promotion to any given position. Questions about cooperative work relations are common in reference letters and the performance appraisals upon which promotions are based. Similar screening procedures may be applied to organizations themselves — for governmental licensing, and for admission to trade organizations and other alliances.

"Training" is used here to denote all interventions directed at producing lasting changes in parties which have already been selected. In the case of individuals, this may include formal or informal socialization of managers into acceptance of organizational norms and values, educational programs directed at cognitive learnings, job rotation practices which facilitate interdepartmental coordination by giving managers a common perspective, laboratory training programs (13) designed to give managers diagnostic and action skills in interpersonal relations, and provisions for individual therapy.

Implications

This meta model or framework can be used to help potential change agents identify their diagnostic and intervention styles — by surfacing assumptions about the source of conflict, and by classifying their preferred interventions. Development of specialized styles may be functional for a change agent, and the four perspectives help to identify the change agent's strengths. By implication they also help to identify blind spots.

One normative suggestion deriving from this article is that the change agent and practitioner *should* be explicit about their conceptualizations, and explicitly consider the four kinds of diagnoses and intervention strategies in choosing how to deal with an important conflict situation. In effect, these four perspectives can be used as a "checklist" to suggest the full range of possibilities. Having a wider choice of alternatives would enable a more realistic cost/benefit

analysis (81) — i.e., an assessment of the costs of each type of diagnosis and corresponding intervention strategy versus the expected short or long range benefits to be derived from the interventions. Even if change agents themselves are not equally skilled in implementing the four perspectives, conscious awareness of all four approaches can allow them to involve appropriate others and prevent them from using their strengths inappropriately.

One can argue normatively for a *team* of change agents with different perspectives to address important conflict situations. If no single person can be expert in applying more than one or two perspectives, a team can be composed so that all four perspectives will be equally considered, coordinated, and applied as necessary. The present meta model of the four perspectives may give the team a common framework for organizing and appreciating their diversity of approaches, resulting in a true systems approach to conflict management. Such an approach may become more necessary as organizations face more complex, dynamic, and changing environments, where the sources of frequent conflicts are complex and multidetermined.

Although the four perspectives and model emerged from a review of conflict literature, they are easily generalizable to the understanding and influencing of other behavioral phenomena. If management is viewed as a process of influencing others, the four perspectives can be used to classify approaches to management in general: (a) the external process approach is roughly equivalent to close supervision and direct control of others' work; (b) the internal process approach includes counseling and helping individuals to define their own goals, which are basic elements of Management by Objectives (61); (c) the external structural approach involves management through incentives, rules, control systems, and organizational design technologies (42); and (d) the internal structural approach includes recruiting, placement, and training.

In short, this meta model provides a new approach to classifying managerial style — one which emphasizes the individual's implicit philosophy of how people are influenced, rather then inter-personal manner (whether one is considerate, assertive, etc.). This scheme combines a number of important philosophies of management — not only the classic Behavioral Science process distinctions of close Theory X supervision vs. Theory Y counseling and goal setting (48), but also the Management Theory emphasis on incentives and control systems, and Industrial Psychology emphasis on selection and training. Subsequent development of instrumentation to assess managerial reliance upon the four perspectives may provide a means of identifying these managerial philosophies at the level of the individual practitioner, thereby enabling research on the effects of these philosophies upon workers and the organization.

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