

Rowboat in a Hurricane: Metaphors of Interpersonal Conflict Management

SUZANNE McCORKLE and JANET L. MILLS*

Metaphors are cognitive structures that help individuals understand their world. In interpersonal conflict management, metaphors can function as models for how conflicts should be negotiated. Hocker and Wilmot (1991) asserted that negative metaphors appear to dominate interpersonal conflicts. The results from this investigation support the prevalence of negative interpersonal conflict metaphors. The 349 respondents in this study used 616 interpersonal conflict metaphors that resulted in 28 categories. These data, however, contradict the categories previously specified in the literature. To highlight the function of metaphors as models of interpersonal conflict, the *natural processes* metaphor is analyzed to illustrate the (a) general nature of the conflict process within the metaphor, (b) role of the person using the metaphor, (c) role of the conflict partner within the metaphor, (d) power distribution inherent within the model, and (e) conflict management strategies and tactics encouraged by the metaphoric model.

■ The present investigation explored the relationship between metaphor and interpersonal conflict management. Metaphors may help to frame or solidify the conceptualizations of conflicting parties. A strong basis for this understanding has been evolving from a theoretical perspective during the past decade.

Constructivists, in contrast to nonconstructivists (Ortony, 1979), argue passionately about how the meaning shift occurs between metaphor and target concept. They share the perspective, however, that some cognitive association between primary and secondary terms (or target and domain) does occur. That is, if conflict management is labeled as *war*¹, the primary term (conflict management) is interpreted cognitively based on a model of *war* (the secondary term). Metaphors project one conceptual world onto another. Black stated that "every metaphor is the tip of a submerged model" (1979, p. 31). During the past decade, the focus of analysis in metaphor study has not been on the word as a figure of speech, but on the conceptual realm that is transferred to the primary term.

Phenomenological hermeneutic scholars extended the analysis to the social reality for groups. Darrand and Shupe (1983) posited that metaphors "give both corporate and individual identity to the membership as well as permeate the very language by which members communicate." They went on to suggest that metaphors "...compose the 'building blocks' of any group's social reality" (pp. 2-3). By examination of how children and

*Suzanne McCorkle (Ph.D, University of Colorado) is Associate Professor and Janet L. Mills (Ph.D, University of Kansas) is Professor of Communication, at Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725.

adults use metaphors, Engel (1988) argued "that the interpretation of metaphors in conversation requires that the listener accept that the metaphor maker implies a whole world through his or her metaphors. Specifically, this entails the idea that the listener is being invited to reconstrue the world in a new way" (pp. 338-339). The perspective of metaphor adopted for this study follows the psychological tradition of U.S. constructivist theorists. Specifically this investigation explored how interpersonal conflict management may be metaphorically conceptualized.

Communication Perspectives on Metaphor

Numerous communication theorists and critics have discussed the function of metaphors in rhetorical and argumentation contexts. Their treatment of metaphor in public contexts is comparable to the constructivist approach to metaphor. Osborn (1986) discussed metaphor in public communication as one of the vehicles used by rhetors for "rhetorical depiction." He went on to describe this depiction as a compression of "verbal or nonverbal visualizations that linger in the collective memory of audiences as representative of their subjects when rhetoric has been successful" (p. 79). Constructivists go beyond Osborn's function of "revealing the world," however, and contend that metaphors help construct our perceptions of the world.

A second explication of metaphor in public contexts came from Blankenship's study of Presidential campaigns. She argued that campaign metaphors not only name events, but they also imply arguments for why we should view events in the way named. In that case, metaphors function to persuade citizens to a particular world view. Blankenship's (1990) analysis is congruent with the epistemic function of metaphor posited by constructivists.²

Rhetorical or argumentation approaches to metaphor in public contexts have been relatively common, but studies that directly link interpersonal conflict and metaphor are less prevalent.³ Hocker and Wilmot (1991) presented metaphors as diagnostic tools for deducing the structure of a conflict. They adopted a constructivists' view of metaphors, and asserted that metaphors of conflict management help to shape reality for the parties in conflict. Metaphors of conflict, referenced by Hocker and Wilmot, were developed from their own observations of families, students, and organizations. They contended that conflict metaphors are dominated by negative images such as *war, explosion, trial, upward struggle, mess, game, and heroic adventure*. By contrast, collaborative images of conflict that could be used to transform perceptions of the conflict are the *bargaining table* and *tide* metaphors.

Crum (1987) developed an extended metaphor for conflict using Aikido. Specifically, he claimed that learning a new way of thinking and acting, like the nonviolent approach of Aikido, may neutralize destructive

conflicts without excessive force or injury to another. Physical and psychological centering appears to be a common link between Aikido and conflict management. Crum identified five mind sets, which people assume in conflict situations that include destruction, decay, survival, success, and artistry. The first three mind sets are negative, diminish energy, invoke fear in relationships, and require struggle. The final two are positive, invoke love in relationships, and are effortless or joyful. Crum does not identify his mind sets as metaphor categories, although they are similar to the categorical types developed by others.

Authors, such as Höcker and Wilmot, reported conflict metaphors from their own experiences, but others have conducted research that uncovered organizational metaphoric perspectives of conflict. Specifically, Blewett (1987) analyzed the language of conflict in feminist organizations. The four common metaphors reported include (a) *conflict as war*, (b) *conflict as unhealthy*, (c) *organization as machine*, and (d) *organization as a connected entity*. Six other metaphors that were occasionally used and reported are *organizational members as supporters*, *organization as family*, *conflict as a business deal*, *conflict as explosion*, *conflict as abuse*, and *organization as team*. The metaphors described by Blewett appear to confirm Höcker and Wilmot's assertions that conflict management metaphors are primarily negative.

The discussion of theory and research on metaphor suggests that the way a conflict is characterized metaphorically creates a perceptual set in which the conflict is perceived, and consequently will affect how the parties choose to act during that conflict. This study focused on metaphors of interpersonal conflict, and attempted to determine if the metaphors derived from nonsystematic observations, like those discussed by Höcker and Wilmot, actually occur in subjects' written descriptions of their past interpersonal conflicts.

METHOD

Three hundred forty-nine students from lower division Social Science classes at a Western university were given a questionnaire asking about their past interpersonal conflicts. Conflict was defined as occurring when "two or more people have goals that are not compatible or struggle over things that they perceive to be in short supply." Respondents reported their age, sex, year in school, and up to four interpersonal conflicts. For each conflict, respondents were asked about their relationship to the other(s) involved, what the conflict concerned, and to rate how important the conflict was to them. Respondents were then asked to write a brief paragraph describing what the conflict was like.

The researchers coded respondents' descriptions of the relationship into 12 categories that include parent-child, other family relationship, spouse, ex-spouse, lover or intended spouse, friend, roommate, boss-client, employee, other work, organization, and other. Because the study focused

on interpersonal conflicts, cases were dropped that reported conflicts with self, objects (their car), and animals (their pets). Additionally, the descriptions of the conflict topics were coded into 10 categories of money, alcohol or drugs, the relationship, education, sex, religion, time, parenting, work, and other. Ratings were reported on a 1 to 10 scale (10 = "most important").

The paragraphs generated by the respondents that described their conflicts were read to determine if a metaphor was used. First, the researchers coded using the categories from a pilot study and metaphors suggested by Hocker and Wilmot (1991). The metaphors were coded a second time to include additional categories. For example, many responses described a situation where one party talked and the other party was unwilling to listen ("It was like talking to a brick wall"). These responses represented a new category labeled "one-way communication." The final analysis included twenty-eight categories of metaphors.

RESULTS

Forty-five percent of respondents were 20 years of age or younger, 39% were 21-30, 11% were 31-40, and 5% were 40+. Fifty-seven percent were female. Respondents' class standing ranged from 53.9% frosh, 26.2% sophomores, 15.7% juniors, 3.5% seniors, to .6% graduate students and other.

Most respondents reported one (30.4%) or two (30.4%) conflicts on the survey. Three conflicts were reported by 20.9% of the respondents, and 18.3% reported four conflicts. Of those who reported conflicts, 12.3% did not generate a metaphor. Thirty-five percent of the respondents who reported conflicts used a metaphor in at least one of their written descriptions, 26.1% generated metaphors in two, 16.3% generated metaphors in three, and 10.3% generated metaphors in all four of their conflict descriptions.

Respondents most frequently reported conflict with parents/children (20.3%), followed by a lover or intended spouse (16.9%), friend (12.4%), boss-client (10.7%), spouse (10.2%), other family members (7.8%), other (5.5%), others at work (4.7%), roommate (4.3%), teacher (4.0%), an organization (1.6%), and ex-spouse (1.5%).

Conflict topics varied widely and 34.9% did not cluster together in any categories that represented a significant number of the respondents. The remaining conflicts were coded as relationship (22.1%), education (11.3%), work (9.6%), money (8.2%), time (4%), parenting (3.4%), sex (3%), religion (1.9%), and alcohol or drugs (1.5%). Forty-seven percent of conflicts were reported as highly important, 38.5% as moderately important, and 14.3% responded that the conflict was not very important.

The 616 metaphors were coded into 28 categories.⁴ The largest category (12.7%) contained *animal* metaphors that depicted the conflict or parties in the conflict as animals (see Table 1). *Natural processes*, that

TABLE 1

Metaphor Category	Percentage	Examples
Animal	12.7	"Stubborn as a Mule" "Two rams butting heads" "A zoo"
Natural Processes	12.2	"Undertow in water" "A tornado" "Every rose has its thorn"
Other	8.1	"You go to a bad movie" "Old fragile bridge" "Ghost town"
One-Way Communication	7.6	"Talking to a Brick Wall" "Explaining chess to a seven year old" "Arguing with someone from another planet"
Confinement	6.0	"Tied up in chains" "In a time warp" "Buried in a hole"
Military and War	5.7	"Cold war" "Civil war" "Never ending battle"
Biological States	5.2	"Brain dead" "Pain in the ass" "A festering splinter in your finger"
Person to Person Violence	4.7	"Stabbed in the back" "Knife in my heart" "Circumcised with a dirty butter knife"
Struggle	4.2	"Sinking ship with no lifeboat" "Checkbook that won't balance" "Rocky road"
Religion	3.9	"Demon from hell" "Lost soul looking for salvation" "Devil comes to call"
Multiple Metaphors	3.7	(Contained more than one metaphor category)
Drama	3.4	"The three stooges" "A Harlequin novel" "Soap opera"
Games & Sports	3.2	"Tug of war" "King of the mountain" "Hide and seek"
Mechanical and Nonviolent Process	3.2	"Ticking clock" "Spinning top" "Squeaky wheel"

Table 1 continued, next page

Table 1, continued

Metaphor Category	Percentage	Examples
Mechanical or Object & Violent	2.4	"Caught in a blender" "Hit by a truck" "Sliding down a razor blade"
Parenting	2.1*	"Being treated like a child" "Babysitting a seven year old" "A child being scolded"

*Metaphors from categories representing less than 2% may be obtained by contacting the senior author.

included events of weather or nature, were ranked second (12.2%). In third rank (8.1%) were a conglomerate of *other* metaphors that did not represent a common theme.

Following the top three metaphor categories in rank were *One-way communication* (the writer spoke to an object or person who was unwilling to understand or reply), *Confinement* (in a small space or a place one cannot escape from), *Military and war* (military language but not describing bombs or explosions), and *Biological states and illness* (related to the body and one's health). The next grouping of categories that represented less than 5% of the total metaphors were *Person to person violence* (one person committing direct violence on another), *Struggle* (a difficult or hopeless task), *Religion* (imagery of any religion), *Multiple metaphors* (containing more than one category of metaphor), *Dramas* (imagery from television, play, movies, or dramatic action), *Games and sports*, *Mechanical process that is nonviolent* (involving a machine or object but not violence), *Mechanical or object and violent to oneself* (involving a machine or object with violence directed at the writer), and *Parenting*.

Additional categories not included in Table 1 are *Self-imposed violence or damage* (actions by the writer that harmed him/herself), *Food, Weight* (carrying or constrained by heavy objects), *Circus*, *Personal violence to objects* (the writer harmed a thing), and *Difficult persons* (communicating between persons/groups that are difficult, but not one-way). The remaining categories that represented less than 1% each were *Dream*, *Alchemy* (transforming one thing into another), *Bomb* (explosive objects), *Manipulation by other person* (suggesting manipulative or outside control of the writer), *Robbery*, and *Garbage*.

DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, these respondents reported that over 40% of conflicts were with family or a roommate. This may reflect the important relationships that are more likely to be central to college students' conflicts.⁵ From this sample, the metaphors suggested in the literature as common

descriptions of interpersonal conflict were not dominant. Only two of the metaphors discussed by Hocker and Wilmot (1991), *war* and *struggle*, were significant in this study's thematic categorization. Furthermore, Hocker and Wilmot's categorization of struggle as an "upward" struggle, almost a power dominance theme, was not the focus associated with most of the metaphors in this study's *struggle* category. Most importantly, the top five categories of *animals*, *natural processes*, *other*, *one-way communication*, and *confinement* were not predicted from the conflict management literature.

The difference between the previous literature and the categories generated from this study may be explained in two ways. First, the results may reflect the difference between what is verbalized in natural conversation and what is written in a more anonymous and retrospective context. Second, this study may have tapped into some larger universe of metaphors used by this specific sample population to describe their conflicts.

What is consistent, between this study's findings and the general literature on conflict management, is the uniform negative nature of the metaphors generated. None of the metaphors were positive. This appears to confirm the EuroAmerican cultural assumption that conflict is by definition negative. Respondents uniformly recalled and wrote about negative or destructive conflicts, and 47% of respondents rated those conflicts as very important. This may suggest that if the interpersonal conflict was managed productively, respondents did not perceive it as a conflict at all or did not prioritize it among their top four choices when responding to the questionnaire.

Contrary to metaphor theory that suggests that all persons use language that is inherently metaphorical, 12% of the respondents did not generate metaphors. These results may suggest further examination of the universality claims made by metaphor theorists. It does not, however, alter the function of metaphors among those who do use them.

Metaphoric Models

The *natural processes* metaphor group is explicated here to illustrate how metaphors function as models in conflict management. The five questions that guided the analysis are (a) What is the general nature of the conflict process? (b) What is the role of the person who uses the metaphor? (c) Into what role does the metaphor cast the conflict partner? (d) How is power distributed in the model? and, (e) What conflict management strategies or tactics flow most easily from the conceptual model?

The cognitive meaning of "nature" may be personalized differently by each individual. A general outline of its probable interpretation, however, can be achieved by analyzing Western culture's view of nature. Traditionally, EuroAmerican culture viewed nature as a wild, untamed, and a potentially destructive entity. This included the assumption that some aspects of nature are controllable, but that most are not. Merchant in the

Death of Nature (1989) analyzes the link developed in Western thought at the time of the industrial revolution between the wildness of nature and the unpredictable aspects of women. During that time, nature was perceived as a wild, feminine force to be tamed by men and therefore, influenced a frequent use of such phrases as "rape of the earth." Other views of nature do exist in Western tradition (pastoral nature, spaceship earth, earth as an organic being), but metaphoric descriptions have typically evoked the realm of the feminine, of wildness, and of uncontrollable forces that are destructive.

Metaphors within the *natural processes* category revealed in the present investigation may be subdivided into several themes. Specifically, prevalent disaster metaphors included earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, avalanches, being swept away in the rapids, and a fire that can't be controlled. The overall tone of this disaster model is negative. The creator of this type of metaphor is cast as the passive and innocent victim of a sudden and overwhelming force. One description enhanced that helplessness and hopelessness with the phrase "a rowboat caught in a hurricane." The conflict partner usually was cast into the role of the overpowering force that cannot be resisted or even fully understood. Power, in the disaster model of conflict, is maintained in the hands of an outside force or the other party.

One implication of conflict as a natural disaster model is an overall theme of powerlessness. Those who feel powerless may (a) take little or no responsibility for their own actions that sustain the conflict, (b) feel that the other participant has all the choices, or (c) believe no one involved has any choices. Under these perceived circumstances, the most predictable choice is to avoid conflict because it is inevitably and inherently destructive.

Another theme within the *natural processes* category focused on the light/dark archetype. EuroAmerican culture traditionally viewed light as good and dark as threatening or evil. As a natural process, darkness often precedes disaster. Dark metaphors may include clouds covering the sun, cold dark night, a dark grey fog obscuring, or a dark deep void. These metaphors evoke thoughts of disaster, threat, and doom. Osborn (1967) explained darkness as a contrast to light "bringing fear of the unknown, discouraging sight, making one ignorant of his environment-vulnerable to its dangers and blind to its rewards. One is reduced to a helpless state, no longer able to control the world about him. Finally, darkness is cold, suggesting stagnation and thoughts of the grave" (p. 117). From a religious perspective, darkness may precede a threat to one's soul.

The user of the light/dark variation of a *natural processes* metaphor puts him or herself in jeopardy. The other party may be the threatening agent or they both may be mutually threatened by the situation. Dependent upon how creatively the associations were played out, the people in conflict may perceive constructive actions to manage the situation, such as turning on lights or sharing warmth against the cold. Most of the

respondents' narratives, however, maintained a negative and powerless tone where avoidance appeared to be the strategy of choice.

Most of the remaining metaphors in the *natural processes* category developed similar themes of powerlessness or struggle against great odds. They included (a) fighting to reach the surface from deep in the ocean, (b) leaf in the wind, (c) a stream hitting a boulder, (d) a mountain crumbling, (e) thunder exploding around me, and (f) a well that went dry. Other metaphors described less threatening or intense situations such as a thorn in my side, wind in my face, a perfect rose with a lurking thorn, loving thorns rather than the rose, or a daisy with its petals falling off. These variations may be more amenable to transformation into productive models (e.g., conflict is part of the natural cycle of relationships, as thorns are an integral part of a rose). Respondents reported, however, that these conflicts were perceived as annoying, painful, and unwanted intrusions on their personal control. Therefore, when this model is applied to an interpersonal conflict situation, communication about the conflict or proactive attempts at management become unlikely choices. Avoidance or anger are more likely outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

The significance of studying metaphors of conflict management does not rest on the metaphors themselves, but on understanding how a particular metaphor suggests a model of the conflict management process. Wherever one model dominates the discourse about conflict, the choices of the participants in conflict are necessarily limited. Turbayne (1970) described the harm of one metaphor cluster becoming a dominant model. That is, "The victim of metaphor accepts one way of sorting or bundling or allocating the facts as the only way to sort, bundle, or allocate them. The victim not only has a special view of the world but regards it as the only view, or rather, he confuses a special view of the world with the world" (p. 27). Therefore, the benefit of studying interpersonal conflict metaphors lies in (a) discovering which metaphors dominate the discourse of persons in conflict, (b) explicating the assumptions of those metaphorical models, and, (c) ultimately creating new metaphors that may offer more productive options to those in conflict.

NOTES

1. Metaphoric terms or phrases appear in italic type.
2. The mechanical metaphor advanced by Descarte is commonly discussed as an example of a metaphor that has so dominated thought that it shaped how people perceive events and problems. For a discussion of metaphor as epistemic, see: Brummett (1976); Merchant (1989); Kovecses (1986); Turbayne (1970).
3. While argument, rhetoric, and interpersonal conflict management share a common discourse of the language of disputes, the approach taken by those who study public discourse from a rhetorical or argumentation perspective is different from that of an interpersonal conflict management perspective (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Trapp & Schuetz, 1990).

4. The purpose of this study was to investigate metaphors of conflict. We do not claim to have discovered the definitive, mutually exclusive categories for coding metaphors. To illustrate the metaphors in this study, three examples are given from each category.

5. Because this is a first attempt to verify assertions about metaphors in interpersonal conflict and due to the study's limited sample, results may not be generalizable.

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