In Theory

Rethinking Conflict: Perspectives from the Insight Approach

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In this article, the authors present the "insight approach" to conflict as an analytical and methodological framework that addresses the dynamic interactions between conflicting parties. According to the insight approach, conflict is relational, dynamic, and adaptive, generated from the responsive interpretive frameworks that parties use to construct meaning. Conflict arises as a result of parties' experience of what insight theorists call "threat-to-cares," which generates defend–attack patterns of interaction between them. The authors suggest that rethinking the nature of conflict so that it is seen as an interaction embedded in meaning making enables conflict interveners to help parties gain insight into, and articulate, the values that are being generated, advanced, threatened, and realigned within the complex interactions that define us as social beings. In doing so, parties develop abilities to generate new patterns and solutions that can limit and even eliminate the experiences of threat that generate conflict between them.

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10.1111/j.1571-9979.2011.00311.x

Key words: conflict, conflict resolution, mediation, insight approach, insight mediation, negotiation, communication, interpretation theory, Bernard Lonergan.

Introduction

Intervening in a conflict requires the practitioner to ask some deceptively simple questions: *What is going on here? How did this situation arise? What should I say or do next? Which strategy would best help the parties now*? The questions are deceptively simple because the answers are based in a practitioner's training and experience that bring together implicit, explicit, and complex theories about conflict, human behavior, and the nature of social interaction.

This article describes five perspectives about conflict that guide the strategies and behaviors of practitioners trained in the insight approach to conflict. The "insight approach" was first articulated in 2001, after researchers applied Bernard Lonergan's (1992) theory of cognition to empirically analyze successful strategies and operations in mediation (see Picard 2003; Picard and Melchin 2007). Describing a dynamic movement between theory and practice, this article continues to refine the methodology and shape the theory of the insight approach. The article's largely theoretical articulation of what we call an "interactionist" perspective on conflict is intended to advance not only the work of insight practitioners but practitioners and theorists engaged at all levels of conflict work, from the interpersonal to the international.

The insight approach is most fully introduced in Melchin and Picard's *Transforming Conflict through Insight* (2008). As the practice of insight mediation has developed, it has become clearer how the theory of conflict embedded in this approach differs from other conflict approaches. Picard and Melchin discussed these differences in an earlier *Negotiation Journal* (2007) article, arguing that interest-based practitioners (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991) have focused on the conflict problem with a pragmatic view to reaching settlement, while narrative (Winslade and Monk 2000) and transformative (Bush and Folger 2005) mediators take a more relational approach that shifts them away from an exploration of the conflict problem to generate a new narrative or to achieve empowerment and recognition.

In this article, we explore the distinct features of the insight approach primarily in comparison to the interest-based approach as a way to generate dialogue directed at deepening our collective understanding of conflict theory and conflict intervention practice. In making comparisons, we want to make it clear that it is not our intent to minimize the effectiveness of interest-based negotiation or disregard the contributions of transformative, narrative, or other approaches. Readers familiar with any of these approaches will recognize some of our shared ideas, practices, and

concerns. But despite these overlapping ideas, the insight approach does have differing theoretical roots, and as a result, distinct strategies that set it apart from other approaches.

The Insight Approach

The insight approach adopts an interactionist perspective that views human behavior as fundamentally relational (Mead 1934; Niebuhr 1963; Laing, Phillipson, and Lee 1966; Taylor 1989; Winslade and Monk 2000; Bush and Folger 2005). As individuals, we do not stand outside of the environment in which we seek to act, but are always part of the environment toward which our actions are directed. Consequently, any changes in the conditions of that environment necessarily have an effect on our consciousness and how we reflexively interpret our position or standing within that environment. We are responsive actors as well as purposive actors; our actions generate responses in others that have consequences for ourselves, consequences that are not necessarily predictable in terms of the goals that motivated our actions in the first place (Mead 1938; Niebuhr 1963; Waldrop 1992).

According to the insight approach, conflict emerges out of this responsive interactive framework by which people make meaning out of their environment and seek to realize what matters to them — their cares. Cares, according to this approach, are defined to include more than the pursuit of our individual or collective interests, needs, or values. They also include our value-based expectations of other's behavior, our assumptions of how people ought to act, the presumed patterns of cooperation we consider necessary, and our value-based judgments of progress and decline that we perceive in the behaviors and intentions of ourselves and others. Conflict thus arises from a person's subjective experience of what insight theorists have called "threat-to-cares" that in turn creates in that person a "defend" response, a response that can then be seen as an "attack" on what matters to other people (Melchin and Picard 2008).

Our cares, therefore, are not just our own concerns but also involve us in judgments about how other people ought to behave and how the world ought to be ordered. These judgments can account for the intensity attached to the conflict, even when it may seem to an outsider that the conflict is only over a small issue. Thus, because cares are relational and involve the social identities of the parties, elements of identity-based conflict arise even in situations that are more typically thought of as interest based or distributive in nature.[1]

According to the insight approach, conflict arises when people perceive an actual or perceived threat to their desires, disruptions of their expected patterns of cooperation, and/or value-based judgments of harm. These experiences of threat drive the intensity or tenacity with which parties in conflict maintain a position or seek to overcome or defeat the other. In turn, these defensive responses can often be experienced by the

other party as an attack on what he or she values. Insight practitioners explore defend-attack patterns of interaction to generate insight into these threat experiences; insights that can help parties develop new patterns of interaction in which the cares of each party can coexist without the generation of threat. Resolution, according to the insight approach, occurs through a process of learning in which people adjust their interpretive frameworks, an adjustment that can have a significant and lasting influence beyond solving the conflict at hand. When the parties and the intervener attend to, and gain insight into what is threatening the cares of the parties in conflict and how they interpret those threats, opportunities for new interpretations emerge, different responses become possible, and change in conflict behavior patterns can occur.

Practitioners of the insight approach pay close attention to the defend responses of parties because they can be key to understanding both their patterns of interaction and the cares that underlie their conflict dynamic. At the interpersonal level, addressing emotions is an important strategy because emotions reveal to the mediator or to the parties the experiences of threat-to-cares that are so central to the defend-attack patterns in conflict (Melchin and Picard 2008). For individuals, feelings signal whether our cares are affirmed or violated. Insight approach practitioners understand that although the values in a conflict can be obscure, the feelings and defensive responses that the conflict arouses are more visible. Organizations also respond to perceived threat-to-cares through defend-attack responses, although an organization itself cannot experience emotions. Defend-attack decisions, policies, and actions in response to threats to organizational values or concerns are clearly visible in the daily operations of government, business, and communities, as well as in conflicts around the globe.

Drawing on the theoretical foundations of Lonergan's (1992) work on cognition and learning, insight approach theorists and practitioners have developed practical strategies to help parties achieve insight into their experiences of threat, which have become manifest in defend-attack patterns of interaction. When parties learn about what matters to others, why those things matter, and how what matters is perceived to be threatened, their reasoning about the intent of the other often changes. This newfound uncertainty about the other generates curiosity and a willingness to talk and listen to each other. The insights gained through new interpretations and understandings are what diminish the threat response and enable parties to find new possibilities in which their cares can be accommodated without generating threat.

To facilitate these insights, insight mediators use distinct skills to explore the interpretive process through which the parties make meaning (Picard and Melchin 2007). These insights are achieved through *deepening conversations* that enable parties to shift the conflict onto new ground and toward new possibilities for change because their perceptions of threat are

reduced or eliminated. To facilitate these deepening conversations, insight mediators also use practices familiar to interest-based, transformative, narrative, and other conflict practitioners such as reflective listening, strategic questioning, and reframing.

Key Elements of the Insight Approach

Five core ideas lie at the heart of the insight approach to mediation. They are:

- Conflict is relational.
- Conflict is dynamic and adaptive.
- Conflict emerges from meaning making.
- Values are always operating within a conflict.
- Communication involves interpretation as well as intention.

Each of these ideas and their implications is explained below.

The Relational Aspects of Conflict

Like the narrative and transformative approaches to conflict, the idea that human beings are *social* actors, not just individual actors, is fundamental to the insight approach. We live our lives within networks of relationships that are meaningful to us and from which we generate a sense of our own identity (Merton 1968; Kidder and Stewart 1975; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner 1987; Moses 1990; Winslade and Monk 2000; Bush and Folger 2005). As G. H. Mead (1934) pointed out, it is by imagining ourselves as others see us that we first become self-conscious, reflexive actors capable of observing and controlling our own behavior, even our own desires. Thus, we tend to be conscious of how others respond to us, and we relate to others in ways that both generate and reinforce our own sense of identity.[2]

Our actions take place in social contexts, directed not only toward the realization of our own goals but also designed to influence the ways in which others perceive and respond to us. Our actions have impacts on our relations with others, sometimes indirectly and unintentionally. Each person is both an actor, who seeks to modify his or her own environment in a purposive, goal-directed way, and a respondent, who perceives his or her own environment to be affected by the behavior of others. Thus, we argue that the behavior of parties can only be understood within an *interactionist* framework — a framework that views each action as both an initiation on the part of the actor and as a response to the perceived actions of others. Every action is both initiation and response, just as every actor is both actor and respondent.

This relational understanding of human behavior differs from that of individualist thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, who started from the assumption that humans are fundamentally self-referential

actors, whose needs and desires are generated internally, rather than relationally through the individual's interaction with his or her social environment. From this individualist perspective, if we want to understand the causes of conflict behavior, we need to start by considering the interests and needs of the individual parties. Each party is seen as the source of his or her own interests and needs, and as the author of his or her own actions, almost as if the actor existed outside of any social relations with others (Niebuhr 1963; Taylor 1989; Winslade and Monk 2000).

Interest-based approaches to negotiation and mediation tend to depict conflict in individualist terms — as a competition or struggle arising out of perceived incompatibility of the parties' goals and interests. According to this interest-based understanding of conflict, if Party A seeks to achieve a goal and Party B is viewed as having goals incompatible with this objective, conflict may arise between Parties A and B. The conflict takes the form of a struggle in which each party seeks to achieve his or her own goals at the expense of, or in spite of, other parties. It is each party's perception of the other as an obstacle to the realization of his or her own goals that fuels the conflict between them, sometimes resulting in bitter and protracted conflict. Because obstacles must be overcome, and because overcoming such obstacles is often expensive, difficult, and time consuming, the costs of conflict — especially ones in which the parties are relatively evenly matched in terms of resources — are often very high.

This calculus of the costs and benefits of protracted conflict to the parties themselves tends to be the focal point around which interest-based conflict intervention approaches are primarily oriented. Emphasis is placed on mutual gains and on the identification of shared or "tradable" interests that can provide the foundation for a mutually satisfying resolution to the conflict (Walton and McKersie 1965; Lax and Sebenius 1986; Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991). Interest-based negotiators or mediators concentrate on helping the parties become "joint problem solvers," who can each achieve more of their goals through collaboration and joint decision making than through competition and struggle (Axelrod 1984, 1997).

Interest-based approaches to conflict often depict parties as rational, goal-seeking actors, whose primary concern is with their own welfare and achieving their goals in an environment that imposes constraints on their capacity to do so (Heath 1976). They seek to modify their own environments to achieve their own ends — taking purposive, goal-directed, and future-oriented action. This expectation is the basis for the concept of "rational choice" decision making: what is the most rational decision I can make to achieve my desired goals in the future given what I know about the state of affairs in the environment toward which my action is directed (Heath 1976; Coleman and Fararo 1992)? In the interest-based approach, parties are generally seen to make autonomous choices based on a rational calculation of the costs and benefits of foreseeable outcomes.

A view of the parties as rational, future-oriented decision makers, however, can fail to take into account the reflexive, two-sided dimensions of purposive human action (Mead 1934, 1938; Niebuhr 1963; Buckley 1967; Oakeshott 1975; Spector 1983; Sandywell 1996). As Reinhold Niebuhr (1963) wrote, all purposive action looks backward to respond to the past, as well as forward to a future that it seeks to amend. Consequently, no action ever commences only with an act of the will or with the formulation of an intention; all purposive action arises instead as the actor's response to something in his or her environment (Mead 1938; Niebuhr 1963; Buckley 1967).

The actor thus looks forward in time, purposively, toward a future that he or she seeks to modify in accordance with his or her goals or intentions, and also looks backward, reflexively, basing his or her actions on his or her interpretation of the circumstances that compelled him or her to act in the first place.[3] Any purposive action or decision is, therefore, contingent because it involves the testing of the actor's hypothesis about his or her environment and is itself generated as a product of that very hypothesis (Buckley 1967; Argyris, Putnam, and McLean Smith 1985).

With this in mind, insight approach theorists do not define conflict as a struggle or contest between two or more goal-directed actors pursuing incompatible goals. Instead, they believe conflict emerges out of the parties' reflexive experience of a threat to their deeply held desires, values, or patterns of normative expectations, and the behavioral responses that such perceived threats elicit (Picard and Melchin 2007; Melchin and Picard 2008).

How we theoretically define what is going on in conflict can have important implications on how we respond to it. If we define the conflict in terms of interest incompatibility or as a struggle over competing aspirations, then it follows that mediators will seek to help parties achieve their goals or realize their respective aspirations. Proponents of transformative and narrative mediation approaches advocate alternative objectives to the interest-based focus on problem solving to reach settlement. In transformative mediation, the goal is "empowerment and recognition" (Bush and Folger 2005), and in narrative mediation, it is the "generation of a new story" (Winslade and Monk 2000). Because insight mediators believe that conflict is generated reflexively from the parties' experience of threat, they focus on addressing the parties' dynamic interaction to help them find ways in which both parties' cares can be maintained without engendering threat in the other.

The following case study illustrates our argument that attending to the interactive nature of conflict behavior is necessary and also highlights the relational generation of threats-to-cares.[4] The conflict involved two coworkers in a library: Teresa, a new staff member, and Danny, a long-time employee. When Teresa became an advocate for increased computerization

within the library, Danny experienced this as a threat to his competence and seniority within the workplace. Danny complained to his fellow workers; for their own reasons, they responded by developing a "coalition of the unwilling" to resist Teresa's advocacy of workplace change. Teresa was taken aback because she believed she was responding to staff consultations by moving toward a unified approach to customer service. For her part, Teresa felt threatened and responded by escalating her own efforts to overcome this resistance by holding focus groups and other efforts designed to argue the case for change and potentially recruit senior management in support of her cause.

The possibility that management would intervene into what had until then been a horizontal workplace team discussion further heightened Danny's and his coworkers' sense of threat, reinforcing their perception that Teresa was advancing her own agenda at their expense. Increasingly, they treated Teresa as an outsider, further undermining her efforts to convince her fellow workers that her ideas had merit. As the stakes for each side grew, they lobbied for support and pulled more people into the conflict. The escalating costs of the conflict rippled throughout the organization.

From an insight perspective, it makes little sense to view these participants as rational actors pursuing their goals independently of each other. The actions of each have consequences for the other and for the environment (workplace) that they both inhabit, consequences that are not necessarily predictable in advance nor directly attributable to the intentions or motives behind the initiating action. In this coevolutionary environment (Kauffman 1995), actions often have unforeseen or unintended consequences, as when Teresa's efforts to enlist management in support of her proposal for library computerization had the effect of increasing Danny's sense of threat and making him and his coworkers more suspicious of any subsequent efforts on her part to reengage with them and de-escalate or defuse the conflict.

The experience of threats-to-cares is thus both simultaneously the cause and effect of the escalating conflict dynamic between the parties, and drives much of the pattern of defend-attack behavior on both sides. Within an interest-based model, the focus of intervention might be on assisting the parties to identify common interests as a basis for a negotiated resolution to the conflict. But a problem-solving approach such as this tends to emphasize the rational pursuit of interests at the expense of considering the relational pattern of interactions that generate the perception of threat within the conflict dynamic. As one can see in the above case, Danny's complaints organized his colleagues in unpredictable ways, while management's potential intervention was an unintended consequence of Teresa's frustrated communication. In this case, the conflict is both relational and nonlinear; the causes and effects are complex and

unpredictable, embedded in different interpretive frameworks, organizational relations, histories, and values.

The Dynamic and Adaptive Aspects of Conflict

Humans are social actors whose motivations are not just internal to themselves but arise out of the particular patterns of social, cultural, religious, political, and/or economic relationships through which we derive our identities. It follows then that if those patterns of relationships change or — perhaps more important — if our *perception* of those patterns of relationships change, then what matters to us may also change. We are constantly influenced by the environments we inhabit, both physical and social, while our actions also affect those environments, generating a dynamic, interactive relationship between the person and his or her world. A change in this interaction can cause changes at another point in the interaction, in ways difficult to predict in advance (Buckley 1967; Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch 1974; Spector 1983; Waldrop 1992; Kauffman 1995). Thus, a model of dynamic, adaptive change is a critical element of our theory of conflict analysis and resolution.

We cannot always predict the results of our actions, how they may affect us, and how they may affect others. Particularly in a conflictual situation, our actions may have unintended consequences. Thus, we should not analyze a conflict by reference only to the parties' intentions as if they are rational chess players moving pieces on a board. In an emergent theory of conflict, the board may also keep moving, so to speak, so that the players have to decide not only what kinds of moves to make in response to the other party's actions, but also what kind of game they are now playing — is it chess or checkers?

In many conflicts, the parties themselves often disagree about the nature of the conflict itself or feel uncertain about exactly what kind of conflict they are involved in. A change in the circumstances of the conflict or an action by the other party can increase a party's uncertainty. One way to manage this uncertainty is to become even more fixed and inflexible on how one defines the nature of the particular conflict. And, of course, how we define the conflict influences what we do with it.

The case of Danny and Teresa illustrates this phenomenon. Danny's defensive response to Teresa's proposals for change set off an escalating cycle of *interpretation-action-interpretation-response* sequences, in which the response elicited from the previous action was often contrary to what the initiating actor intended. Teresa's efforts to enlist management's support to overcome Danny and his coworkers' resistance had the exact opposite effect that she desired, by increasing their suspicion of her motives and causing them to "circle the wagons" against what they perceived as the threat from an "outsider."

At the same time, Danny's escalated response to Teresa's efforts had the paradoxical effect of making him more vulnerable in his job, by making

it easier for Teresa and her allies in management to call him an "obstructionist." To this extent, he seemed to be working against his own long-term job-security interests. In each instance, the parties' diminished each other's efforts to achieve their objectives through the purposive goal-directed action that resulted from the definition that they imposed on the conflict. We can be prisoners of the labels imposed on us by others.

The Emergence of Conflict from Meaning Making

Human beings develop our ideas and worldviews based on our own experiences and via education and acculturation. We develop cognitive maps or frames of meaning that we use to organize and manage complex information and stimuli and make sense of these experiences — our own and others' (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1974; Thaler 1984, 1999; Beach 1997).

Our cognitive maps then shape our understanding of our experiences. We each call on multiple cognitive maps or frames of meaning, through which we make sense of our experience and others' action. This is why different people will often interpret the same action in different ways. The similarities or differences in our interpretations do not follow only from the precise data that we each observed — they also emerge from the interpretive frames we impose upon that data. What Teresa from our case study intended as an objective observation about the state of affairs in a particular workplace, Danny interpreted as a threat.

The insight approach arises from the idea that perceptions influence behavior and that how parties define the situations they find themselves in influences the nature of their responses to those situations. Research in behavioral psychology has shown that the way in which decision makers frame problems significantly affects the nature of the solutions that they propose (Tversky and Kahneman 1981, 1986; Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Thaler 1984, 1999; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1990; Bazerman and Neale 1992). Similarly, psychologists studying perception have demonstrated that the mind does not directly experience the objects that the senses appear to present to the mind. Rather, the mind draws what are called "perceptual inferences" from the sensory data and, from these inferences, constructs mental representations or mental images (Beach 1997). Thus, even our knowledge of physical objects is not generated directly from our senses but cognitively constructed by our minds. This process of drawing inferences from the sensory data provided by the senses enables us to organize, control, and manipulate our environment.

What is true of our encounters with objects in the physical world is even truer of our encounters with other minds. We attribute meaning to the behavior of others, although we can never actually read their minds to know for certain their true attitudes or intentions toward us. Consequently, we must draw inferences from their observable actions. We form ideas

about how other people think to attribute motivations to their behavior, and we are often correct. We constantly interpret our environment for clues as to how to respond to other humans. Our response to the actions of others is determined not only by the *material consequences* of their actions on us but also by the *inferences* we draw about them and their intentions toward us, inferences that we then rely on to orient our own actions toward them (Jervis 1976; Jonsson 1990).

If we interpret someone's actions toward us as hostile, then we are likely to respond in a manner consistent with that interpretation — we too can become defensive, and quite possibly, hostile and our response will often reflect that hostility, which can, in turn, generate hostile responses. Research has shown that observers have a tendency to attribute dispositional tendencies to others, while regarding their own behavioral responses to be more influenced by situational factors (Jonsson 1990), a phenomenon that some conflict researchers have called the "attribution error" (Deutsch 1991; Folger, Poole, and Stutman 2001).Thus, we are often guilty of adopting a "double standard" when evaluating conflict interactions: we interpret our own responses as normal and appropriate, while viewing the responses of our opponents as unreasonable and even malevolent (Jervis 1976). We can observe this process of cumulative attribution errors (Jonsson 1990) in the case of Danny and Teresa. Teresa characterized Danny's responses to her suggestions for change as threats to her goal of workplace improvement and thus reacted accordingly. He then reacted to her advocacy for change and her enlistment of management support with distrust, and responded accordingly by increasing his resistance. To understand the dynamics of their mutually hostile interaction, we should look not just at Danny's perceptions of Teresa's suggestions for change, but also at the perceptions that underlie Teresa's interpretation of his response, and how this influenced her subsequent behavior toward him, which then reinforced his impression of her actions as threats.[5]

We can observe this spiraling of negative attributions — in which each party interprets the other's actions unfavorably and responds accordingly — in many conflict situations. These cycles fuel the conflict and have no obvious beginning or end. In some respects, the conflict between Danny and Teresa is not unlike an arms race between two nations who do not trust each other's motivations (e.g., Pakistan and India, the United States and the former Soviet Union). In each case, the processes of attributing meaning to the behavior of others and then acting on the basis of the meaning attributed to that behavior are similar.

This is not to say that the conflict lacks a material basis or that the conflict is solely about perceptions or that it is "all in the mind." Rather, what we argue is that a party's attribution of meaning and intent to actions and circumstances shapes that party's perceptual experience, activates

motivations, and generates behavior that in turn affects how others perceive that party's behavior, motivations, and intentions.

The Role of Values in Conflict

The insight approach questions the implicit assumption in much of the conflict resolution literature that the concept of "interests" can be analytically differentiated from the concept of "values" for the purpose of analyzing and changing a party's behavior. Conflicts over values are said to be more difficult to resolve than conflicts over interests because values are related to individuals' identities — their core sense of who they are and how the world ought to be ordered — and therefore are nonnegotiable (Atran and Axelrod 2008).

Building on Lonergan's (1992) work, the insight approach views values, needs, and interests as interdependent and intertwined. This is why we use the term "cares" to describe what underlies and motivates a conflict. In the insight approach, cares include particular desires that we seek to realize for ourselves and also encompass broader patterns of normative social relations that we have come to value because we believe that they serve the greater good. Finally, cares can operate at a third level, in which we use them to make value judgments that have a more enduring effect on self-identity and relate to assessments of progress and decline. These judgments are not immutable; they are linked to scales of value priorities that reflect wider visions of who we are and how we believe people ought to behave (Morelli and Morelli 1997).

To give an example, waiting in line for theater tickets is a patterned response to a simple problem of allocation: how to distribute goods or services when the demand exceeds the supply. There could be other allocation systems, such as random selection; differential treatment for the wealthy, who could pay people to hold their places in line for them; or reverse alphabetical order, which commences with names beginning with the letter Z. The particular cares here operate on multiple levels. First, patrons want to get tickets. Second, they want the ticket allocation process to be understandable, logical, and fair, even if that process does not guarantee each patron a ticket. When people begin acting disrespectfully toward others in line by jumping the queue, we begin observing these higher-level concerns at work. Most patrons believe that personal convenience does not warrant a violation of the normative expectations concerning standing in line. It is common to find others within a given culture who share our normative expectations, such that it is often possible to construct powerful conflict alliances with others through an appeal to higher-level values and standards, even if they may not share our initial concern, which in this case, is the purchase of theater tickets.

The same structuring of interests, within patterns of normative expectations and judgments of value, can also be seen in the negotiation process.

Morton Deutsch and others have explored this topic in the context of their work on the role of justice norms in bargaining and the potential for conflict between competing justice principles (Deutsch 1985, 2000; Deutsch, Bunker, and Rubin 1995; Tyler et al. 1997; Hegtvedt and Cook 2001; Gelpi 2003). What Deutsch refers to as a "sense of injustice" can often engender conflict and stimulate negative emotions for reasons beyond the immediate interests at stake in the particular allocation or negotiation decision (Deutsch 1985, 2000; Tyler et al. 1997). A sense of injustice, whether experienced at the individual or group level, may thus fuel the conflict and make resolution more difficult (Deutsch 1985, 2000).

The implications of this idea can be seen in distributive conflicts, such as a negotiation between management and union representatives over the terms of a new collective agreement. In presenting their demands at the bargaining table, each side seeks to articulate its particular immediate claims at one level, as well as persuade the other side of the legitimacy of its claims and the seriousness of its demands at a higher level. For example, the union asks for a 6 percent salary increase because other employees in the same industry have negotiated salary increases in this range. For them, this provides a valid standard of comparison. The management team, on the other hand, judges the union demands as unrealistic given the company's financial condition and responds with the claim that management is trying to protect jobs by offering a much smaller incremental increase. The union perceives management's response that union demands would jeopardize jobs as a challenge to the normative principle that salary rates for workers in the same industry should be established on a comparative basis. And so the conflict intensifies.

In this instance, what is at stake in the negotiation process is not just the direct financial outcomes for management and the union but also the evaluative criteria or distributive justice principles by which the financial issues are to be negotiated within complex patterns of relationships. Moreover, the negotiation regarding the evaluative criteria may be more important to the parties than the amounts directly in issue between them. The process and outcomes of this bargaining round can have a lasting impact and establish a set of normative expectations that are likely to influence the patterns of future negotiations, not only between these parties but between other parties in the same industry.

Once established, patterns of normative expectations often become entrenched, part of the cognitive framework through which negotiating parties frame their understanding of the negotiation process and interpret the behavior of other parties.[6] These values are rarely explicit until the patterns of expectations are disrupted, threat emerges, or defensive reactions are encountered.

Normative expectations can certainly be discussed using the language of interests (e.g., the union has an interest in the normative principle of

equality with other unions, or management has an equally compelling interest in framing its rejection of the union's demands in terms of protecting jobs). But translating the language of values into the language of interests, we argue, fails to capture the *dynamic* between them, the experience of the threat, and the intensity of attachment to particular outcomes that may override the immediate consequences for the party concerned (Atran and Axelrod 2008).

A scenario from a popular British television series, *Prime Suspect*, illustrates this dynamic. In the show, a police sergeant and his homicide squad actively sought to undermine the authority of a newly appointed female police inspector, who was given responsibility for a high-profile homicide investigation. The police sergeant's efforts to undermine his new boss were not grounded in his own interests; he did not seek the job himself. Rather, his behavior arose from his dissatisfaction with the organizational decision-making process that had resulted in the dismissal of his former boss, to whom he was still loyal, and his replacement with an apparently novice officer whom he considered to be unqualified.

In this scenario, we see a complex dynamic between interests and values. In the end, it was not their common interest in solving the crime that enabled the sergeant and the new chief inspector to put aside their respective cares and threats and work together. As long as he saw her as unqualified, the police sergeant continued to keep information from his boss, even if this had the effect of undermining the efficiency and integrity of the investigation. His attitude changed only once he began to see her as tough and competent, as a "boss" consistent with his established pattern of normative expectations as a veteran police sergeant.

Most important, we cannot look at the parties' interests without also considering the meaning systems in which these interests are embedded. To put this more pragmatically, the way in which interests are presented in terms of values is likely to influence another party's perceptions of the legitimacy of the interest. And this in turn can influence that party's response to the interest asserted, whether he or she will consider it worthy of accommodation or resistance. Because of the connection between interests and values, the insight approach prefers the term "cares". This is why we define conflict as arising out of an experience of threats-to-cares, which explicitly recognizes that a party's response to a conflict can be linked to a sense of attack at multiple levels.

The desires, expectations, and values that underlie parties' cares are often not acknowledged and sometimes not even understood by the parties. Parties can be unaware of the values attached to their demands, let alone the values that underpin the other parties' demands. When parties experience a threat to those values, they respond defensively. The exploration of defensive reactions can bring underlying values to the surface,

allowing parties to talk about what really matters rather than simply maintaining their patterns of defend and attack.

Interpretation and Intention

Communication plays a critical role in conflict — without it, social interaction is impossible. Humans are not like billiard balls, whose tendency toward movement can be predicted from physical laws of motion, independent of any stimulus from within the ball itself. Instead, we actively seek information from our environment in order to decide how to act in response to the conditions in that environment. Communication is critical to our ability to act purposively on our social and material environment, which in turn influences us.

Communication is an interactive process between parties, and it is critical to understand how information is received as well as transmitted. The literature on communication and conflict has tended to emphasize transmission over reception (Jonsson 1990). As Robert M. Krauss and Ezequie Morsella (2000) have observed, the communication process is typically characterized as a form of code encryption and decryption, in which a speaker formulates a message, encodes it in the form of a signal, transmits the signal through a medium (e.g., written, spoken, or sign language) to a receiver, whose job is then to decode the signal to reveal the speaker's intention encoded in the message.

In the intentionalist model above, the sender initiates the process of communication — the receiver's role is essentially passive. Problems of miscommunication arise when there is too much "noise" in the channel accompanying the message, so that reception is difficult, or when the intended message is ambiguous, contradictory, or otherwise difficult for the receiver to interpret. Alternatively, the receiver may not share the sender's interpretive framework; this frequently happens in cross-cultural communication situations, increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation. In this model, the communication process is essentially purposive and linear, involving an intentional transmission of information or ideas on the part of one participant to another. That recipient then adopts the active role and transmits a message back to the original sender, the roles of sender and receiver alternating as each party takes turns in this ongoing interchange (Turnbull 2003).

What this intentionalist account leaves out is any consideration of the active role of the receiver in *eliciting* information from the sender, sometimes independently of the sender's wishes. As mentioned previously, as listeners, we never have direct access to another person's mind, thus we can never obtain direct access to his or her communicative intentions toward us. Instead, we must rely on the message itself, as well as what we know of the sender and the context in which the message was sent, to draw conclusions about the sender's intent.

For example, when a speaker accompanies phrases such as "I think that is a dreadful thing to say" or "I think you are totally wrong about that" with a wink of the eye, she indicates to the listener that she does not mean what she is saying, but rather is making a joke. Another listener, with no access to these additional clues, might take the statement literally and thus attribute an entirely different intention to the speaker.[7] The capacity for different intentions to be attributed to the same statement by different observers in different contexts using differing interpretive frames can make ascertaining a speaker's intentions a challenging and contingent task.

In addition, reliance on the speaker's intentions to determine the meaning of a message assumes that all communicative acts are intentional, but we often communicate unintentionally. Tone of voice, turn of phrase, gestures, and body language all convey messages to others about our attitudes and intentions toward them that we may not intend to send or even be aware of.

As Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don. D. Jackson (1967) point out, we can never *not* communicate, insofar as we are always being interpreted. Our every communicative gesture, intentional or otherwise — even silence — can be interpreted on at least two levels: the purpose or content (e.g.,"What did she mean by that?") and the affect (e.g.,"What does his gesture tell me about the relationship between us and how he views me?"). Affect may be interpreted differently than content — the *tone* of my message may contradict the content, undermining the effectiveness of my communication.

Thus, the sender does not have a monopoly over the meaning of his or her own message. In any given interchange, the information received can differ significantly from the message sent. Readers of detective stories know that during an investigation, a witness can make a statement to the detective that unlocks the mystery. The witness may report that a suspect was seen entering a drugstore at a particular time, when, according to the testimony of other witnesses, the suspect was supposed to have been somewhere else. This casual statement by the witness, who may otherwise have little to do with the mystery, thus provides the detective with information critical to breaking the suspect's alibi. An apparently innocuous casual statement can thus have a significance far greater than that which could have been apparent to the witness himself or herself.[8]

In this illustration, the difference in the meanings assigned to the statement by the witness and by the detective does not arise from miscommunication. Instead, it follows directly from the fact that the receiver has a different perspective on the information than does the sender. As William James (1906, 1963) might have put it, the "cash value" of the information to the detective is greater than it is to the witness. The difference lies in the uses to which this information can be put. The relationship between the witness's information and the other testimony gives this evidence its particular

importance. In short, its meaning is *relational*, and arises out of the exchange of information between sender and receiver, rather than being inherent within the message or located within the intentions of the sender. James (1906, 1963: 40) observed that meaning "adheres" to a name of a thing, or to a statement, in light of its consequences; it does not inhere within the word or the statement in its own right. Meaning is emergent, and arises out of the dynamic interaction between sender and receiver in the communication process, rather than being encoded into the message at the outset by the sender and simply awaiting a receiver to decode it (Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson 1967; Rosenblatt 1978; Jonsson 1990; Dewey 2008).

For mediators, this more dynamic view of the communication process in conflict situations suggests that mediators should attend to the framework through which parties interpret each other. As we have seen, the meaning of the message for the receiver may differ significantly from what the sender intended. This gap is not explainable *only* as misinterpretation. Perception is at the root of these differences in meaning-making. How parties perceive each other influences the way they respond to each other. Parties — and mediators — will communicate more effectively if they take into account the "listener's perspective" (Krauss and Morsella 2000: 138).

Implications for Practice

It is clear from this discussion that, as mediators, our theoretical view of human interaction and conflict interactions greatly influences the ways that we intervene in a conflict: what we think influences what we do. Helping conflict practitioners become more explicit about their theoretical standpoints can help them become better practitioners. Using theory as a roadmap to apply particular strategies and skills can enable them to be more intentional in their actions. The following discussion sets out some of the practice implications for the insight approach to conflict.

The insight approach posits that conflict emerges from a person's perception that his or her cares are threatened and from his or her protective or defensive reaction to that perceived threat. This defensive response is consequently interpreted by the other party as an attack, thus placing the parties in escalating and conflict-prolonging defend-attack patterns. Because of the interpretive nature of the threat experience, insight practitioners seek to help the conflicting parties ascertain if each other's cares must necessarily be a threat and to discover whether their differing cares can coexist without the necessity of threat.

Other approaches to the mediation process, such as the narrative approach, also attend to the interpretive frames through which the parties make meaning. Insight practitioners, however, do not see their role as fostering the codevelopment of new narratives about how to resolve the conflict. Instead, they believe that parties can, and do, maintain diverse narratives arising from their complex interpretive frames. To the insight

practitioner, parties need not necessarily agree on the narrative; rather, they see their primary role as changing defend-and-attack responses to enable parties to generate insights that can open the door to changing threat-producing patterns of interaction.

Interest-based theorists have also acknowledged that parties may have different interpretations of conflict (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991; Fisher, Kopelman, and Schneider 1994). Addressing this in mediation could involve an interpretive "reframing" of the conflict in an attempt to shift parties from holding their positions to uncovering and advancing their interests. But the insight mediators do not begin with a goal of reframing positions to discover mutual or tradable interests. Instead, insight mediators believe that the cares motivating the conflict are generated within complex patterns of interaction, embedded in values and emotions, and that the conflict arises from the perception of threat. Focusing on advancing interests alone, without attending to the threats to one's values and the social contexts that generate the perception of such threats, means that parties may only be able to address a fraction of the conflict story. Moreover, insight mediators seek to uncover not just the interests themselves but why they matter to disputants, which insight mediators believe will give parties more satisfaction with the overall process.

Engaging in what insight mediators call "deepening conversations" is what sets the insight approach apart from other conflict intervention approaches. Deepening enables practitioners to help parties understand the patterns of communication and interaction that have led to the belief that what matters most to them is being threatened. The threat experience is affective, so insight mediators focus on emotions to more clearly articulate what matters to the parties and what is at stake. An insight mediator thus directs attention to the interpretative process of meaning making so that the parties are able to articulate what matters and why.

The following dialogue provides an example of a deepening conversation from our case study involving Danny and Teresa. In this example, Danny's current perception of threat stems from his previous experiences of organizational change that were followed by job cuts. What Teresa values as "innovation," Danny experiences as "threat." To ensure that she understood him correctly, the mediator paraphrased what Danny had just said, a common strategy in most mediation approaches, allowing Danny to verify if she had understood correctly or not. The distinctness of the approach rests in what the mediator notices and to what she attends. Rather than working with Danny to identify an interest, she noticed how Danny had constructed his interpretation of the meaning of his situation by reference to past events. She briefly deepened to discover how the past has shaped the present by asking a series of layered questions, a skill that insight practitioners call layering.[9] The implicit insight questions then become: Is it necessarily the case that the term "innovation" has the same meaning and

impact the way Teresa and the supervisors use it as it did in the situations that have caused Danny concern? Is the dire outcome that Danny has envisaged the only possible outcome? How can Teresa alter her interpretation of Danny's and her own behavior? How can gaining these insights help the disputants cease their defend-and-attack behaviors?

This type of implicit, unspoken, curious, nondirective question guides the insight practitioner's strategy. Although it is difficult to capture the trajectory of a mediation in a short segment, the following sample dialogue reflects a few key elements of the insight approach.

> **Mediator:** Over the past five years, you've started to see lots of change in your organization; people have left and things are different.
> **Danny:** Yea, well in operations, you know, they started talking about innovation and half of them lost their jobs.
> **Mediator:** When was that Danny?
> **Danny:** It's about a couple years ago now.
> **Mediator:** And so people lost their jobs as a result of changes that happened in the past.
> **Danny:** Well, yea, that's the way it works. The new ones get the jobs and the old ones sort of get shafted and put off in the corner somewhere.
> **Mediator:** There seems to be a link between people losing their jobs in the past through organizational change and what's been happening between you and Teresa as a result of her bringing ideas forward to improve the workplace.
> **Danny:** Well, that's the way I see it.
> **Mediator:** And the link for you is?
> **Danny:** Well, change leads to people losing their jobs or people being put out. Joe is trying to do this new thing Teresa suggested, but he doesn't know how to do it. And, there is no time for people to learn new stuff. Teresa is too busy coming up with new ideas to help Joe out, and it is embarrassing for him.
> **Teresa:** But no one has ever asked me for help.
> **Mediator:** Hang on for one sec, Teresa. It seems this is an important piece of information to be sure that we understand. Jot down that thought so [you] don't forget it when we come back to you.
> **Mediator:** What I'm getting from you Danny is that that you and some of the other staff are feeling that some of the changes that are being suggested by Teresa are likely to result in job loss, or, the very least being put into a position you are not trained for, or, a position where you are not able to contribute in the way you would like. Have I got the right picture?
> **Danny:** Yea, I think that sums it up. But she doesn't seem to see that, it's pretty obvious.

In this brief segment, the mediator follows Danny's interpretation of changes in his work environment in the past when "they started talking innovation and half of them lost their jobs." Danny's certainty about the current situation is based on experience, which suggests to him that he and

his colleagues are at risk. By exploring the sense that Danny has made of what has happened in his workplace, the parties and the mediator have taken the opportunity to gain insight into his experience that his cares are being threatened, in the process providing Teresa with her first knowledge of how Danny has interpreted the conflict. Until the mediation, he had only made angry protests that made little sense to her other than as unfair challenges to her competence. With the mediation helping to reduce Danny's perception of threat, the parties can discuss how their interpretations and response patterns have escalated the conflict.

When Danny said, "she doesn't seem to see that, it's pretty obvious," he opened the door for the mediator to focus on Teresa's perception.

> **Mediator:** What are you hearing Danny say?
> **Teresa:** Well, he is saying the old way worked. But when I talked to people, when I did the focus groups and the research to find out what kind of change they wanted, people were saying it wasn't working. New technology gets implemented all the time that can help make our jobs easier and allow us to do more things. A lot of people that I spoke with when I did this research wanted change. They wanted to see a difference, they wanted new technology, they wanted their jobs to be easier so they could do things that were more interesting to them. They were bored with some of the mundane things they had to do all the time; they wanted to do new things. So when I was restructuring some of the jobs, I tried to match up interests with people and what they wanted to do with their skills, so I don't see pieces, I haven't seen that.

By drawing out the threats being generated within this defend–attack pattern, the mediator has helped Danny and Teresa to identify specific interpretive frames fueling their sense of threat. As the mediation progressed, Danny and Teresa were able to develop new patterns of interactions at work, and Danny stopped deliberately silencing Teresa in staff meetings. At the same time, Teresa became more sensitive to the concerns of Danny and his colleagues. Discussions soon followed about how to redesign staff training to make participants feel less vulnerable without putting extra burdens on the workers' already busy schedules. Teresa and Danny no longer felt it necessary to defend and attack because they were able to discuss, with each other, what mattered most in how they made sense of the situation. In doing so, they were able to find ways to reduce threats and allow their differing cares to coexist.

Conclusion

We have argued that the analysis of conflict behavior should be considered from an interactionist perspective in which every action is viewed, not as a distinct event but as part of a sequence of interconnected actions

and responses to actions that take place in complex social dynamics and interpretive frameworks. Human behavior is both self-referential and other-oriented. Our actions, feelings, hopes, and fears are both internally driven and influenced by our perceptions of the hopes, fears, feelings, and actions of others. This gives our perceptions a two-sided quality, looking both backward and forward, both inward and outward. The same holds true for our understanding of the communication process — the receiver's perceptual frame influences the message as much as the intentions of the sender.

We believe practitioners can benefit from an analytical framework for understanding conflict as dynamic and interactive. The focus of conflict analysis and intervention need not necessarily be linear and purposive but can instead address the dynamic interactions between conflicting parties rather than treating parties as self-referential actors whose interests can be analyzed objectively as if they are distinct from the conflict itself. Articulating a more relational and interactive theory of conflict can help practitioners develop a practice robust enough to consciously address the complexity of conflicts they face.

Successful conflict intervention often involves helping the parties to question much of what they think they know about the other in order to learn what really motivates them. If we can reconsider something we were formerly sure about, our perceptions of the conflict can change significantly. Expanding the parties' horizons allows them to imagine new ways of interacting that can potentially reduce the threat that they pose to each other's core concerns and goals. This, in turn, allows them to find new ways of addressing, changing, or resolving the conflict between them. Through skillfully addressing conflict, parties gain insight and articulate what matters to them most — their cares, which are generated, advanced, threatened, and realigned within the complex interactions that define us as social beings.

NOTES

1. Roger Fisher and William Ury address this issue by acknowledging that most negotiations involve "relational interests" as well as "substantive interests." The authors recommend that relational interests should be disentangled from the substantive issues at stake — separate the people from the problem and deal with the relational interests directly (Fisher, Ury and Patton 1991: 20–21; see also Lax and Sebenius 1986: 70–74). Our understanding of the reflexive nature of human behavior suggests that the people issues cannot always be clearly separated from the substantive issues.

2. R.D. Laing, H. Phillipson, and A.R. Lee (1966: 5) make this point as follows: "My field of experience is filled not only by my direct view of myself (ego) and of the other (alter), but of what we shall call *meta*perspectives — *my view of the other's* (your, his, her, their) *view* of me. I may not actually be able to see myself as others see me, but I am constantly supposing them to be seeing me in particular ways, and I am constantly acting in the light of the actual or supposed attitudes, opinions, needs, and so on the other has in respect of me."

3. Niebuhr (1963) observed that all responsible purposive action is generated as an answer to the question "what shall I do?" but that this question cannot be answered only by reference to a prior question "what is my goal?" without also considering the answer to an antecedent question "what is going on?"

4. The story of Danny and Teresa was the first case study to which researchers applied Lonergan's theory of cognition, thereby developing both the original theory and method of the insight approach.

5. For a foundational statement of the dynamics of this spiral of mutually reinforcing distrust, in which each new response generates the data required to establish the premise on which the initial response was based, see Merton (1996: 183–201). Similar dynamics have also been explored in the field of international relations with reference to the security dilemma under anarchy (see Butterfield 1951; Hertz 1959; Jervis 1976).

6. Behavioral psychologists refer to this phenomenon in terms of anchoring assumptions, which orient the parties toward past outcomes, regardless of whether they are applicable to current circumstances. The implication, however, is that this represents a departure from cognitively rational behavior, rather than a normative foundation for rational purposive action.

7. The example was suggested by one of the authors' children who claims that one can tell by the movement of the author's eyebrows whether any given comment should be taken seriously or not.

8. Indeed, the witness may not even be aware of the significance of his or her own testimony to the detective. Had the witness realized the importance of his or her evidence, he or she might have tried to conceal the information, or to extract a higher price for it in the information exchange, such as by trying to blackmail the real criminal, a practice that leads to unfortunate results in most detective novels.

9. Insight mediation uses terms such as deepening, layered questions, noticing, bridging, finishing, and using to describe the strategies and skills that mediators use to help assist the parties to understand more fully the patterns of interaction and communication that have created the conflict and keep it ongoing.

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