Framing the Conflict: How Students See It

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ABSTRACT

Frame perspective can be used to contextualize action: to a certain degree it both explains, why individuals behave as they do, and emphasizes various restrictions upon individuals. “Its central feature is the experience of individuals and the organizing of experience when interacting with others” (Persson, 2015). The study aimed at revealing the ways of framing the conflict. Data were collected from undergraduate students at Mykolas Romeris University (N = 138). Findings show that most students perceived conflict in negative versus positive terms. Identifying the images of conflict students made statements mostly about the situations that have become aggressive, both verbally and physically.

KEYWORDS

Aggressive, Conflict Frames, Lithuania, Students

INTRODUCTION

Individuals’ perceptions function to shape and define what the interaction is about, the valence of the interaction, and attributions about others’ motives and intentions (Folger et al., 2001; Rogan, 2006). These perceptions in communication and conflict studies are conceptualized as frame indicating how parties make sense of their situation and how they interact (Elliott, Kaufman, Gardner and Burgess, 2002). B. H. Sheppard and colleagues (1994) have considered framing as the cognitive work that precedes conscious analysis and decision-making as an initial interpretation of the structure of interaction. The researchers explain that “like a picture frame, cognitive frames focus our attention on some aspects of a situation, to the exclusion of others; and, like a guardrail, they suggest certain directions for action over others” (Sheppard et al., p. 55).

Thus, disputants use frames interpretively. These cognitive structures help to reduce information overload and operate as models of reality that, by necessity, trade details for clarity. Disputants as well use frames strategically. They formulate frames that are consistent with their interests, and communicate through their frames to strengthen their positions and persuade opponents, rally like-minded people. As D. Shmueli and colleagues (2006) noted, divergent frames as lenses through which disputants interpret conflicts limit the clarity of communication and the quality of information, and then encourage escalation (Shmueli et al., 2006, p. 217). Knowing the frames in use and the way of the construction helps disputants to understand and influence conflict dynamics. “The frames individuals adopt are subject to manipulation, and participants in a dispute may be able to cue particular frames to influence the behavior of others to resolve or exacerbate conflict” (Schweitzer and DeChurch,
2001, p. 100). Thus, if left unexamined, frames can limit the range of possible solutions the disputants can foresee.

The aim of the study is to reveal the ways of framing. It is important understanding about interaction between individual frames and conflict resolution. The research questions are as follow: how do students frame the conflict by defining it; to what extend personal perception of conflict may affect the outcomes of their conflicts. This paper addresses the first research question.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CONFLICT FRAME CATEGORIES AND APPROACHES

Conflict frames are characterized across various categories in the field literature (Table 1). The most prevailing is threefold distinction. Sheppard et al. (1994) have identified three types of frames: a choice frame, a negotiation frame; and an underlying conflict frame. Pinkley (1990) has identified three categories of conflict frames such as 1) the relationship / task frame, 2) the emotional / intellectual, 3) the cooperate / win. Although the categories differ as the authors argues general categories - issues, identities and relationships, and interaction process.

L. E. Drake and W. A. Donohue (cited in Rogan, 2006) have deductively coded a set of four frame categories: factual, interest, value, and relational. M. Elliott et al. (2002) constructed six dimensions of frames: identity, characterization, conflict management, risk/information, loss / gain and views. R. G. Rogan (2006) study explored six different categories: instrumentality, other assessment, affect, face, affiliation, distributiveness. B. Gray and A. Donnellon (cited in Rogan, 2006, p. 160) have described framing along three dimensions including perception of the conflict, process expectations, and outcome expectations. They have developed a set of seven frame categories: substantive, loss-gain, characterization, outcome, aspiration, process, and evidentiary frames. M. C. Campbell and J. S. Docherty (2004) have operated with eight types of frame. Researchers have noted that parties in conflict do not necessarily use each one of these frames – some frames may predominant, while others may not come into play at all. Researcher added outcome vs. aspiration, power and world-making story to the set of frames. Thus, there is an absence of consensus about the number and types of frames people use to define their conflicts.

There as well is no agreement according the conception of frames and framing. L. L. Putnam and M. Holmer (1992) have identified three separate orientations to framing research: the cognitive heuristic approach, the frame categories approach, and the issue development orientation. According to researchers, the cognitive heuristics orientation focuses on how individuals make decisions about management strategies according to the perceived benefits and losses associated with particular options. This line of inquiry has generally explored the static individual biases and decision-making structures that influence negotiation behavior. According to the frame categories line of research, frames are internal expectancy sets that individuals employ to make sense of an existing interaction. Frames as categories become manifest in conflict discourse and function to delimit those issues that are important to a disputant as well as exclude those that are unimportant. Researchers working in this realm have principally investigated the types of frames individuals use to define their conflicts and the relationship of frames to outcome goals and expected satisfaction. Issue development researchers focus on how frames are developed, negotiated, and transformed during the course of interaction. Research from this perspective has explored the ways in which disputants individually define the topic of the conflict and how those definitions are negotiated with the other party.

On the other hand, A. Dewulf et al. (2009) have identified six alternative approaches to conceptualizing frames and framing as a basis for research on conflict and negotiation. They are as follows 1) cognitive issue frames, 2) cognitive identity and relationship frames and 3) cognitive process frames; 4) interactional issue framing, 5) interactional identity and relationship framing and 6) interactional process framing. These approaches were disentangled by analyzing their assumptions about 1) the nature of frames, and 2) what is being framed.

A. Dewulf et al. (2009) contend that there is ontological distinction between two different standpoints towards nature of frames: cognitive representations, and interactional co-constructions.
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