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# Conflict, learning, and frustration: a dynamic model of conflict over time

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Conflict, Learning, and Frustration:  
A Dynamic Model of Conflict over Time

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Introduction

A continuing question in the study of conflict and conflict management is, “When is conflict helpful, and when is it harmful?” Though many have offered explanations for this (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), data in support of these notions have been less forthcoming, especially in relation to the helpfulness of conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In this paper we

present a dynamic model of conflict that we hope will both explain and clarify the confusion by conceptualizing conflict as *simultaneously* containing helpful (learning related) and harmful (negative sentiment related) components. We argue how both learning and negative emotion can inhibit or promote future conflict, constituting feedback loops. We then examine what this implies for conflict over time in terms of the efficacy of collaboration between parties who experience conflict.

Traditionally “helpful” conflict has been called task conflict or cognitive conflict, while the “harmful” type of conflict is relationship or emotional conflict (Amason, 1996; Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. Task conflict is centered on the group’s objectives, or what it should do to solve a problem. It can be animated, but it is not personal. Relationship conflict is personal and emotional and tends to be about clashes of the members of the group. While there has been much research on task (Amason et al., 1997; Cosier & Rose, 1977; Gruenfeld, Mannix, Williams, & Neale, 1996) and relationship (Brewer, 1995, 1996; Labianca, Brass, & Gray, 1998) conflict, what has failed to emerge is a clear picture of when or what type of conflict is functional or dysfunctional. Task conflict, theorized to be positive (Gruenfeld et al., 1996; Jehn, 1995, 1997) is found to be negative (De Dreu et al., 2003). Relationship conflict is seen as always negative, but in other fields that deal with the stability of continuing relationships, relationship conflict can sometimes be helpful. In the field of marital counseling, volatile couples who value honest expression of anger, and who also tend to engage in escalating quarrels, tended to be more stable than those who did not (Gottman, 1993). We believe that this confusion about the usefulness of conflict types comes from limitations imposed by the constructs themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> We use task and relationship conflict for convenience, but we mean task conflict to include cognitive conflict, and relationship conflict to include emotional conflict. These definitions are functionally equivalent in the papers we cite.

What we argue is that claiming conflict will *either* be task or relationship conflict has limited our understanding of conflict in general. First, it sets up a false dichotomy. Logically, there is no reason to claim that conflict could not be over both the task and the people; that is, that a person challenges the ideas of others, partially because of interpersonal feelings and partially because they think the idea is bad. Similarly, conflict over a task could not be interpreted as a personal attack, and therefore engender the same negative feelings. This is, in fact, what happens when task turns to relationship conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1997), but also can happen in a single instance when one is using a technique such as devil's advocacy to merely explore further the nature of an idea (Schweiger, 1989; Schwenk, 1990). This problem is why Torrance (1957) originally questioned whether people could meaningfully distinguish conflict about the task and the person.

A more subtle potential problem with the use of task and relationship conflict is that they are treated as helpful or harmful in and of themselves, when even in the research on task and relationship conflict (e.g., Jehn et al., 1999) it is the learning that task conflict brings that is helpful (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995), and the bad feelings that relationship conflict creates that is harmful (Jehn et al., 2001). By learning, we mean the synthesis of task relevant information that the parties may have previously overlooked. "Negative feelings" is a general term we will use to describe a range of affective reactions from basic emotions (e.g., anger) to more complicated ones (e.g., apprehension), all of which are unpleasant to experience. We believe that if learning is the good and negative feelings are the bad outcomes of conflict, then we should examine how these arise from conflict directly. To do this we need to understand the interplay of the information and unpleasantness that can produce learning and negative feelings.

For these reasons, we start with the argument that disagreement over the task and personality clashes can and often do co-occur *in the same disagreement*. This implies that a single instance of conflict will generate some learning and some negative feelings as by products of the conflict. We think that it is important to understand the effect of these by products as they accumulate over time. Conflict is a dynamic process where subsequent actions are viewed in relation to what has already happened (Jehn et al., 2001; Weingart, Prietula, Hyder, & Genovese, 1999). To this point, we believe that as the learning/ negative emotional by products of conflict accumulate, it can affect amount and usefulness of subsequent conflict. By examining the way learning and negative feelings result from conflict directly, and by taking into consideration conflicts that have occurred in the past, we believe we will be able to gain a clearer picture of the conditions under which conflict will be useful.

In this paper, we begin by defining a *conflict* event, a single disagreement that can be bound in terms of time and space, in which task and relationship conflict can occur simultaneously. We go on to explain how a single conflict event can lead to learning and negative feelings simultaneously. We then suggest that learning and frustration will both affect the likelihood of subsequent conflict. Finally, we complete our model by examining how negative feelings can affect subsequent learning, and vice versa. The model is presented in figure 1. Once we have articulated the model, we describe what this implies for relationships over time (e.g., partners or groups), and demonstrate this using a computer simulation. We conclude by discussing the implications of our model for the study of conflict as well as conflict management.

#### *The conflict event*

We define a conflict event as a disagreement between two or more parties, acknowledged by those involved, which can be bound in terms of time. Bound in terms of time means that the

experience of the conflict has a definable starting and stopping point (e.g., part of a meeting, a phone call, etc.). Acknowledged by those involved means that the parties to the conflict event all recognize that there is a disagreement and that some accommodation will need to take place before an agreement can be reached. Thus, an example of a conflict event would be a fight between a subordinate and boss that begins when the subordinate disputes the current bonus structure for employees in a meeting, and ends with the subordinate storming out.

Since a conflict event is not bound in terms of content (i.e., what it is about), we can allow a conflict event to contain some portion of task and some portion of relationship conflict. This conflict can also vary in the degree to which it is emotional. Our notion of a conflict event fit with Baron's (1984) observation that "what starts as a rational exchange of opposing views deteriorates into an emotion laden interchange...in which strong negative feelings are aroused" (p 272). In this example, task information was exchanged, negative feelings were aroused, and personal attacks may have surfaced as well, and this was experienced as a single conflict event. We define a conflict event thusly because we believe it will correspond more to people's experience of conflict. By admitting the possibility that both task and relationship elements are present in a conflict, as well as varying levels of emotion, we can use these as the basis from which to deduce what the effects of a conflict event will be.

#### *The by-products of conflict events*

If we accept that a conflict event can be about the task and about relationships, from this we can derive the by-products of conflict. Task conflict can produce information as people try to reconcile their diverse perspectives about how a decision should be made or a problem should be solved (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1997). We would also argue that useful information can come from non-task arguments such as procedures or interpersonal interactions. Here, the same mechanism

is at work, different perspectives about the processes or people lead others to disclose information that was previously being overlooked by the other parties, and the incorporation of that information should improve the way the parties interact. For example, disagreement over whether one was trying to marginalize another can bring to light information on how people wish to be treated in a group. When this is incorporated into the group's interaction patterns, it should improve the groups functioning.

Relationship conflict will produce some amount of unpleasant feelings in those involved (Amason et al., 1997; Jehn, 1997), as people do not like being personally attacked. Yet conflict may be unpleasant for reasons other than personal attack. Some people may not wish to argue over something they deeply believe should be true. Such a conflict over values may provoke a person's sense of morality over the way they believe things ought to be (such as fairness judgments, see Bies, 1987) or may even be threatening to the ego (Allred, 1999). Finally, some people simply do not like confrontation and are conflict avoidant. This individual parameter implies that engaging in a conflict event of any sort will evoke some degree of unpleasantness.

A conflict event can thus be located on a 2 dimensional plan where there is some amount of task relevant information, and some amount of unpleasantness (figure 2). In this depiction, the lower right (high information, low unpleasantness) is where task conflict is usually positioned, and the upper left (low information, high unpleasantness) is where relationship conflict is usually positioned. Our notion of the conflict event also admits low information, low unpleasantness conflict, as well as high information, high unpleasantness conflict. Across all types, we postulate that the information and unpleasantness that surface during the conflict will produce two by-products, learning and negative feelings.

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Insert figure 2 here

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*The Conflict-Learning Loop.* We argue that conflict brings about information, leading to learning, and as people learn about each other (and the task), they will be better able to work together productively, thereby decreasing the amount of future conflict. Consider how conflict can lead to learning. The information surfaced by conflict, if properly synthesized, should lead to learning (Thompson & DeHarpport, 1994; Tjosvold, 1985, 1997). Learning between people is "the activities through which individuals acquire, share and combine knowledge through experience with one another" (Argote, Gruenfeld, & Naquin, 2001, p. 370). Thus as parties share their own perspectives and information, it can expand or deepen the capabilities of others, leading to more adaptive responses. Learning does not have to only be about better ways to do the task. Parties could learn better ways to interact or communicate with each other, or better ways to resolve conflicts or make decisions. When people learn better ways to interact or work, in addition to improving the output of the group, it can have a secondary effect of reducing conflict.

One way learning should decrease the probability of future conflict is by reducing misunderstanding between the parties. Misunderstanding can lead to conflict when communication is misconstrued, and people react to their misunderstanding as though it were the intended meaning. For example, if person A, intending only to get more clarity, questions person B's motives for a decision, person B may misconstrue this question to be a personal attack. Person B may react and respond in kind with a personal attack on person A, starting a conflict spiral (Brett, Shapiro, & Lytle, 1998). As parties learn about each other, it should reduce the number of times people make these sorts of errors. The meaning of ideas can be misconstrued as well. For instance if an engineer says "design a quality (meaning *durable*) part"



to a designer, who takes quality to mean *finely crafted*, conflict can arise after the two realize they were expecting different objects. As people learn about each other, it becomes easier for them to understand the nuance of their language, and to anticipate, prepare for, and accommodate each other's needs. This should also decrease conflict that comes from people acting in unexpected or undesired ways.

*The Conflict-Negative Feelings Loop.* We argue that conflict, in addition to bringing about information, is going to be experienced as somewhat unpleasant, and that this will lead to a buildup in negative feelings that over time can prime people for more conflict. The first link in this is that when people experience the unpleasantness of conflict, it can build up negative feelings. The most familiar example of this is what happens in relationship conflict where people's personalities are attacked. This is an unpleasant experience that can evoke anger, irritation or annoyance (Amason, 1996; Amason et al., 1997; Pelled, 1996). Yet we argue that there may be other negative feelings that build as the result of conflict. When resolution to a conflict is delayed by protracted difficulties, this can be a frustrating experience. Here it is the inability to get to a resolution rather than anything personal that evokes the unpleasantness, and the particular feeling is one of frustration. In the case of a less powerful person trying to resolve an important issue (e.g., a small business owner trying to fight a mistaken IRS decision), it may be despair rather than frustration that emerges. Finally, some negative feelings may be individual based. A person who simply is conflict avoidant may just experience displeasure as he or she is engaged in the conflict, even a relatively mild one. A person in a high status position may feel affronted that he or she is challenged by a lower status one. Across situations, people, and conflict types the mix of specific negative feelings may change, but in all cases the conflict itself

is experienced as unpleasant to some degree, and leaves an emotional residue of feelings that are on the negative side of the continuum.

When negative feelings build up, it should increase the likelihood of conflict. There are a number of ways in which negative feelings can provoke conflict. A very simple one is frustration-aggression (Berkowitz, 1982), when people are frustrated they can lash out. Frustration has been shown to perpetuate the conflict cycle (De Dreu, Nauta, & van de Vliert, 1995). Another is reciprocity, where people who are experiencing something unpleasant can seek to return the unpleasantness in kind, especially if they feel justified (Bies, 1987). Negative feelings may prime people to look for conflict as well. When people are in a negative mood they are more likely to attend to or remember similarly valenced thoughts (Bower & Forgas, 2001). Through these different mechanisms, as the amount of negative feelings build, the likelihood of conflict should increase as well.

#### *Feedback between the loops - The tipping point*

If conflict simultaneously increased learning and negative feelings, assuming fairly similar rates of conflict increasing (through negative feelings) and decreasing (through learning), it would simply mean that over time you would have a very skilled and surly group. It would do little to explain why task conflict appears to be mostly ineffective (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), and it would imply that conflict would have about the same effect no matter what had happened before. However, we argue that there is also a feedback loop between learning and negative feelings, such that negative feelings can reduce learning, and learning can reduce negative feelings (for evidence of the simultaneity of this relationship in a particular context see, Holman & Wall, 2002) . This will mean that over time, there is a high likelihood that one loop (learning or negative feelings) will tend to dominate the other.

*Negative feelings reduce learning.* In order for people to learn from the information given, they must have the capacity and motivation to do so. This is because synthesizing information into one's own knowledge base is an effortful process (Hasher & Zacks, 1979). When something decreases cognitive capacity, then less of this type of learning can take place. Negative emotions can do just that; negative emotions crowds out cognitive capacity for other learning (Bless & Schwarz, 1999). At the same time, emotion can lead one to either selectively attend or encode particular (Forgas, 1995) details, thus not comprehending the full story, but only the affect congruent parts (which would be negative).

In addition to reducing capacity to learn, we argue that negative feelings, especially those centered on others, will reduce the motivation to learn from them. Here instead of not being able to process the information given, people will choose not to. This kind of dismissal is more akin to prejudice (Devine, 1989). It uses surface features to dismiss the usefulness of information before it is processed. The end result is the same, information that would be useful is not incorporated into a person's thinking.

*Learning reduces negative feelings.* As people work through their difficulties, it can counter some of the negative feelings that have built up. At a fundamental level, we argue that each "breakthrough" that results from learning should have some degree of satisfaction (or relief) associated with it. This would operate through the same reinforcement mechanisms used to design self directed learning programs, where people's interest and commitment grows through a series of small successes learning a task (Keller, 1968). When the learning also results in the overcoming of small disagreements, we expect this to mollify negative feelings as well. Here the same principles that work for the gradual reduction in tension strategy (Osgood, 1974), where small concessions help overcome frustration and bolster commitment to a course of action or at

least promote positive attributions to counter the negative feelings (Lindsfold, 1978), would operate. In short, as people learn about others, it can produce a sense of accomplishment (especially when the learning solves actual problems) and the positive feelings that this accomplishment evokes can reduce the negative feelings brought about by the unpleasantness of conflict.

### **Conflict over time**

Now let us consider the behavior of the entire system over time. With each conflict event, there is some increase in learning, and some increase in negative feelings. For simplicity, we will imagine that frustration subsides and learning decays at similar rates (this does not change the main point of the model). In this system, each loop has the possibility to dominate the other. If there are more negative feelings than learning, then the information brought about by the conflict event will go unused as people will not learn from each other. This effectively leaves frustration and conflict to spiral unabated as there is no learning to “put the brakes” on the conflict-negative feelings loop. On the other hand, if learning outstrips negative emotion, there will be less conflict, and the unpleasantness of whatever conflict comes up should be overshadowed by the learning that takes place. Thus there are fewer chances for conflict to produce unpleasantness, and the buildup of negative feelings will be diminished. Over time, this model predicts one of three outcomes.

*Outcome 1: Too much negative feelings – group disintegration.* In this scenario, learning happens at a lower rate than the accumulation of negative feelings, and so the frustration feedback loop overtakes the learning feedback loop. Thus each conflict event feeds the level of negative feelings, further diminishing learning while begetting more conflict. After a certain point this group will disintegrate. The level of negative feeling in people will become so

unpleasant that no one will want to continue in the group, as at a certain level people will begin to withdraw (Spector & Storms, 1987). Since learning will have long since stopped, there will be little reason (in terms of effectiveness) to try to save the group.

*Outcome 2: Too much learning – groupthink.* Some groups will seek to minimize all conflict and negative feelings. This kind of overzealous desire to have group harmony can be accomplished by inculcating people into the same way of thinking. In this scenario, any conflict would be an occasion for people to learn how to react to each other so that they avoid conflict in the future. The outcome here is groupthink (Janis, 1997). As everyone is taught to think the same way, negative feelings are avoided but at the high cost of narrowing the group's range of thinking. We caution here that what can happen can be insidious, that people can focus on commonality to the exclusion of anything that might cause conflict. An example is people's tendency to focus on shared information (Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996). As people learn from each other and about each other, there can be a homogenizing force that simply crowds out conflict (and by extension frustration). You then get the "happy and ineffective" group that would rather compromise than find a Pareto-optimal solution.

*Outcome 3: The right balance – cohesion and resilience.* In our minds, the optimal situation is where the learning occurs at a high enough rate to control but not eliminate frustration. This steady state behavior implies that conflicts still occur, and that they are somewhat difficult to solve (guaranteeing some frustration but also learning when it is solved). We see this as analogous to the suggestion that for maximal improvement, one should have goals slightly beyond one's reach (Locke & Latham, 2002). Like "slightly beyond", "somewhat difficult" needs further research to quantify. We can say, however that if the learning in which a group engages expands the members' views (as opposed to refining the current shared view), it

should be less likely to descend into groupthink, as pushing these boundaries will create more questions than answers. At the same time, as the group continues to try and keep their perspectives integrated, provided the synthesis of ideas is not too disparate, the frustration created should never rise to that critical detrimental point where learning is choked off by high amounts of negative feelings. Learning advances at a rate high enough to keep the level down.

*A simulation of this model*

**[The model proposed in this paper can be emulated using systems dynamics. We plan to create a model in Vensim where we can compare different parameters (rates of learning, negative feeling buildup, etc.) and demonstrate the three outcomes as a function of these different parameters. This is still in development]**

*Implications*

Our model expands on the notions of conflict as a dynamic process. The notion that what happens in conflict depends on what has happened previously is found in the research on conflict spirals (Brett et al., 1998) and on offer-type reciprocity (Weingart et al., 1999). These processes occur within single conflict events. Our model expands the general notions to what happens between conflict events. In a different vein, Jehn and Chatman (2000) have looked at conflict dynamics by viewing the effects of relationship and task conflict as a function of the proportion of each type of conflict over a period of time (i.e., multiple conflict events). Our model looks at this notion within single conflict events (also looking not at task conflict and relationship conflict directly, but rather their by-products). We hope our theory will contribute to the understanding of conflict in relation to the history of conflict between parties.

Our model can explain one of the current paradoxes in conflict research, why task conflict does not produce constructive controversy and in fact is most often negative (De Dreu et

al., 2003). We have argued that the information imparted by task conflict can be ignored if frustration is high. Thus the simultaneous presence of a high level of negative feelings would effectively negate the usefulness of any task relevant information shared. This intuition is consistent with the finding that trust can help increase the usefulness of task conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000), as trust should reduce the unpleasantness of conflict (e.g., people who trust each other may not make negative attributions about the conflict).

### *Future research*

We see multiple research opportunities in testing the parts of the model we have presented, as well as to improve the model overall. Although some links are well established (information improves learning), others are not (negative feelings prevent learning). One could also try to determine the limits of interdependence between the two loops in the model (e.g., how much negative feeling can be tolerated before learning is affected). One can also think about exogenous influences on these processes. One mentioned earlier was trust, which we would expect would moderate the link between conflict and negative emotion, but may actually work to decrease misunderstanding (people would be less likely to make negative attributions about the motives of those they trusted).

At a more general theoretical level we think our model has implications worth pursuing with regard to the endpoints of protracted conflict. Intuitively, it seems like the conflict-negative emotional loop would be most likely to group out of control. We would conjecture that unpleasantness is more consistent than learning. If that is so, then figuring out how to control that feedback loop seems critical. Here we would argue that most people concentrate on decreasing the unpleasantness of conflict (Robinson & Weldon, 1993). Maybe researchers should try to figure out how to dissipate the negative feeling buildup as well.

At the practical level, research needs to be done on how to find the balance between learning and frustration. Are there “warning signs” that can redirect a group when it gets too high on either frustration or learning? A better question may be simply what controls to put in place to manage the level of frustration. In this paper we have suggested learning as the countervailing force, but there are clearly variables exogenous to the model that should help. Is an established relationship where people are committed enough to each other to “weather the storm”. Maybe hoping to increase learning as a means to reduce frustration is too uncertain a bet, and other relational factors (trust, respect) can be used instead.

Our model raises many questions. We hope it serves to untangle some of the confusion currently existing in the study of conflict, as well as to promote research on conflict as it is experienced over time.



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Figure 1. Conflict events can be located on this Cartesian plane

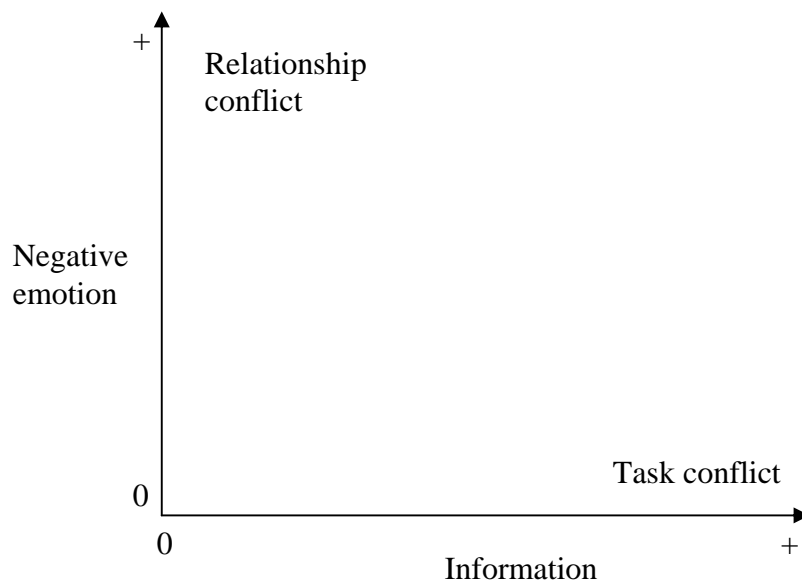


Figure 2. The dynamic model of conflict, learning, and frustration

