



Interpersonal Conflict at Work. A Constructionist Approach to Complex Problems

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Abstract

This article conceptually explores the possibility of addressing the complexity of interpersonal conflicts at work through a constructionist vision of them. It understands that the conflict is a situation in process in which the intervening performers have the possibility of modulating their behavior to escalate or de-escalate the conflict. And these behaviors are regulated by a series of contextual variables, the influence of the intervening subjects themselves and individual variables that guide and direct their behavior. To solve the need for understanding, a series of instruments are developed such as PICS (Perceived Interpersonal Conflicts Scale).

Keywords: Conflict; Constructionism; Motivation; Narration; Frames; Perceived Interpersonal Conflicts Scale

A first approach to the concept of interpersonal conflict in organizations can be made by observing the difference between transactions and disputes [1]. In this sense, while transactions refer to exchanges of resources between the parties, disputes instead refer to unaccepted or incompatible requests, involving the emotions of the parties that are added to the elements in dispute. This differentiation between “eminently cognitive conflicts” and “conflicts with a socio-emotional basis” grounds a dichotomy in the study of conflicts in work situations: task conflicts versus relationship conflicts. While task conflict refers to group members’ disagreements about the tasks to be performed and their content, relationship conflict is understood as interpersonal discrepancies and incompatibilities that arise between group members due to personal problems, including affective components like feeling tension, friction, enmity, and hostility.

Nonetheless, a pure dichotomy between relationship conflict and task conflict has been questioned by different

authors, and is not very close to reality, so to evaluate the conflict we should not think of it as a monolithic and objective reality (independent of the performers) but as a social construction constituted by a game of perceptions that can become contradictory. In this dynamic process, a series of elements can be identified: *structural factors*, the organizational and contextual conditioning factors that are at the base of the problems, *manifest issues*, refer to the issues that make up the conflict issue, *dynamic factors*, the forms of communication and scaling or de-scaling actions or behaviors [2].

Conflicts can evolve negatively through the so-called escalation process that can contain all or some of the following incremental transformations: *hardening of tactics*, initial promises and persuasion evolve towards threats and coercion, *adding problems*, conflicts usually unleash around a Main concrete problem and as time passes, new problems are added, *personalization*, therefore there is a displacement of the problematic nature of the issue in conflict to the people

involved, *selective perception*, tendency of the parties to lock themselves in their particular point of view on the other in a polarized and irrational way, *motivational displacement*, an individualistic and competitive interest replaces the cooperative search to unite self-interest and that of others, *increase of actors*, as the problems intensify, a polarization of perceptions occurs and active requests are made before third parties who position themselves, *psychopathological alterations*, escalated conflicts can induce or aggravate a wide range of psychopathological alterations such as symptoms of anxiety and/or depression.

The conception of the conflict as a process also includes the notion that the workers involved are necessarily active subjects in that they make decisions, as isolated individuals or within a group, to respond to the conflictive situation in which they find themselves; showing a scalative or descalative behavior. Therefore, the subject has a more or less broad and well-founded understanding of the situation, which will guide their actions along with their motivations in the process.

For constructionism, the individual and his reality are the result of a historical and social process where language plays an essential role. Several authors of these perspectives coincide in taking the located interpretive activity of individuals and groups as the unit of analysis. This implies (Sebastián, 2014, p. 203):

- The concept of interpretation indicates that all psychological and social activity involves an evaluation of the meaning that events have for people.
- The interpretive activity supposes that the action is essential “to build is how to do, a way to achieve something in the world and not just to think about it”.
- Located interpretive activity means, on the one hand, that human activity takes place in a context that habitually involves other people or that has been structured by a previous social or linguistic activity and, on the other hand, that individuals are not unified beings but they that adapt to different contexts by developing modules of meaning and specialized skills.

From coordinates close to this vision, the cognitive linguist George Lakoff writes in the foreword of his book “Don’t Think of an Elephant!” about “mental frames”:

“Frames are mental structures that make up our way of seeing the world. As a consequence, they make up the goals we set for ourselves, the plans we make, our way of acting and what counts as the good or bad result of our actions.

Reference frames cannot be seen or heard. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the ‘cognitive unconscious’ - structures in our brain that we cannot consciously access,

but which we know by their consequences: our way of reasoning and what is understood by common sense. We also know frames through language. All words are defined in relation to conceptual frameworks. When a word is heard, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in the brain. To change the frame is to change the way people see the world. It is changing what is understood by common sense. Since language activates frames, new frames require a new language. Thinking differently requires speaking differently” [3].

Therefore there is a discursive reality supported by social practices. In other words, the interpretation and understanding of what happens is done through language and narrative, giving sense and meaning to situations.

Narration can be understood as the story of facts, in the form of actions, events or events (true or imaginary) that certain characters carry out and that are related to form sequences. In this way, the narratives are used intrapersonally and interpersonally to give meaning to the activity.

For Cabruja, Íñiguez and Vázquez [4], the narrative refers to the production practices of argumentative articulations organized in a plot and framed in space-time coordinates. The narrative, therefore, constitutes the matrix for the organization of the meanings with which the world, our experiences, others and our own identity make sense” [5].

For example, in the field of Ergonomics, the concept of “narration” (a neologism that in Spanish is named as “narración”, “narractividad”) created by Sebastián [5] makes it possible to point out that the interest does not reside in each action or event, but in the meaning assigned by the operator in the context of their activity (its putting into plot, its putting into meaning and its putting into discourse). A productive narrative must elicit shared and sufficient knowledge to answer questions such as: what was the operator trying to do? In what context did it seem coherent to do it? breaking the rules?.

In the same way, in a conflict process we can find different “narrative bubbles” or “echo chambers”, concepts that refer to the existence of simple explanatory systems based on some powerful idea associated with some intense intention or emotion. It is an organized matrix of stories (a system) complete and closed in such a way that it takes the appearance of offering all possible answers to a question. It is not so much an explanation of what happened as a guide (unquestionable and inadvertent) to be able to interpret past and future events. It can be credible and reasonable, as long as it is effective, but it does not have to be truthful. They are social phenomena that allow the followers of a faction to show an exclusive and totalitarian vision of reality [6].

Current constructionist models suggest that both cultural and personal processes participate in the construction of meaning, so that it is possible to affirm that meanings are a narrative elaboration that a subject performs within multiple levels of a hierarchically organized organism-environment system. Regarding interpersonal conflicts in work environments, Berkowitz understands that aggressiveness is a pattern of behavior embedded in all animal species, generating an emotional state consisting of feelings of hatred and desires to harm another person, animal or object [7].

The theory of personal construction (one of the oldest constructivist models) provides a series of conceptual tools that are especially useful for understanding conflict processes. The starting point would be the idea of the construct, a descriptive meaning of a dichotomous type that is applied to more or less broad, but always limited, fragments of experience. It implies that all meaning is ignited in the form of a contrast between two poles, which are experienced as personally incompatible either to determine what the opposite is or to seek an independent meaning, not opposite, but merely different [7].

McCoy gives a good discussion of Kellian transitions. Among them, the most relevant for understanding conflicts are the following [7]:

Guilt is the awareness that one is failing to act as he supposes he should, according to a point of view that is absolutely relevant to the subject. Guilt implies getting out of one's own identity.

- *Shame* is also related to the deviation from expectations, but not with regard to one's own identity but with respect to the role that one estimates that others assign to him. It is a deviation of a social nature.
- *Fear* and *threat* are linked to how the world is understood. We are threatened to the extent that we appreciate that our relevant meanings are going to stop being useful to us and we do not have a valid replacement that can replace them. Fear is the awareness that a lower level change in these meanings is going to take place than in the case of the threat.
- *Anger* is associated with guilt. A person generates anger when he realizes that the inspection of a series of identity-relevant meanings is going to start a cycle of hostile behavior (repetitive and unproductive). You cannot understand anger without knowing how to understand hostility, which is one of the types of behavior related to transitions.
- *Anxiety* involves recognizing that the phenomena one faces are outside the field of meanings that is usually used to interpret the world, which means that some adaptation or transformation mechanism must be put in place.

The two most relevant behaviors related to transitions are *aggressiveness* and *hostility*. *Aggressiveness* is defined as the active attempt to expand one's own system of interpretation of reality. *Hostility* is the attempt to validate one's perception of the world even though it had already been shown to be non-viable. Therefore, hostility and aggressiveness are actions, that is, they are behaviors, acquired or elaborated by the system and not innate tendencies of the subject. They may or may not be launched at the request of the interested party [7].

If hostility and aggressiveness can be put into action at the will of the subject participating in the conflict, it is of great interest to understand what will motivate the subject to carry out de-escalation or maintenance behavior. To approach the study of this motivation, we will briefly describe the ideas contributed by Deci and Ryan in this area.

For Deci and Ryan, a psychology theory is motivational if it explores energy, impulse to satisfy needs, and direction, processes of the organism that give meaning to internal and external stimuli, orienting action towards satisfaction of needs [8].

The concept of motivation presents a hierarchical structure with three levels of generalization: global, contextual and situational. The global is characterized by a general orientation of the individual, of a stable character and related to the personality. At the contextual level, specific areas of daily activity - work, family, educational or sports - are distinguished in which the social factors of the environment exert great influence. At the situational level, there are specific and concrete moments in time that, as such, are unrepeatable - a meeting, a celebration, a class or a game. These three levels interact with each other, and at home one sees the same sequence. Social factors influence motivation through mediators constituted by the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and bonding. Depending on their satisfaction, the existence of different types of motivation is favored: intrinsic (IM), extrinsic (EM) and amotivation (A). IM implies carrying out activities for the pleasure derived from their execution, not being necessary external rewards or environmental control to carry them out. EM concerns behaviors performed only as a means to an end. Finally, A refers to behaviors that the person does not regulate, experiencing a sense of purposelessness. Different results will be generated depending on the type of dominant motivation. Deci and Ryan divided their formulation into five sub-theories dedicated to analyzing specific aspects of the motivational phenomenon [8].

1. **Basic psychological needs:** the energy of behavior is generated by the search for the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and

bonding, which are described as innate and universal.

- *Autonomy* involves volitional aspects and the organization of behavior in activities consistent with the integrated sense of the self.
- The *competence* refers to feelings of effectiveness that are generated when the person assumes optimal challenges, being able to generate a certain impact on the environment.
- *Bonding* represents the experience of healthy social relationships involved in meaningful interactions with others, connecting with them in bonds of mutual care and affection.

1. Causal orientations: personal characteristics play a discriminating purpose in the selection and interpretation of environmental stimuli. The causal orientations (autonomous, controlled or impersonal) determine the tendency of the subjects to evaluate the events as informative, controlling or amotivating, presenting any of the three to a greater extent.

- Subjects with MI present an autonomous orientation and interpret events as informative, using the information to make self-regulating choices.
- Subjects with EM present a controlled orientation and interpret events as controlling, assuming the rules and behaving according to the demands.
- Subjects with A present an impersonal orientation, interpreting events as motivating and responding in an unintentional and incompetent way.

2. Cognitive assessment: focused on MI is based on the assumption that there are innate interests, just as there are innate needs, which vary between individuals; so that the impact that an event has on the motivational process is determined by the meaning it has for the individual. This will remain stable at both the global level, while the contextual and situational level is influenced by the emphasis that social agents place on informational aspects.

3. Organic integration: details the different forms of ME and the social factors that promote or threaten the integration of the regulation of these behaviors in individuals, who are inclined to take values, beliefs and behaviors accepted and reinforced by their culture, due to their need to relate to significant others and to belong to a group. For this reason, people naturally tend to internalize values and rules of their social groups. Deci and Ryan distinguish four types of EM regulation along a continuum of integration.

- External regulation: Behaviors are performed to obtain rewards or avoid punishment.
- Introjected regulation: an external regulation is internalized without accepting it as one's own.
- Identified regulation: behaviors are actively chosen even though the choice is dedicated for external reasons.
- Integrated regulation: individual needs and values are

consistent with the results of socially expected behaviors.

- 4. Goal content:** referred to the global hierarchical level, it includes the orientation of the subject's set of behaviors, asking to find goals of extrinsic motivation, fame or financial success, or intrinsic motivation, satisfaction of basic psychological needs or psychological well-being.

Considering everything seen so far, taking as a dependent variable the harmful consequences of interpersonal conflict in work environments (absenteeism, turnover, decreased performance, symptoms of anxiety, depression, delirious ideas, paranoid ideation), and as influencing variables, they are independent, mediators or moderators, those who intervene in the conflict situation (task object, relationship conflict, escalation of the conflict, resolution measures by the company, motivations of the participants, types of contract, workloads, situation of the company, etc.), a relationship model similar to that proposed by the authors can be envisaged (Figure 1).

It is a moderation-mediation analysis model [9]. This type of analysis is the most appropriate for the reality of a complex system, such as that presented by interpersonal conflicts. Complexity is understood here as the presence of multiple nodes of variable information, which are related in a multidirectional and feedback way, with the best possible approach to understanding them being a model whose analysis results as the one that explains the most variability of the consequences of the situation.

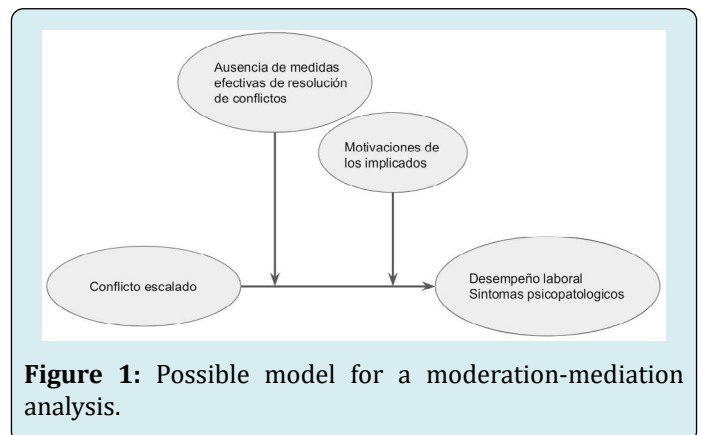


Figure 1: Possible model for a moderation-mediation analysis.

The example in the figure proposes to explain the dependent variables of work performance and psychopathological symptoms by the influence of the escalated conflict, in whose relationship they influence, on the one hand, the absence of effective conflict resolution measures, and on the other, the motivations of those involved.

In any case, we must assume that there are multiple variables present in a conflict process and that their

identification would allow us to correctly detect the intensification dynamics (escalation) and the inverse process (de-escalation), which occurs when destructiveness and interactions are reversed. They have a more cooperative character. Something essential to avoid derailing an effective intervention. Therefore, the purpose of conflict analysis is not to achieve an objective understanding of the facts, but to clarify subjective perceptions in this regard and organize the information obtained through questionnaires, interviews, documentary analysis, etc. The resulting diagnosis makes it possible to focus on relevant aspects of the conflict and, in this way, direct the intervention on essential elements of it.

For this purpose, tools are needed that facilitate us to deconstruct the conflict foundation process, that is, to come to understand it not as an entity but as a process composed of multiple parts that are articulated. For example, following the ideas of Stale Einarsen and Lars Johan Hauge [10], workplace harassment situations can be seen as unresolved interpersonal conflicts that have followed a process of escalation. In this case, in order to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon, we should make explicit the conflict that bullying tries to resolve in an inappropriate way, and this means understanding how people or groups (actors) with the capacity to influence (power) by virtue of their position or capacity (source of power), pursue an objective (interest) and therefore enter into tension-collision with other actors (conflict). Faced with this obstacle, the actors design a set of strategies (coalition, negotiation) using the channels through which power is exercised (systems of formal and informal influence) [11].

For this purpose, the Perceived Interpersonal Conflict Scale (PICS) that Sebastián et al. Developed in 2019 is of special interest. This multidimensional conflict assessment instrument has high reliability and robust validity, both in terms of content in its factorial structure and relational, by bringing together the measurement of relevant dimensions in the conflict processes. PICS makes it possible to analyze and differentiate the characteristics of a conflict process, thereby facilitating an adequate evaluation / intervention. The scale's format (reduced size and expressions that are easy to understand for the working population in general) make it ideal for use in psychosocial evaluations of work situations, together with other instruments and methods for the early detection of harassment situations. work and the prevention of the effects of interpersonal conflicts: work stress, social deterioration, work accidents and, at least indirectly, cardiovascular diseases. The usefulness of this tool is not limited to knowing the perceived problems (obtaining a screening) but can also be used to detect the changes produced after a psychosocial intervention and to analyze groupings of positions within a workplace.

For René Gempp and Serio Chesta [12,13]:

“The purpose of a psychological test is to provide replicable evidence (i.e. “reliable”) that allows making relevant and founded inferences (i.e. “valid”) about the people who answer it. These inferences are obtained from an objective sample of the behavior. In this way, a test makes it possible to use the responses to a reduced set of items (a sample of behavior) to make inferences about the possible universe of behaviors of an individual, in a given field of their psychological functioning (e.g. personality, intelligence, mental health, among others)”.

From this definition of test, brilliantly exposed by Gempp and Chesta, a test like PICS allows offering three types of inferences:

- A diagnosis of the social phenomenon, that is, an evaluation of the interpersonal conflict process in the work situation. This diagnosis will allow us to access an explanation of what happened to date and expectations about the future of the process. The social sphere.
- Based on the above, obtain greater knowledge about the thoughts, perceptions, emotions, feelings and actions of the people involved. The personal sphere.
- Knowledge of the above areas (social and personal) should illustrate the potential effects that a prolonged exposure to the evaluated conflict process would have, both for the health of the people and for the health of the organization. It is about identifying and evaluating the psychosocial risk factor posed by the interpersonal conflict evaluated. The Psychosocial sphere.
- Finally, the knowledge acquired by this set of inferences should be useful to facilitate or integrate solutions that allow the process to be descaled or, at least, to minimize its impact. The framework of the intervention.

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