



2015

Emotions in Conflict Resolution: A New Model of Constructive Conflict

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2015) "Emotions in Conflict Resolution: A New Model of Constructive Conflict," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol10/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Emotions in Conflict Resolution

A New Model of Constructive Conflict



by Emily Ann Warren

Conflict is basic to living, and emotion is fundamental to the emergence and resolution of conflict. Early theoretical approaches to emotion described it in terms of physiological states, but more recent research points to its connection to cognitive appraisal and goal progress. Specifically, emotion is characterized as mediating between cognition and behavior. This review identifies shortcomings of the “emotion as a mediator” approach, including its overemphasis on negative emotions as well as its failure to consider the complicated role of human agency. A new model is proposed that incorporates constrained agency, positive emotion, and cognitive appraisal as components of a feedback loop.



Conflict is basic to human experience and occurs at all levels of society. It ranges from intrapersonal dissonance to interpersonal rifts to civil and world wars. Conflict can be defined as any situation or endeavor in which two or more individuals or parties have beliefs, views, or objectives that appear to be incompatible (see Halperin, Sharvit, & Gross, 2011). As agentic beings capable of founding and maintaining societies for thousands of years, humans are no strangers to conflict. As Galtung (2001) asserts, the fact that we are around at all at this point testifies to a lot of conflict-resolution capacity.

Because we are emotional beings, conflict is rarely, if ever, resolved through simple logic. Much like rhetoricians, psychologists understand that cognition and emotion contribute to conflict (see Lewis, Haviland-Jones, & Barrett, 2008). For Poblet and Casanovas (2007), emotion is the “principal currency” of negotiation and conflict resolution (p.145).

Recently researchers’ interest in conflict has broadened from mere resolution to the notion that conflict can be used constructively at any level (Blumberg, Hare, & Costin, 2006). Current models portray emotion as a mediator between cognition and behavioral outcomes in conflict-resolution attempts. A model of constructive conflict would likely require a focus on positive emotion in conflict resolution in addition to the traditional focus on the management and suppression of negative emotion.

Although it has been acknowledged that emotion plays a role in conflict resolution, the specifics of this role have yet to be articulated. Doing so may benefit from (a) highlighting the positive emotion in conflict and (b) investigating how emotion can be both input and output in a feedback loop involving emotion, cognition, and behavior.

A Brief History of Emotion

Emotion is not easily defined. Kleinginna and Kleinginna (1981) offered this definition:

[Emotion is] a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated by neural-hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labeling processes; (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) lead to behavior that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptive. (p. 355)

Physiological Models of Emotion

Early models of emotion focused primarily on its physiological components. One of the first, the James-Lange theory (James, 1884), proposed that physical sensations in response to stimuli elicit subjective feelings. According to this perspective, when we encounter a frightening stimulus, such as a snake, our muscles tense, our heart races, and we then experience fear subjectively. Nearly half a decade later, Cannon (1927) and Bard (1934) proposed a new theory that physical responses and subjective feelings occur simultaneously in response to a stimulus. Thus, encountering a snake would elicit muscle contractions and feelings of fear at precisely the same moment. Later, Schachter and Singer (1962) offered a different theory. They suggested that emotional experience involves two factors: (a) a physiological response and (b) a cognitive assessment of that response that leads to subjective feelings. Similar to the James-Lange theory, encountering a snake initially leads to physical sensations. However, these may be similar for multiple emotional states. Thus the individual consciously appraises and interprets the situation, resulting in the subjective feeling.

Cognitive Approaches to Emotion

Contemporary approaches to emotion have further emphasized the role of cognition in emotion. The Somatovisceral Afference Model of Emotion (SAME; Cacioppo, Berntson, & Klein, 1992) builds upon the James-Lange and Schachter-Singer theories. It recognizes that physical responses to a stimulus can range from very specific to quite general. The degree of specificity places differential requirements on the cognitive processing that precedes emotion. An encounter with a snake, for instance, would likely require relatively little processing due to the highly specific nature of the physical response, whereas the more general arousal experienced during public speaking may require more extensive processing in order to produce embarrassment rather than enthusiasm or vice versa.

Other recent models have placed greater weight on cognition than on physiology in the causation of subjective feelings. Ellsworth (1991), for example, analyzed the cognitive interpretation of a situation as a series of appraisals, not just one.

Emotion in Conflict Resolution

The role of emotion in conflict resolution has been linked to cognition, as in the cognitive appraisals already described. Yap and Tong (2009) view cognitive appraisal as providing the framework in which the person evaluates and otherwise makes sense of events. Appraisal occurs most often in progress toward a goal (see Bell & Song, 2005; Carver & Scheier, 2000).

Emotion as Mediator: A Linear Approach

The most prominent models of emotion's role in conflict include a process in which cognition leads to emotion, which, in turn, motivates specific behaviors (Bell & Song, 2005). That is, emotions are defined by the cognitive antecedents they, in turn, modify. In risky or high-conflict situations, Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, and Welch (2001)

suggested that emotions mediate the relationship between an individual's cognitive assessment of risk and subsequent behavior. This model has been widely adapted for use in conflict situations.

Nair (2008) has faulted the Lowenstein et al. model for its unidirectionality. Specifically, it neglects the possibility that behavior may be a cause of emotion. Moreover, to the extent that conflict is not invariably linear (Obeidi, Hipel, & Kilgour, 2005), it may follow that cognition, emotion, and behavior affect and are affected by each other.

Managing Negative Emotions: The Best of the Worst

According to the "emotion as a mediator" model, emotion is experienced as the outcome of the appraisal process. Because appraisal in high-conflict situations is rarely positive, conflict research has focused largely on managing negative emotions. Indeed emotions often are considered the "antithesis of rationality" and thus seem to reduce the effectiveness of conflict-resolution techniques (Nair, 2008, p. 367). Particularly in the workplace, conflicts are considered best managed once emotions have been placed aside (Scott, 2008).

As already mentioned, negative emotions garner much attention in conflict analysis and resolution, and can be categorized as "hard" or "soft." Hard emotions include anger, irritation and aggravation. Sadness, hurt, concern, and disappointment are considered soft emotions (Sanford, 2007). Hard emotions increase negative communication, and soft emotions affectively neutralize communication. Thus, resolution consists of moving from hard emotions to soft ones (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). Other conflict research has investigated the "best" hard emotions from which to reach resolution. According to Halperin, Russell, Dweck, and Gross (2011), feelings of anger without hatred lead to increased willingness to compromise. Further, Sinacer et al. (2011) found that threats are an even more effective starting point than anger.

Discussion

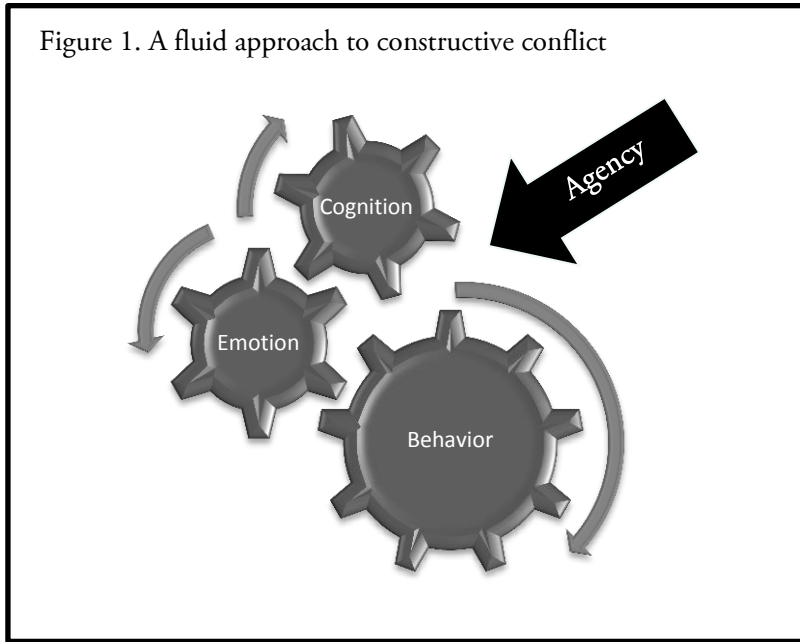
Research in emotion and conflict has produced linear models in which emotion is determined by cognition and produces behavior. Such models have limitations, however. The linear approach doesn't allow for reappraisal nor has it included positive emotion.

Constructive Conflict: A Fluid Approach

Recently, scholars have suggested that conflict can be used constructively in any situation (Blumberg et al., 2006; Coleman, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2012). An essential element of constructive conflict is the ability of parties to reevaluate their initial judgments and incorporate new information into their appraisals (Blumberg et al., 2006). Likewise, conflict transformation, which is a way of moving toward constructive conflict, requires consideration of the underlying emotions (Jameson, Bodtiker, & Linker, 2010; Jameson, Bodtiker, Porch, & Jordan 2010; Yungbluth & Johnson, 2010).

Combining these elements yields a new approach such as that shown in Figure 1. The gear-like model represents a “fluid approach” to constructive conflict that includes cognition, human agency, and the reframing of negative and positive emotions.





Interlocking Gears: Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior

Building on Ellsworth's (1991) finding that emotion requires a series of cognitive judgments, the new model frames cognitive appraisals as events that occur and recur as behavioral decisions are made. Cognitions interact with emotions much like two gears turning together, allowing an individual to assess and reassess their feeling and thinking. As appraisals of both the situation and the individual's response to it recur, alterations can be made in the level and form of cognition, affect, and behavior.

Constrained Agency

Because individual control is required to enable constructive conflict, the model makes a place for human agency, which Slife and Fisher (2000) describe as the notion that, in regard to thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, one has the ability to act otherwise. Research on this concept describes individuals as having a sense of "cognitive

control” over their cognitive and affective experiences (Chiew & Braver, 2010, p. 842). Contrary to the deterministic perspective, the agentic perspective argues that individuals can interrupt pre-established processes with their choices. It is for this reason that the gears in the model are “greased” with agency. Without individual choice, including the initial choice to engage in conflict, the gears eventually come to a halt. In this way, even a decision not to enter into a conflict is a choice with a consequence; just as choosing not to lubricate the gears is a choice to cease their turning. Only with agency does conflict have the prospect of turning constructive.

Human agency is not limitless, however. Though it underwrites the ability to choose one’s actions, one is not always in control of his or her consequences. Additionally, one only has limited command of one’s circumstances. In a very real sense, agency is bounded by the choices of others and the demands of the biophysical world (Sugarman & Sokol, 2012). Thus, the agency within this model is not unlimited, but rather a constrained, bounded form.

Comprehensive Emotion

As previously noted, conflict research has predominantly investigated negative emotions. Recently, however, scholars have called for more research on positive emotions in the conflict process (Nair, 2008) and on their adaptiveness (Kanske & Kotza, 2011). Although previous approaches advocated a move from hard to soft emotions, the fluid model of constructive conflict reframes cognition and emotions in a positive light.

As defined by Brigg (2003), reframing is the act of shifting one’s attitude or orientation. Although this concept may be typically performed by a third party, it is possible for individuals to intervene in their own thought and affect. One example of reframing is forgiveness, which “involves transforming negative thoughts, affect, behavior or

motivations toward the ‘offender’ into positive ones” (Rizkalla, Wertheim, & Hodgson, 2008, p. 1592). Other examples include reframing anger into compassion, frustration into knowledge seeking, and contempt into vulnerability through conscious and persistent cognition and affect decisions. As the realm of emotion expands, so too do the possibilities of reconciliation, resolution, and relationship.

A Hypothetical Case Study of the Fluid Model. Six months ago, Jim and Pam bought a cozy home in a suburban neighborhood. It was their first major purchase as a married couple, and they were excited to finally have a place of their own. Pam had just finished her degree and Jim was still going to school, so finances were tight. One Sunday evening, Pam was in the front yard gardening when Jim came out to discuss bills. Before Jim had a chance to say anything, Pam expressed her desire to plant an apple tree in the front yard. Already frustrated by the state of their finances, Jim quickly said, “No!” He had appraised Pam’s request as selfish and spendthrift, causing him to respond with anger. In response to Jim’s anger, Pam felt that he considered her needs unimportant. She responded with complaints about the excess money Jim spent on eating out.

According to the linear model of conflict, this sequence continues in a cycle that is destructive to both parties and their relationship. When the fluid model is applied, however, the conflict moves from destructive to constructive. When Jim hears Pam’s complaints about the money he spends on food, he begins to realize that perhaps Pam views his spending habits just as selfishly as he views hers. Instead of responding in anger at her accusation, he chooses to listen for more information. Jim asks Pam what it is about his spending that bothers her. As Pam responds, Jim begins to move from anger and frustration to understanding and empathy. He now recognizes that he spends more money on food because it is something he values highly and is

able to explain to Pam the importance he places on flavor and healthful benefits. He then asks her what it is about the apple tree that she values. In considering her answer, Jim is able to realize that Pam values the yard's ambiance and having something to take care of. After understanding each other's positive desires, Pam and Jim are able to discuss how to apportion their income in ways that meet their respective needs. In doing so, they are able to successfully resolve the initial conflict while building skills that advance their relationship.

While the wheels of cognition and emotion continued turning, Jim applied his agency to recognize alternative thoughts and emotions that smoothed the situation and strengthened their relationship. He and Pam were able to turn a potentially destructive conflict into a constructive one.

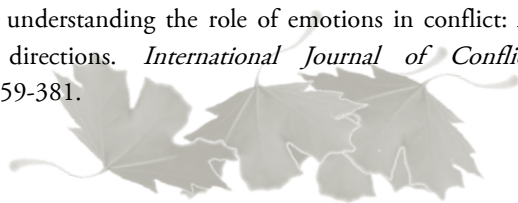
This paper proposes a fluid model of constructive conflict that includes cognitive appraisals and reappraisals, reframing negative emotions, and constrained agency that work together to produce positive outcomes. Future research could examine the role of emotion in framing and reframing conflict, using specific methods for reframing, and identifying the characteristics of conflict situations in which constrained agency plays a critical role in resolution.



References

- Bard, P. (1934). Emotion: I. The neurohumoral basis of emotional reactions. In C. Murchison (Ed.), *Handbook of general experimental psychology* (pp. 264-311). Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.
- Bell, C., & Song, F. (2005). Emotions in the conflict process: An application of the cognitive appraisal model of emotions to conflict management. *International Journal of Conflict Management, 16*(1), 30-54.
- Blumberg, H. H., Hare, A. P., & Costin, A. (2006). *Peace psychology: A comprehensive introduction*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Brigg, M. (2003). Mediation, power, and cultural difference. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly, 20*(3), 287-306.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Berntson, G. G., & Klein, D. J. (1992). What is an emotion? The role of somatovisceral afference, with special emphasis on somatovisceral "illusions." *Review of Personality and Social Psychology, 14*, 63-98.
- Cannon, W. (1927). The James-Lange theory of emotions: A critical examination and an alternative theory. *American Journal of Psychology, 39*, 106-124.
- Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (2000). Origins and functions of positive and negative affect: A control-process view. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Motivational science: Social and personality perspective* (pp. 256-272). New York, NY: Psychological Press.
- Chiew, K. S., & Braver, T. S. (2010). Exploring emotional and cognitive conflict using speeded voluntary facial expressions, *Emotion, 10*(6), 842-854.
- Coleman, P.T. (2012). Psychological components of sustainable peace. *Peace Psychology Book Series, 55*-84.
- Ellsworth, P.C. (1991). Some implications of cognitive appraisal theories of emotion. *International Review of Studies on Emotion, 1*, 143-160.
- Galtung, J. (2001). After violence: reconstruction, reconciliation, resolution: Coping with visible and invisible effects of war and violence. In M. Abu-Nimer (Ed.), *Reconciliation, justice and coexistence*. New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- Greenberg, L. S., & Johnson, S. M. (1988). *Emotionally focused therapy for couples*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

- Halperin, E., Russell, A. G., Dweck, C. S., & Gross, J. J. (2011). Anger, hatred, and the quest for peace: Anger can be constructive in the absence of hatred. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *55*(2), 274-291.
- Halperin, E., Sharvit, K., & Gross, J. J. (2011). Emotion and emotion regulation in intergroup conflict: An appraisal-based framework. In Bar-Tal, D. (Ed.), *Intergroup conflicts and their resolution: A social psychological perspective* (pp. 83-124). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Jacobson, N. S., & Christensen, A. (1996). *Integrative couple therapy: Promoting acceptance and change*. New York, NY: Norton.
- James, W. (1884). What is an emotion? *Mind*, *9*, 188-205.
- Jameson, J. K., Bodtiker, A. M., & Linker, T. (2010). Facilitating conflict transformation: Mediator strategies for eliciting emotional communication in a workplace conflict. *Negotiation Journal*, *26*(1), 25-48.
- Jameson, J. K., Bodtiker, A. M., Porch, D. M., & Jordan, W. J. (2010). Exploring the role of emotion in conflict transformation. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, *27*(2), 167-192.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2012). Restorative justice in the classroom: Necessary roles of cooperative context, constructive conflict, and civic values. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *5*(1), 4-28.
- Kanske, P., & Kotza, S. A. (2011). Positive emotion speeds up conflict processing: ERP responses in an auditory Simon task. *Biological Psychology*, *87*(1), 122-127.
- Kleinginna, P. R., & Kleinginna, A. M. (1981). A categorized list of emotion definitions, with suggestions for a consensual definition. *Motivation and Emotion*, *5*(4), 345-379.
- Lewis, M., Haviland-Jones, J. M., & Barrett, L. F. (2008). *Handbook of emotions* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Loewenstein, G. F., Weber, E. U., Hsee, C. K., & Welch, N. (2001). Risk as feelings. *Psychological Bulletin*, *127*(2), 267-286.
- Nair, N. (2008). Towards understanding the role of emotions in conflict: A review and future directions. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *19*(4), 359-381.



- Obeidi, A., Hipel, K. W., & Kilgour, D. M. (2005). The role of emotions in envisioning outcomes in conflict analysis. *Group Decision and Negotiation*, 14, 481-500.
- Poblet, M., & Casanovas, P. (2007). Emotions in ODR. *International Review of Law Computers & Technology*, 21(2), 145-155.
- Rizkalla, L., Wertheim, E. H., & Hodgson, L. K. (2008). The roles of emotion management and perspective taking in individuals' conflict management styles and disposition to forgive. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 42(6), 1594-1601.
- Sanford, K. (2007). Hard and soft emotion during conflict: Investigating married couples and other relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 14, 65-90.
- Schachter, S., & Singer, J.-E. (1962). Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state. *Psychological Review*, 69, 379-99.
- Scott, G. G. (2008). Take emotion out of conflict resolution: Think about workplace conflicts in a new way. *Training and Development*, 62(2), 84-85.
- Sinaceur, M., Kleef, V., Gerben, A., Nealte, M. A., Adam, H., & Haag, C. (2011). Hot or cold. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(5), 1018-1032.
- Slife, B. D., & Fisher, A. M. (2000). Modern and postmodern approaches to the free will/determinism dilemma in psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 40(1), 80-108.
- Sugarman, J., & Sokol, B. (2012). Human agency and development: An introduction and theoretical sketch. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 30, 1-14.
- Yap, A. J., & Tong, E. M. W. (2009). The appraisal rebound effect: Cognitive appraisals on the rebound. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(9), 195-221.
- Yungbluth, S. C., & Johnson, S. E. (2010). With respect to emotion in the dominion of rationality: Managing conflict through respectful dialogue. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 18, 211-226.