It's All Relational: Blinded or Aided by Our Own Lens?

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Everything is a relationship, or so it may seem, to those of us who study relationships. Groups are made up of relationships. Organizations are made up of groupings of relationships. And so it goes. For better or worse, our academic institutions are comprised of relationships, with some more functional than others. Although the nature of our work is often solitary, we are not alone. Relationships abound, and as such, they must be navigated. But sometimes it can be difficult navigating the professional academic relationship waters.

As scholars of relationships, we are frequently expected to be experts at managing interpersonal issues. As relational "experts", we know all too well the reality of relational interactions: knowing is not doing and complex relational interactions involve myriad variables. And this relational nuance becomes particularly apparent when conflict is present – both at individual and organizational group levels. Put differently, how do relational scholars manage professional relationships using (or not) the "tools of the trade"? Given the parameters of varying role expectations at different types of institutions, how are we enabled or constrained in our options for effectively dealing with both positive and negative relational issues that arise within the academy?

Our thoughts are based on discussions initiated at a recent competitive panel at the National Communication Association's annual conference in Chicago, Illinois. In this piece, we delve even further to examine how varied organizational experiences and approaches to interpersonal relationships are served by various conflict approaches. As participants/authors, we consider a range of organizational roles within the university setting. We represent a variety of institution types, including private and public; small, mid-sized, and large; union and non-union; faith-based and secular; research- and teaching-focused; and serving diverse and homogenized groups of colleagues and students. Our approaches to professional conflict are based in our relational scholarship (which we conceptualize broadly as research, teaching, and service), which comes from the subdisciplines of organizational, interpersonal, media/ted, rhetorical, political, and spiritual theories and research foci.

Setting the Scene

Most relational scholars are familiar with established theories and research-based advice on the *appropriate* and/or *effective* (a key distinction) strategies, styles, and tactics for competently dealing with interpersonal conflict (e.g., Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Therefore, we will not dwell on those tools here. Instead, we focus on new ways to internally reframe our own perspectives as relational researchers, teachers, and practitioners – re-calibrating our lens, so to speak. Ultimately, our hope is that this discussion of relational perspectives and experiences will serve as both an applied thought-provoker and a challenge to "practice what we preach" in the academy. This can obviously help our institutions, departments, and students as we become better relators. But more importantly, it can refresh our own approaches and mindsets, helping us – as scholars of relationships working largely in academia – to renew (in the face of obstacles) our original passion for relational scholarship.

Anyone who teaches or studies basic conflict skills knows that a common tactic for addressing conflict is to first identify its source. However, we also recognize that the apparent *content* is rarely the true obstacle to resolution. Rather, in basic interpersonal relationships, it is typically *identity* and *relational* goals that need to be addressed. Professionally, with multiple personalities and ego-types at play, the issue becomes more complex. Further, ongoing conflict subsumes all of the episodic interactions and can create a patterned, unintentionally complex environment.

As colleagues hired for the same purpose, with presumably equivalent competencies, scholars are supposed to be working toward the goals, vision, and mission of their larger organization. But within that framework, we realistically manage others' personality and psychological issues and circumstantial moods. These situations often lead to "over-the-edge conflict" – conflict that if not truly resolved can destroy a unit's efficacy, our working relationships, and the overall success of a university. In these situations, others observe our ensuing chaos with the infuriating inquiry, "Aren't you supposed to be experts at this sort of thing???"

Getting Back to Basics: Pretending We're Not "Experts"

Perhaps solving conflict is easier or more effective amongst those not aware of interpersonal typologies of basic conflict styles (i.e., based on Blake & Mouton, 1964). Maybe it really is better for non-experts. For relational professionals, our strength as competent interpersonal communicators results in our ability to manage and, unfortunately, to manipulate others – or at the very least, to recognize when/what strategies are being used on us. In these cases, perhaps interpersonal competency should be re-named or at least recognized for what it often is – politicking, manipulation, coercion and/or compliance-gaining.

Close in meaning, these terms are distinguished from "conflict management" by their inherent ethics. Understanding our own actual (whether helpful and/or selfish) interpersonal goals may aid us in ethically using our skills, while simultaneously strategically choosing strategies to do our job of making our organizations function. How can (and should?) we use this interpersonal competency/manipulation ability to accomplish the politics necessary to hold a department (or institution) together?

Dealing with structural issues.

Clearly, in dealing with the activities surrounding education, we look to minimize the obstacles, make the tasks as approachable and realistic as possible, and solve potential problems in the most effective and humane way. But difficulties emerge (and so have different solutions) at different levels: structural and personal. Some difficulties are the result of the structure: curriculum requirements, scheduling, course expectations, prerequisites, advising, and outside demands. When the system is deficient, overly complicated, too demanding or too lax, attempts at reform and revision of the structure are appropriate and helpful.

Merely recognizing the difference between structural issues/discourse-level conflicts and inadequate performances/personal-level conflicts can help us respond appropriately. Responding accordingly encourages two things. First, it makes clear that it is our responsibility to look carefully at systems, students, faculty, and resources and recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and efforts. Second, it is a mistake and unfair to attempt to solve a performance problem by "fixing" a system which works well enough for those who do participate in it. Such adjustments often result in unnecessary and onerous "corrections" for everyone to attempt to compensate for the failure of a few who usually will not respond to new structures any better than the old.

Dealing with hostage-takers.

Sometimes people simply do not do their jobs, and fail to fulfill their professional obligations; this is a situation quite different from structural difficulties. Someone who does not handle conflict situations competently can drain the passion, energy, and desire to work together from everyone in the department. We know that positivity and control perceptions directly affect motivation to accomplish goals (Haase, Poulin, & Heckhausen, 2012). Essentially, one toxic person can hold an entire department hostage. Departments that function primarily using compromise tend to not make the best decisions and may be overly cautious about presenting ideas, vote against poor ideas in order to avoid competition, and to help others not feel bad. The end result is poor decisions, prolonged conflict, and an overall dysfunction. In ongoing conflict, just as with serial arguments in couples (e.g., Bevan, 2014), it is the other party (and his or her role; Rahim, 1986) who predominantly affects our perceived likelihood of resolving a conflict.

No one is more responsible – perhaps unofficially and unfairly – for dealing with these issues than academic leader/s. Among us, we have personally served as department chairs; grievance officers; college- and university-level administrators; and chairs of curriculum, research, grants/funding, oversight, contract bargaining, and disciplinary committees for students and fellow faculty. Thus, we know that even when the conflict is caused and/or perpetuated by the communication of others, those in positions of authority (e.g., relationship scholars/departments or chairs) are the ones seen as affecting the climate (Porter, Wrench, & Hoskinson, 2007) or failing to resolve the conflict.

Although experienced at a small, private university, the following brief narrative reflection highlights themes common to all of us: face-needs, personal versus private goals, lack of administrative support or of clear institutional parameters for resolution, and role of organizational identity strain via community versus company.

> *Our department's Chair had been in that role for over seven years and had not been what many of us considered an effective chair. At the time, we were in no hurry to change leadership because many of us were pursuing our own research, personal lives, and faced with whether or not it was appropriate to call our Chair to accountability.*
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> *At our university, there are varying ideas on what conflict should look like, whether or not it is appropriate for a professional to engage in conflict among faculty members (especially within his/her own department), whether or not we should support and enable the person to help overcome any involved personal issues, and at what point it is more important to focus on a professional relationship to the exclusion of an*

interpersonal relationship. There are high expectations for promoting a "community" atmosphere. For further context, our department was faced with not growing; we were stagnant and there was frustration at administrative levels that we had been at a standstill for 7+ years. The unhealthy result was that back-channeling began to occur. Obviously, this was detrimental to the working atmosphere, as trust deteriorated and coalitions formed.

Although the decision was made by 80% of department members that it was time to elect a new Chair, it seemed there was never an opportunity presented to reassess or suggest new leadership. We were all concerned about hurting this person's feelings and operating within an organizational framework stressing community and "good relations." Our communal avoidance held our department hostage, such that overall satisfaction and morale were at all-time lows.

Administration was not helpful as they believe faculty should settle their own conflicts within departments and do not often want to interfere. However, the situation in our department had become so dire that the Dean decided that we needed to bring in a mediator who would interview all members of the department to hear the different sides of the story. Faculty interviewed by the mediator made it worse, as they were not willing to undertake this task, felt they really had no choice but to be involved, did not trust that their discussion would be kept confidential, and were concerned about not being understood. The results of the very time-consuming process of mediation alienated us even deeper and our lack of trust with each other grew deeper still."

As is often the case in settings where academics believe they "know better" than outsiders, the mediation-goal of healing the department can actually create even more hurt feelings and anger, resulting in delay of an ability to even address the issue (due to academic calendars) for yet another semester. Years can pass while a department is impacted by anger and/or yelling, snide comments and sarcasm, with department members bewildered and "held hostage" by the behaviors of mere individuals.

As relationship-professionals, we are taught – and teach our students – to deal with conflict in ways that assume all parties are relationship norm-following adults. What do we do when they are not (e.g., as in Lakey & Rhodes, 2015)? Outside of a setting where we personally treat/counsel that individual, is it really our job to handle conflict with people who do not follow the "rules" of basic interpersonal decency? We are used to being told to "act professionally" and accommodate diverse individuals and styles. But what happens when "diversity" is used to cover a personal need for counseling, treatment, or skills-training? Reporting to authorities (e.g., Human Resources, Administration) that someone "needs" help to deal with his or her own issues (when seen as detrimental to the health of the department) can potentially result in allegations of discrimination or lawsuits. In academia, help-seeking too often results in victim-blaming; bringing problems to the attention of administrators can threaten the credibility of the competent departmental members.

Whereas conflicts at a structural level, focused on the discourse of an issue, can be procedurally addressed, personal-level conflicts are often housed in the language of discourse. An individual's problems – whether treatable through vacation, intense counseling, or finding a new job – can be communicated in the otherwise-valid discourse of "department inequity," "disenfranchisement," or "injustice." Far from being solvable as *identity*- or *relational*-conflict goals otherwise taught as solvable in an interpersonal conflict, the presence of true personal-level goals in a scholarly environment that values individual diversity make navigating that conflict much more difficult.

In academia, most of us do not work in an environment where problematic individuals easily (if ever) have their employment terminated. Therefore, if we continue working (whether by choice or through lack of other options) with these individuals, we must learn how to personally survive the seemingly uninhabitable departmental waters.

Ancient Approaches to Old Problems: Saving Ourselves From Drowning

One of the first things we teach our students is that conflict is not bad and in many cases can be incredibly constructive; it is how we manage it that

matters. Of course, those of us who are honest with our students then note that "it's easier said than done." A basic premise of conflict theory is that conflict is inevitable and not always solvable, let alone manageable. This is because conflict is never solely about what is on the surface, or content issues. Rather, identity and relational issues are almost always creating the waves. Thus, when working through professional or institutional conflict, it is important to remember that we often operate from incommensurate social realities (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

As noted previously, assuming everyone is working at the same "level" can not only hinder conflict management for all, but can begin to affect us personally – even those of us dealing with it "constructively" as we were taught. In these situations, it may be helpful to consider Eastern approaches to relational communication, which offer a useful lens for managing this incommensurability. Whereas in the West, we commonly focus on the cause/content of the problem, Eastern wisdom suggests "cause and effect emerge clearly at the same time" (Masunaga, 1975, p. 8), as illustrated with this Zen koan,

> *Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat and told the monks: "If any of you say a good word, you can save the cat."*
>
> *No one answered. So Nansen boldly cut the cat in two pieces.*
>
> *That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him about this. Joshu removed his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out.*
>
> *Nansen said: "If you had been there, you could have saved the cat."*
>
> -Nansen Cuts the Cat in Two (Reps, 2009, p. 21)

Using this story as a model for managing conflict directly challenges us about using the same old tools to solve the same old problem. Merely arguing about something is not a meaningful way to resolve an argument, which is what the monks are depicted as doing. Joshu realizes this and engages in a meta-perspective that does not use words to argue a position. His actions demonstrate the recognition that arguments cannot be won by engaging directly in a conflict; it calls for different, new, and unexpected responses.

Thus, merely re-creating interactional, or even institutional, norms will not resolve problems. Although it is not one of the Western-valued conflict styles, because it is not deeply rooted in the individual defenses of the ego, letting go of the desire to win an argument and taking a meta-perspective can be a personally useful way of managing conflict. If the individual need to win an argument or be right is limited, it may even serve to decrease future conflict. As Chuang Tzu's, *The Empty Boat*, indicates:

> *If a man is crossing a river*
> *And an empty boat collides with his own skiff,*
> *Even though he be a bad-tempered man*
> *He will not become very angry.*
> *But if he sees a man in the boat,*
> *He will shout at him to steer clear.*
> *If the shout is not heard, he will shout again,*
> *And yet again, and begin cursing.*
> *And all because there is somebody in the boat.*
> *Yet if the boat were empty.*
> *He would not be shouting, and not angry. If you can empty your own boat*
> *Crossing the river of the world,*
> *No one will oppose you,*
> *No one will seek to harm you.*

Ultimately, we all know that our own desires to preserve identity and face-needs are central to conflict (e.g., Willer & Soliz, 2010); our sense of self is inherent in conflict. We live "in the midst of causation from which [we] cannot escape even for a moment; nevertheless, [we] can live from moment to moment in such a way that these moments are the fulfilled moments" or conflict-free interaction (Kim, 1975, p. 285). Further, allowing (or forcing) ourselves to move on, or to forgive our own mistakes (e.g., see Liao & Wei, 2015), can aid in the resolution of conflict, if only to make the experience (if not the conflict itself) manageable in work contexts. As difficult as it may be, when the situation seems untenable, sometimes we need to remember that there is no one on the productive-work boat and we must float on, or otherwise sink.

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