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AND INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**

Robert C. Ziller

**A Technical Report
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ABSTRACT

A social psychological theory of self-other orientation provides the basis of a theory of interpersonal conflict and aggression. It is assumed that conflict devolves to aggression toward self or other under conditions of reduction in self esteem and social interest, and the development of an unchanging self centered theory of behavior. Principles of conflict control are discussed in relation to group characteristics (open-closed groups, presence of a third person, problem-solving norms, and power differential between members), communication processes (formal-informal communication, verbal-nonverbal communication, and timing), and the complexity of task demands.

A THEORY OF
SELF-OTHER ORIENTATION AND INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Robert C. Ziller
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The essence of social psychological theories of behavior is the interrelationship of the self and significant others. A condition of conflict exists when the relationship between self and Other is such that the theory of behavior of the self is perceived as incompatible with the theory of behavior of the Other and the continuity of the self system is threatened. It is assumed that the basis of the conflict may be found in the self-other orientations of the parties involved, and that the resolution of the conflict involves the restructuring of these self-other perceptions.

The self-other perceptions that are crucial in terms of interpersonal relationships include self esteem, social interest, and self centrality. Together these form the fundamental components of the self system. The self system is presumed to be an "apperceptive mass," a residual or abstraction of serial events which facilitates prediction of future events involving the self. The Other is a generalization for selected significant persons in the person's life space.

Self esteem is the component of the self system concerning the individual's perception of his worth within a social context. The individual holds a hierarchical mapping of himself with regard to a set of significant others. He locates the self in a position above some and below Others. In order to predict one's own social behavior, it is useful to hold some overall estimate of one's opinions and abilities in relation to the opinions and abilities of Others (Festinger, 1954).

It is further proposed that self esteem is that component of the self system which regulates the extent to which the self system is maintained under conditions of strain, such as during the processing of new information relative to the self. Thus, for example, either positive or negative evaluations do not evoke immediate, corresponding action by the individual with high self esteem. New information is examined in terms of its relevance and meaning for the self system. In this way, the organism is somewhat insulated from the environment or is not completely subject to environmental contingencies.

Persons with low self esteem, on the other hand, do not possess a well-developed buffer for evaluative stimuli. The individual's behavior is directly linked to environmental circumstances and thereby is inclined toward oscillation or inconsistency. In response to this inconsistent behavior, the Other also behaves inconsistently, thereby contributing to the low self esteem individuals' perception of instability and to his separation from Others.

The second crucial component of the self system is social interest, the perception of the inclusion of the self with Others as opposed to being apart from Others. Inclusion involves a willingness to be subject to the field of forces generated among Others and the self. The self guidance system associated with self esteem must be reconciled with the group guidance system or group norms. There is an inherent conflict between the self guidance system and the guidance system of the Other. The manner in which this inherent conflict between self and Other is resolved is presumed to be the essence of style in interpersonal relations.

The reconciliation of self and Other is also the essence of the socialization process. Usually socialization is discussed in terms of the polar needs for dependence and independence (Adler, 1927; Rank, 1936; Ausubel, 1952; Levy, 1955; Erikson, 1959; Harvey, Hunt & Schroder, 1961; Rotter, 1966). Inherently, the socialization process involves conflict between the satisfaction of individual and group needs. There are advantages with regard to each of the polar behaviors under varying conditions of difficulty and resulting successes and failures. It is sometimes comforting to rely on the group and to lose one's identity within the group. At other times it is frustrating to be compelled to act in unison or interdependently. The potential for conflict between self and Other is emphasized throughout these theoretical approaches, but the process of reconciliation is rarely discussed.

The potential conflict between independence and dependence may be translated into Self-Other Orientation Theory (Ziller, Long, Ramana, & Reddy, 1967; Ziller, 1967) using the constructs of self esteem and social interest. It is assumed here that conflict management skills are crucial in the reconciliation of self and Other. The inability to maintain a degree of stability in order to permit adaptation processes to evolve is assumed to stem from inadequate self and social guidance systems (low self esteem and social interest) which, in turn, lead to withdrawal (high self centrality).

An individual with low self esteem prematurely withdraws from an exchange of views when his own beliefs and those of a group of which he is a member are in conflict. On the other hand, persons with high self esteem and high social interest are capable of a more extended

exchange of views between self and Other under conditions of conflict. Conflict is neither threatening to self esteem nor group membership. Indeed, persons with high self esteem and social interest use conflict as a means of developing and maintaining a viable guidance system involving self and Other.

McNeil (1959) dramatizes the relationship between self esteem and conflict in the following analogy: "Having an ace up one's sleeve, while dangerous in some social circles, would make the fall of the cards less frustrating and less an occasion for anger (p. 206)." The relationship between self esteem and aggression has also been examined in a laboratory setting where it was noted that the number of aggressive responses made by a subject tends to increase as the tempo of insulting remarks is increased (McClelland & Apecella, 1945). At the international level, Levi (1960) lists ego fulfillment or the need for prestige as one of the four basic causes of war. Similarly, Deutsch & Kraus (1960), Bullough (1963), and Rosecrance (1963) indicate that a national threat is mediated primarily by concern over loss of face or self esteem.

Underlying the self-other orientation approach to conflict is the assumption that a conflict among theories of behavior challenges the fundamental predictive framework of the individual, raises doubt upon past performance and disinhibits the threat reaction. The threat of disorganization is further exacerbated by the search for substitute behaviors which arouses anxiety because search behavior is usually unsystematic and has a high probability of failure (Mandler, 1964).

The threat of disorganization is perceived to be greatest for persons with low self esteem whose guidance framework is already unreliable (Mossman & Ziller, 1967). Persons with low self esteem have little assurance that their system of behavior can be maintained under conditions of conflict with the other's system of behavior. A reconciliation involving both parties is not usually perceived as an alternative by persons with low self esteem.

Boulding (1957) proposes that the less "sensitive" the parties in conflict, the less likely the hostility of one increases at each level of hostility of the other, and the more likely is a balance-of-power solution to be found. This suggests that persons with high self esteem absorb hostility rather than transforming it to a higher level of intensity.

As has already been suggested, one of the most frequently used strategies for conflict control is avoidance (Boulding, 1962). One form of avoidance is self centrality (Ziller, 1967; Ziller, Long, Ramana, & Reddy, 1967). Self Centrality is defined as the perception of the social environment largely from the point of view of the perceiver rather than from the point of view of significant others. Thus, Adler (1927) describes the self centrality of the neurotic who thinks with idiosyncratic ideas, assumptions and values which do not correspond with the ideas of other people.

In terms of the Self-Other Orientation Theory presented here, Adler appears to be describing a guidance system which is self contained, involuted, internally consistent, closed and designed to be adaptive in

only a narrow range of situations. The frame of reference is internal. The comparison process reduces to an analysis of the consistency between past and present behavior.

Self centrality is adaptive, but only in a narrow range of circumstances and within a limited range of time. In the process of partially resolving an immediate press through withdrawal, the individual's development of a theory of behavior is prematurely fixated and does not incorporate mechanisms for change or adaptations. In contrast, Mudd & Taubin (1967) describe the characteristics of families who adequately regulate conflict as "autonomous without being isolated, community oriented but not compulsively conforming (p. 59)." In terms of the present framework these families may be said to have high social interest. They are engaged with the community.

It will be recognized that the underlying assumptions of the self-other orientation framework is that optimal adaptation can be approached only by persons whose theory of behavior is renewed by continuous modification through exchanges with individuals holding other theories of behavior. It is also assumed that the social universe is too complex to develop a complete perceptual-behavior system which is optimally adaptive across time and social conditions. Conflict, then, is seen as a necessary process of adaptation.

If there is some way the individual is excluded from membership in a meaningful group, opportunities for comparison of behavior theories are limited. As a result, over time, a private behavior theory will become increasingly idiosyncratic and incompatible with the behavior

theories of Others. Moreover, skills in conflict regulations and utilization will have little opportunity to develop. As a further consequence, the individual will receive negative reinforcement from significant Others whose behavior theories differ leading to lower self esteem and further exclusion and increased self centrality. This cyclical degenerative process results in a triadic pattern of self-other orientation which is associated with the sociological concept of alienation. The triadic pattern of alienation (Ziller, 1967) is described as low self esteem, low social interest, and high self centrality. Previous research (Ziller, 1967) has shown that the alienation syndrome describes behavior problem children, neuropsychiatric patients, and to some extent, the aging and the American Negro.

In the proposed triadic pattern of self-other orientation, social interest is presumed to be the most critical component, albeit, in interaction with self esteem and self centrality. In becoming separated from or being excluded by Others, the bipolar correction system evolving from the behavior theories of self and the theories of other persons and involving skills of conflict utilization and control is disrupted, and the cyclical degenerative alienation process may be initiated. The disruption of the exchange between self and Other behavior systems through exclusion is assumed to precipitate the alienation syndrome. Exclusion, then, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The individual is excluded because he is different, and the process of exclusion leads to the development of differences, thereby justifying the original basis for exclusion.

Somewhere in the midst of the process of separation and exclusion, a point of inflexion is reached where conflict phases into aggression. Here the destructive potential of conflict is realized. It is at this point that the possibility of reconciling conflicting behavioral systems is abandoned. Self and Other are categorized as separate units and are no longer perceived as associated elements in the same social field (low social interest). At this juncture, the exchange ceases between disjunctive behavior systems. No alternatives appear possible. Modification of the Other's behavior system is rejected, and modification of the self system, appears less advantageous than separation.

Furthermore, the refusal of the Other to change may be interpreted as a low evaluation of the self system. In order to preserve the self system, separation is again a high probability response. Aggression is an accompanying high probability response to the perceived low evaluation of the self system by the Other. Thus, although a reduction in social exchange is the point of inflexion of conflict and aggression, the threat to self esteem is the most crucial cue for aggression.

The refusal of the Other to accept aspects of the self guidance system deemed essential for self maintenance is perceived as a demand for complete dependence on the guidance system of the Other and the abandonment of self continuity. Separation from the Other eliminates the alternative of loss of continuity, but the separation must be made acceptable to the self.

Aggression directed toward the Other and toward the self are presumed to be the two most frequently used equilibrating devices. By devaluating the guidance system of the Other, separation is justified. Similarly, by devaluating the self, loss of inclusion is again justified. Both approaches result in responses from the Other which reinforce the perception of the low valuation of the self or the Other, and the separation is not only assured but sharpened until it is unlikely that the two parties involved will be threatened by association with each other.

The intensity of aggression is a function of the strength of the original association, the ease of separation, the number of associations with other persons, and the extent to which self evaluation is dependent upon the association with the Other. In terms of Self-Other Orientation Theory, it is hypothesized that aggressive potential is highest under conditions where the separation follows initial high social interest between self and Other and low self esteem of both parties. For example, according to this framework, the aphorism "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," may be more accurately (and cacophoniously) written as "Hell hath no fury like a woman with low self esteem and no other social attachments, scorned."

Against the background of the conflict-aggression framework presented here, the crucial elements for the regulation of conflict and avoidance of aggression are those which lead to the continuation of exchange between the guidance systems of self and Others. These elements are self esteem and social interest. It would appear, however, that alternatives to conflict regulation norms, such as aggression, are more available in the response hierarchy. As opposed to aggression, conflict regulation

skills requires learning by both members in interaction. Learning of these skills is necessarily complex, and models for social learning are not as readily available as models for aggression. It is proposed that aggression can be avoided and exchange maintained to the extent that the Other's behavior permits the operation, in the main, of the self guidance system within a social field including self and Other.

Social interest and self esteem are generated or degenerate in relation to various group characteristics (open-closed, presence of a third party, problem-solving norms, and power differential among members), communication processes (formal-informal, verbal-non-verbal, and time lag of response), and the complexity of the task requirements.

Self esteem and social interest are more subject to group forces under group conditions where the membership is unchanging (closed group conditions) as opposed to conditions where membership is in a constant state of flux. In a closed group, the self system is inextricably tied to the group, and a denigrating act by the other presents an inescapable obstacle to the continuity of behavior. Thus, in a closed group, the perception of threat to the self system following an attack by another is more severe, and aggressive concomitants may be expected to be more violent since there are reduced opportunities to balance the negative forces through associations with persons outside the group.

On the other hand, members of a closed group have more time, continuity, and commitment to the group to develop decision making norms which include conflict management methods. For example, in closed groups as

opposed to closed groups, a norm may be established to avoid attacks on the Other which are irrevocable and which may permanently separate the parties involved. Similarly, norms of rewarding apology and pardon may be learned and remembered more readily by closed groups.

In general, it is proposed that open groups incur and sustain conflict more easily than closed groups. Studies in which open groups show greater resistance to influence (Gerard & Rotter, 1961; Ziller, Zeigler, Gregor, Styskal, & Tognoli, 1967) may be interpreted as supporting this proposition. A change in group membership is perhaps less complex in its demands upon the opposing parties than is aggression and thus may be presumed to be a competing response.

The perception of a third party in relation to self and Other under conditions of conflict between two parties has not been studied experimentally. If the third person is a neutral, however, there is evidence that he is perceived by the disputants as representing public opinion. As a result, the opposing parties contest for the support of the neutral, and the outcome is perceived as a reflection of their relative status (Ziller, Zeigler, Gregor, Styskal, & Tognoli, 1967).

The presence of a third party may also reduce the power differential between two opposing parties. Even the neutral may be perceived by the disputants as only momentarily non-influenced and as a potential member of a coalition with either of the disputants. This potential coalition may caution the more powerful member against taking undue advantage of his position in the process of conflict resolution. Thus, when a third

person is witness to a dispute, the member with less power is not entirely subject to the force field of self and Other. In this sense, the neutral renders the group open.

The presence of a third person also introduces the norms of an overriding organization, provides a third more universal point of reference and reduces the significance of the individual guidance systems. At a more general level, the introduction of a third person introduces greater complexity, or at the very least, more degrees of freedom. For example, the self esteem of a party who is required to make a concession may be maintained by making the concession in the name of the third person rather than directly to his opponent.

Three aspects of communication have relevance for maintenance of the self esteem of the conflicting parties: verbal-nonverbal communication, formal-informal communication, and timing. As opposed to verbal communication, nonverbal communication is less denotative and requires greater participation by the receiver both for the observation and interpretation of the message. A nonverbal message may be initiated or ignored with less risk because the self esteem of both parties is not in jeopardy. For example, a parent recognizing that a child is on the threshold of some transgression, may snap fingers or simply cough in order to give pause and permit the child to reconsider the intended act. In contrast to a peremptory remark from the parent such as "don't do that," the less denotative communication is less offensive and less likely to produce an ego defensive act of aggression. Thus again, under conditions of a power differential, the nonverbal approach may be particularly useful for maintaining the social

relationship and the self esteem of both parties to minimize power differential, maintain self esteem, and control conflict.

High verbal ability may serve a similar function. The person with high verbal ability is capable of sending a more complex yet more differentiated and perhaps more abstract message which incorporates the elements of opposing arguments and presents a grey area for possible conciliation. A wider number of points for bargaining is presented, exchange is facilitated, and separation is avoided. In the process of exchange self esteem and social interest are maintained.

Less denotative messages are also more difficult to record, so the meaning must evolve from exchanges between opposing parties, thereby, by necessity, maintaining the social relationship. In general, it is proposed that informal as opposed to formal agreements between parties are less subject to group disintegrating challenges between members. The less formal agreements leave open the opportunity for additional exchanges in the face of new information or changing conditions. A formal agreement attempts to stabilize the relationship, but often leads to retarding the growth of the relationship by obviating the need for continuous exchange. A formal arrangement tends to lead to separation by removing the requirement of exchange.

One of the most neglected yet most crucial aspects of communication under conditions of conflict concerns the timing of interpersonal responses. Three considerations are critical. First, the delay or speed of response is itself a message or, at least, may be perceived as such by both the self and Other. Second, timing of a response is a ritual which is not circum-

vented with impunity. Finally, under conditions of conflict where behavior change is required, change in the self concept is involved, and resistance to change in the self concept is inversely related to the time demands.

A delay in the acceptance of an offer from one of two disputants may be interpreted as reluctance to accept the offer, or as an affront to the person making the offer. From the point of view of the person to whom the offer is made, a delay in response for whatever reasons may, in itself present an autonomous stimulus to which the person may respond. For example, a delay, even a short delay, in response to someone in distress may be perceived as embarrassing to the delayer (a response to delay as a stimulus), causing further delay, further embarrassment, and prolonged inaction.

Under some conditions, a rapid response may halt movement toward aggression or may prevent further aggression. For example, if the response to an unwarranted act of aggression by the Other is made as soon as it is seen that a retraction is not immediately forthcoming, immediate counter-action may prevent the rigid mechanism of dissonance reduction. If no immediate response is made by the victim, the aggressor may soon find some way of justifying the aggressive act.

A final consideration of communication timing is the appropriate preparation of the other person for approaching events (see Ruesch, 1957, p.49). A rapid response which indicates a sharp change in the theory of personal behavior of the Other may, under some conditions, signal a reevaluation of past behavior of the self in an attempt to reestablish continuity. If

rapid change by the one is perceived by the Other as correcting a burdensome imbalance in the relationship borne by the Other (an increase in wages, changes in birth control laws and laws of celibacy, racial integration, self government), unless the corrective action is preceded by a ritual of decision making which dramatizes the agony of reappraisal and reaffirms the core guiding principles of the person initiating the change, the change may be greeted with aggression rather than gratitude. Here the delay permits an adjustment in the self concept of both parties, and sources of aggression are dissipated (see Douglas, 1957).

A final consideration involving the self esteem and social interest of disputing parties includes the complexity of the task demands. Earlier the increase in complexity of the interpersonal relationships resulting from the addition of a third member was assumed to provide additional means for the maintenance of self esteem. An extension of this approach is the proposition that complexity of the outcome of interaction (reflecting task demands) permits the maintenance of the self esteem of both parties to the dispute and the continuation of their self guidance systems. Under conditions of a single unpartialed outcome, the relative advantage of each of the parties is patent and may lead to a winner-loser labelling of the parties with regard to the outcome. Under more complex outcomes such as in the settlement of wage disputes where large numbers of issues are settled in addition to hourly rate of pay, each party may perceive the outcome as favorable in several respects, thereby buttressing the self system. Thus, an increase in the span of issues may be a defense mechanism designed to protect the self system against the contingencies of conflict resolution.

Boulding (1957) suggests that "widening the agenda" is a function of the third party; that is, the third party is expected to help avoid an impasse by introducing new variables for consideration. In the present framework, "widening the agenda" may be subsumed under the concept of increasing the complexity of the task demands and the outcome.

The primary objective of all the aforementioned conflict regulation procedures and principles is the maintenance of the mutual perception of the advantages of continuing the exchange between the opposing parties. Conflict indicates, at the very least, expectations of some advantage for continued association. With regard to industrial conflict, for example, Dubin (1957) states: "Union-management relations, for all the conflict involved in them, become a web, entangling and committing the parties to the perpetuation of the relationship (p. 191)." Actions by either party which lower the self esteem of the other and threaten the dissolution of the self-other association are assumed to lead to an involuted self system which, in turn, is associated with aggression against self or Other. The framework was described primarily with regard to the dyad or within small groups, but a general theory of conflict is suggested.

Footnotes

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