"System in conflict": Analysis of the conflict theory within a system

Nilda Susana Gorvein

Resumen

Las/os profesionales que trabajan como operadores de conflictos, entre ellos las personas mediadoras, deberían tener una formación sistémica que les permitiera tener una visión amplificada del sistema sobre el cual deben actuar no excluyéndose del mismo. Como facilitadores de la comunicación entre las partes debemos tener presente el contexto donde el conflicto se produjo y contrastarlo con el contexto donde el conflicto probablemente se resolverá en el cual, necesariamente, estará nuestra intervención como terceros en ese conflicto. El siguiente artículo nos aporta nuevas perspectivas desde donde realizar un análisis del conflicto buscando mejores herramientas de trabajo para intervenir en el campo de la resolución pacífica de conflictos.

Abstract

Professionals operating in conflicts, including mediators, require systemic training that provides them with a broad perspective of the system in which they have to act, including them themselves. As communication facilitators between the parties, we have to be aware of the context in which the conflict takes place and contrast that with the context in which the conflict would probably be resolved, which obviously includes our intervention as third parties to the conflict. The article offers new perspectives on how to analyse conflict and searches for better tools to work with in the field of peaceful conflict resolution.

NILDA SUSANA GORVEIN

Lawyer specialized in Family Law, Family Therapist, and Family Mediator.
Researcher and Professor in Argentinian and Spanish Universities.
gorvein4@gmail.com

OBJECTIVES

This work's purpose is to connect the big issues of the Conflict Theory to other disciplines that offer a range of different alternatives and strategies for a better administration and management of conflicts.

We will mainly focus on the multi-object conflicts, i.e. those genetically implying more than one cause for their origin.

INTRODUCTION

1) We will take as a basis that every conflict develops, always, *within a system* and that the conflict we are going to analyze occurs in an interpersonal system, basically in human interactions.

Therefore, the first question that arises is: what is a system? We say that a "system" is any unit including a feedbacking structure and, therefore, being able to process information. Those of us agreeing with Systemics know that our task means working with a new social unit that can be represented by a family, a company or any other kind of social organization.

Following Gregory Bateson, this line of thought necessarily takes us to a new Epistemology, i.e. a new way of thinking what a mind is and a new Ontology, in other words, it is a new place for man in the world.

Starting from this new way of visualizing the world, we could make a difference between those who think:

a) in terms of "systems", and other who think

b) in terms of CAUSE and EFFECT linear sequences.

2) The next issue to analyze is that all conflicts occur in a specific context. To give a wider definition, we could talk about different scenes were the conflict takes place.

This is useful to analyze the reality phenomena, but not isolated from the context where they emerge. In line with this Watzlawick says: "A phenomenon will seem to be inexplicable unless the observation margin is not wide enough so as to include the context in which such conflict takes place."[1]

The basic rule of the System Theory is that if we intend to understand a phenomenon, expression or conflict, we must look at it within the context of the whole circuits being relevant to that phenomenon.

3) On the other hand, conflict occurs in the *interpersonal relationships,* which stand for an interaction between all the system's members.

What we understand here as "interaction" is a series of messages exchanged between people. In this sense, the conflict issue is interweaving with communication, the different languages, and the behaviours generated by those interactions.

4) Besides, every conflict has a *purpose*, which may appear explicitly or implicitly to the observer.[2] This issue is linked to the Perceptions Theory.

5) Moreover, the conflict has a *history*, and so does the system in which it was generated and that goes on evolving in parallel. Both grow and develop at the same time and in the same space. But, as observers of these phenomena, we know that very often the conflict had been generated at the beginning of history

1   Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson: "Teoría de la Comunicación Humana", Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1986.

2   Watzlawick and Krieg: "El ojo del observador", Editorial Gedisa, Barcelona, 1994.

and its actors ignore it or, at least, are not aware about that. This history must be studied by the intervening operator, no matter if he is Negotiator or Mediator, in order to better understand and approach the case.

History can be detected at an early stage, when people experience their unease but they still do not know what and who causes it.

Later on, the cause may appear more clearly and, at that moment, it will be possible to make someone responsible for the existing conflict. From this last stage we can quickly go to the complaint stage, since we are aware of who is causing it. Usually, the complaint does not have a satisfactory answer from the one receiving it and it is here where the conflict really forms for the parties.

6) The conflict takes place in a *scene* that we can call context. In this context the parties are the actors.

7) The judiciary system includes the use of force and of threatens to have the rules respected. The judiciary system does not solve the conflicts, a large amount of them remains outside the system, meaning with this that the system does not answer to all the conflicts. Very often, the answer suggested by the judiciary system is or generates the problem. Thinking in these terms means saying that "the solution is the problem".[3] In line with Harvard's thought model, we would say that thinking about a conflict must not be, at least for the intervening operator, a troublesome thought.

In the interpersonal relationships of the different systems where a conflict generally appears we can also find power, threaten, and force, which have a strong influence on the conflict's evolution.

8) When we think about the conflict as a process and we analyse it as if we were in a laboratory, we are in a *meta-communicational* position, we talk about the conflict but we do not take part in it.

9) When we think and talk about the conflict and we put ourselves *within the scene* where it occurs, or just where we are intervening, our objectivity is compromised due to our being included in the new system we have formed. Mediation is an example of this.

CONFLICT AND SYSTEM OR SYSTEM IN CONFLICT?

We mentioned at the beginning that all conflicts occur within a system made up of actors that play within a specific scene. The system we talk about is characterized by its circularity.

A system is circular when one of its elements is affected and it has consequences on the rest of elements comprising it and on the running or dynamics typical from that system.

To give a practical example, when we talk about a family system, we could ask ourselves whether the communication in a given family is pathological because one of its members is psychotic or, rather, one of the members is psychotic because the communication is pathological.[4]

If we enlarge this concept, it could be perfectly applied to organizations.

The circularity, Von Foerster says, is a characteristic of the systems with feedback circuits.

The conflict relationships are feedback systems and, therefore, they are circular. Conflicts occur in the social and human relationships where circularity prevails and where language intervenes.

As a practical example, we could say that we must leave the notion that A determines B or that B is the cause of A, which puts us in a totally linear reading. The rule system constantly offers examples of this because it works with the cause-effect model. We could conclude that a linear reading is, in principle, incomplete and deficient.

It would be advisable then to turn to the notion that when A determines B is because B previously influenced on A; and this influence occurs on the other through one's reaction.

Another characteristic of systems is their SELF-ORGANIZATION, in other words, the system's ability to adapt to different contexts and situations. This is what Humberto Maturana calls AUTOPOYESIS (from the Greek "autos" –self– and "poiesis" –action).[5] The systems' organization is so important that their only product is themselves and there is no distance between product and product. The existence and the action of an autopoietic unit are inseparable and they form its specific kind of organization.

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3   Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch: "Cambio", Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1986.

4   Watzlawick *et alii*: "Teoría de la Comunicación Humana".

5   Maturana, Humberto: "El árbol del conocimiento", Editorial Universitaria, Chile, 1993.

These characteristics of systems, circularity and self-organization, make an organization reconstruct itself in each operation. The AUTOPOIETIC systems are organizationally closed and energetically open. Therefore, this last concept makes us think about the amount of impacts that systems receive from outside, both from the macro and the micro contexts within which they might be.

An example of the above mentioned is that lawyer that makes a linear reading of the legal system when stating that a conflict can only be solved through the laws and within a legal system. And all this believing that, as Remo Entelman mentions in his books and articles, law is a closed system that foresees all the solutions to all the conflicts where incompatible desires may occur.[6] When law cannot be used as a tool and when the rules are not enough to solve the conflict, then the solution becomes the problem and, sometimes, the judge's sentence is the beginning of the problem.

The HOMEOSTASIS is another characteristic of systems that makes them keep the dynamic balance typical from them. From this model, an analogy can be made with the cybernetic machine, which always comes back to a stable state. It is because of this model that several disciplines used to think that "all the Universe's entities tended to ENTHROPY (no change / no movement)".

Even though systems are characterized by all these concepts, there has been a change in the appreciation of systems from the 1950s to the present. A position in which the systems' balance and homeostasis were the model for changing has led to a new paradigm in the 1970s, especially in Systemic Family Therapy, that challenged the idea of the balance model. This model can be applied not only to the family system, but also to other systems and organizations.

Ilya Prigogine is the first one to talk about this change when stating that some laws did not comply with the balance rule and that many living forms enjoy getting around it. They were moving in a NEGENTHROPIC direction, towards bigger complexities and new states. Prigogine refers then to the "EVOLUTIVE FEEDBACK" and explains it as a fluctuant movement that may suddenly become a

system and then turn to another state. This is the paradigm of CHAOS-ORDER prevailing in systems.

In line with this, Mony Elkaim says that the family therapist's task consists of taking the system away from balance by forcing it to look for a different solution, so that the structure will transform itself according to its own rules and will be able to make a change, not foreseeable by the therapist, since those rules make up the "singularity" of the family system.

CONFLICT AND CONTEXT: CONFLICTS' OPERATORS, REALITY OBSERVERS

We have said that all conflicts occur in a system of interpersonal relationships, in a specific scene, and with certain actors, some of which may be main actors and others supporting ones, but not less important for the conflict's resolution and continuation.

Einstein defined once TRUTH as an AGREEMENT achieved, taking into consideration:
- Observations,
- Their relationships, and
- The observers' relationships.

When studying the conflict's genesis and focusing on its Administration, management and leading, what we essentially look for is what the legal system cannot achieve, that is the PROTECTION and PRESERVATION of the links within the system in which conflict has occurred.[7] This is precisely one of the main objectives of Mediation.

Going on with Einstein's thought, as conflict operators, we are:
- Observers of people's behaviour,
- Observers of the conflict that people bring to us,
- Observers of the actors' interactions,
- Observers and listeners of the communication settled among them and between them and us.

For all the above mentioned, as operators we are responsible for developing abilities in:
- Focusing and isolating the conflict
- Determining who the actors are
- Describing the scene or context

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6   Entelman, Remo F.: course imparted at the "Maestría Interdisciplinaria en Prevención, Administración y Resolución de Conflictos para la formación de Negociadores y Mediadores" ("*Interdisciplinary Master on Conflicts' Prevention, Management, and Resolution for Negotiators and Mediators' Training*"), Faculty of Economic Science, Universidad Nacional del Nordeste Argentino. The author was a teacher and Professorship coordinator at this university.

7   Entelman, Remo F.: previously quoted and "Teoría de Conflictos", Gedisa, 2002.

- Interpreting language
- Observing interactions

The conclusion from all this is very clear: we state that, in order to do such interventions, operators must receive a training focused on the study of the Conflict Theory, so as to detect it, administer it, and prevent it whenever possible; on the Communication Theory with a view to identify the codes used by the actors; on Strategy in order to know how to lead it; on Perception's development to become good reality Observers; and on Intelligence to direct them toward the right decision.

REACTION TO CONFLICT

As mentioned, conflict appears in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, there can be as many reactions to conflict on the actors' side as relationships we may establish with our peers. But in fact, when we talk about conflicts in general, we refer to problems, dead ends, situations that seem insoluble, crises that have been created and kept because the difficulties have not been looked at appropriately.

No matter the variety that may exist, there are at least three ways of not looking at difficulties appropriately:

- To attempt a solution by DENYING a real problem: IT IS NECESSARY TO ACT, BUT NO ACTION IS UNDERTAKEN.

- A CHANGE is attempted in order to eliminate a difficulty which, in practice, is not modifiable or inexistent: AN ACTION IS UNDERTAKEN WHEN IT SHOULD NOT.

- There is a MISTAKE OF LOGIC TYPIFICATION and a "game without end" is established, i.e. ACTION IS UNDERTAKEN AT A WRONG LEVEL. The action should have been undertaken at the immediately above level. This means that we must change the frequency or the pattern of communication and look for a communicative level different from the one given by the system; we must go up to the next level, create another history.

Back to the Conflict Theory, it is focused on the interactions and, especially, in the Conflict Interaction, and all this by virtue of its interest being the links' preservation.

Being in our role of reality observers, we observe people's behaviour in a conflict, among other things. If we take as a basis that all the communication is behaviour, the behaviour of each actor is expressed as one of the elements of a series of behaviours alternatively done by one and the other, and where each behaviour is the cause of the next one. Watzlawick calls that PUNCTUATION OF THE FACTS SEQUENCE or EXCHANGE PATTERNS, on which they may agree or not.[8] The punctuation he talks about organizes the behavioural facts and, therefore, it is vital for the ongoing interactions. Consequently, the lack of agreement as for how to punctuate the facts' sequence is the cause of innumerable conflicts in communication and, thereby, in relationships. According to that, Humberto Maturana states that, as observers, we define as "communicative" the behaviours occurred in a social connection and, as "communication", the behavioural coordination we observe resulting from it.

We are talking here about both interpersonal and international relationships, which are riddled with similar interaction patterns. This kind of series represents a communicational sequence of affirmations and negations of messages. To this respect, Bateson says that the dilemma emerges from the spurious punctuation of the series, in other words, from pretending that the series necessarily has a beginning. And this is precisely the mistake of those taking part in the situation. As we previously affirmed, and in agreement with Heinz Von Foerster, the series is circular, so the beginning or the end cannot be identified.

Finally, we may add that in front of conflict the involved people may have different kinds of attitudes: cooperative, collaborative, competent, indifferent or opposing. Depending on the attitude, the intervention of the mediating people will be more or less successful.

The degree of the "CONFLICT INTENSITY" will also influence on the intervention's result. This is what Remo Entelman metaphorically calls "the specific gravity of the power elements used in the conflict action". The analysis of the conflict intensity will allow us to know the degree of increase or decrease achieved by the parties in their troublesome relationship. According to that degree, we will be able to set up, or not, the strategy to manage and eventually solve it.

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8   Watzlawick *et alii:* "Teoría de la Comunicación Humana".

CONFLICT AND OBJECTIVITY

When we think about the conflict as a process and we analyze it as if we were in a laboratory, we place ourselves in a meta-communicational position: we talk about the conflict but we do not take part in it.

When we think and talk about the conflict and we place ourselves within the scene in which it takes place, or in which we are intervening, our objectivity is compromised by our being included in the new system that we have made up. Mediation is an example of this.

CONCLUSION

The summary of all the above mentioned, were it possible to do, would lead the conflict operators, among which we include the mediators, to have a systematized training allowing them to have a wide vision of the system on which they must act without getting excluded from it. Furthermore, they should have ground knowledge about everything regarding the Human Communication Theory and the Conflict Theory because, no matter the operator's concern, this knowledge will help him in his main task, which is to be a true facilitator of agreements between the parties and of the reformulation of their communication system.

As facilitators we must bear in mind the context in which the conflict occurred and compare it with the context where probably the conflict will be solved, in which our intervention as third party will necessarily be. Humberto Maturana's words on the observer and the observed add elements to reflect on that:

"EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN SAID WAS SAID BY AN OBSERVER"

"EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN SAID WAS SAID TO AN OBSERVER"

"THE OBSERVER'S CHARACTERISTICS MUST NOT INTERFERE WITH THE DESCRIPTION OF HIS OBSERVATIONS"

We, men and women conflict operators, are reality Observers and, as such, we must reflect on concepts such as the Objectivity and Subjectivity of our task development. Thinking about that will provide us with new perspectives to analyze the conflict from and will let us look for better working tools to fertilize the field of conflicts' peaceful resolution.

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Note: Maturana, H.: Chilean medical doctor and biologist, Harvard doctorate, he worked as a biologist on the organization of living beings and of the nervous system. From that he turned his interest to social organizations, and family among them, trying to explain their functioning. He worked on issues such as the human cognitive nature, perceptions, and the objectivity, postulated through the scientific method. After his experiences, he came to the conclusion that the phenomena related to perception could only be understood if the functioning of the nervous system was looked at as a closed circular network of internal correlations. This explanation will make it valid to understand the organization of the living being.

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