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## BROADENING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT: THE CHALLENGE OF METAPHORICAL CHANGE

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### Abstract

This qualitative investigation examined the semester long effects of a critical transformative pedagogy on students' metaphorical understandings of conflict interaction. The study included five university conflict management seminars taught over a four year period. Findings revealed that (a) while most students entered the course with predominantly negative and oppositional perceptions of conflict, the use of a critical transformative pedagogy did indeed (b) help support new metaphorical understandings of conflict interaction and (c) supported instances of personal empowerment and expanded self-knowledge. Implications and suggestions for future research are considered.

Key words: Conflict metaphors, transformative learning, communication pedagogy, conflict management education

A growing body of literature supports the position that traditional conflict discourses, with emphases on domination, opposition, and division, have exacerbated many of the fragmentary norms and polarizing, agonistic practices so prevalent in the public sphere (Bohm, 1996; Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, & Stains, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; LeBaron, 2002; Makau & Marty, 2001; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Rosenberg, 2003; Tannen, 1998). As a result, many communication educators remain committed to investigating alternative approaches to conflict management—perspectives that not only encourage openness and understanding, but which also provide for more civil and constructive ways of exploring human differences (e.g., Gayle, 2004; Gayle, Martin, Mann, & Chouser, 2002; Hyde & Bineham, 2000; Isaacs, 1999; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007).

Because metaphors offer valuable insight into the ways individuals conceptually construct and organize their socio-cognitive experiences, this qualitative study explored the semester long effects of a critical transformative pedagogy on students' metaphorical understandings of conflict interaction. This university course, based on the precepts of critical pedagogy and transformative learning theory, was designed to cultivate critical awareness and social critique on normalized conflict discourses, as well as expand consideration of alternative modes for expressing and bridging differences. In particular, this study compares changes in the manifest content (e.g., descriptions, portrayals) of students' conflict metaphors from the beginning to end of a 16-week conflict management seminar.

### Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study draws on three theoretical suppositions. First, metaphors play a prominent role in our construction, interpretation, and perception of social reality (Foss, 2008; Kliebard, 1982; Koch & Deetz, 1981; Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). From this

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perspective, metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices used to produce imagery, but are mental structures that exercise powerful effects on social cognition and perception. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) maintain that the "human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined" (p. 6), influencing fundamental aspects of thought, language, and action. Metaphoric processes, in this fashion, are characterized as ways of "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 5).

The second principle is that there is a need for broader conceptualizations (e.g., paradigms, discourses, metaphors) of conflict interaction. As scholars from a variety of fields have observed, dominant Western conflict discourses have historically promulgated negative, largely oppositional views of relational, political, and group-based conflict (e.g., Bohm, 1996; LeBaron, 2002; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007; Makau & Marty, 2001; McCorkle & Mills, 1992; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Tannen, 1998; Rosenberg, 2003). Prevailing characteristics include enduring, pre-established commitments to irreconcilable positions; unfavorable or antagonistic views of divergent perspectives; the dualistic separation of self and other; the devaluation of emotional, intuitional, and imaginative ways of knowing; and hyper-competitive efforts to defeat or dominate perceived adversaries (Capra, 1996; Chasin et al., 1996; Gearhart, 1979; LeBaron, 2002; Makau & Marty, 2001; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Tannen, 1998; Wilmot & Hocker, 2011).

The third premise is that conceptual tension is central to psychological development and transformative learning. Indeed, numerous studies have found cognitive struggle or imbalance to play an underlying role in individual learning and perspective transformation (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1978, 1991; Joyce, 1984; Taylor, 2007). Fundamental to perspective transformation is cultivating critical questions about the suppositions, tenets, and social habits that inform our

understandings of conflict interaction, or in the present case, our use of conflict metaphors (LeBaron, 2002; Mezirow, 1997; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). One means of clarifying these underlying assumptions is by focusing on the formidable, yet often unconscious role of metaphor in the framing and enactment of conflict messages and patterns (e.g., Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990; Haynes, 1999; McCorkle & Mills, 1992; Millar & Beck, 1996; Smith, 2005; Wilmot & Hocker, 2011).

### Method

The purpose of this teacher-research investigation was to investigate the influence of a critical transformative approach to conflict management on students' views and understandings of conflict metaphors. The study included five conflict management classes taught over a four year period. A total of 113 students participated in the study; students ranged in age from 19 to 54 ( $M = 27.43$ ). Students reflected a range of academic majors including communication, public relations, psychology, criminal justice, political science, business, and sociology. A qualitative methodology and interpretive framework were used to collect and analyze the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Jacob, 1988; Patton, 2002). Data were collected at two separate times in the semester: once during the second week of the term and again in the sixteenth week. In both instances, students were given an open-ended survey with three questions: (a) In your own words, describe your understanding of interpersonal conflict; (b) How would you explain the role of communication in conflict situations?; and (c) For me, conflict is like \_\_\_\_\_. Please explain. In an effort to log substantive changes over the semester, the questionnaire used in the second survey contained one additional question about the nature of students' learning experiences: Ultimately, would you say that your learning experiences in this class modified (changed) or reinforced (no change) your understanding of conflict? How so? In all, 226 student surveys were



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collected and analyzed; to be included in the analysis of data, students had to have participated in both course surveys.

Survey data were analyzed by the author through a modified constant comparative process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For the purposes of this report, metaphorical linguistic expressions served as the primary unit of analysis; expressions were classified using a grounded coding procedure that reflected common semantic patterns, features, and subject matter (Koch & Deetz, 1981).

### Findings

#### Metaphors at Semester's Start

Overwhelming, competition and opposition-oriented metaphors were the most frequently referenced metaphors at the outset (54%). These metaphors largely portrayed conflict as a zero-sum, win-loss encounter where autonomous parties struggled or clashed over conflicting goals, ideas, and interests (e.g., Lakoff & Jackson, 2003; Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). A second leading cluster of metaphors equated conflict to states of irregularity and pathology/unhealthiness (31%). From this angle, conflict was expressed as a sort of adverse imbalance, sickness, or unsettling condition that, to all intents and purposes, destabilized the otherwise normal, "healthy" rhythms and patterns of a relationship. The third category of metaphors depicted conflict interaction as a type of mechanistic or physical phenomena (11%). According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), understanding experiences "in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind" (p. 25). These metaphors relied upon the principles of mechanistic theory and the physical sciences to analyze and diagnose reasons for miscommunication between conflict parties. While the preponderance of pre-

instruction metaphors fell into one of the three abovementioned categories, a small segment of students depicted conflict as a supportive opportunity for personal growth and development (4%).

#### Changes by Semester's End

End-of-semester data were analyzed independently of the aforementioned findings, but interpreted similarly. Three emergent themes were identified regarding the influence of critical transformative instruction on students' understandings of conflict. These findings revealed (a) modest, but substantive conceptual changes; (b) a deeper appreciation for collaborative approaches to conflict; and (c) a desired personal commitment to self-reflection and readiness for change. While competition and opposition-oriented metaphors remained the most commonly referenced conflict metaphors (39%), fewer students relied on these source domains for their descriptive qualities and characteristics. Students also generated fewer metaphors concerning the categories of irregularity/pathology/unhealthiness (21%) and mechanistic/physical phenomena (7%). These declines were accompanied, encouragingly, by an increase in the number of growth and development metaphors coded (19%), as well as the emergence of one new thematic cluster: conflict as difference (14%). Difference-oriented metaphors depicted conflict as a valued, constructive resource that held the capacity to nurture and enrich relational identification and understanding (e.g., Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007). From this perspective, conflict was not framed pejoratively, but recognized as a catalyst for broadening meaning structures and mindsets, fostering divergent thinking and creative problem solving, and promoting empathic connections and attitudes toward others. The analysis of data also found that many students developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for collaborative approaches to conflict management

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### Conclusion

This investigation explored the influence of critical transformative instruction on students' metaphorical understandings of conflict interaction by offering a qualitative interpretation of the conceptual changes students experienced during their time in a 16-week conflict management seminar. Findings from this study revealed that (a) while most students entered the course with predominantly negative and dualistic perceptions of conflict, the use of a critical transformative pedagogy (b) helped support new metaphorical understandings of conflict interaction and (c) supported instances of personal empowerment and expanded self-knowledge.

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