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## **Engagement in Conflict: Research and Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Engagement is ever-present but implicit in research on conflict. This chapter seeks to make engagement explicit. We draw on dialogic and argumentation models to define engagement in conflict as a process of equal, voluntary, constructive, and deliberative dialogue and argumentation designed to elicit full understanding and shared meaning between two or more parties with the goal of resolving conflicts through shared decision-making and problem solving. Conflict management strategies vary on levels of engagement with avoidance and toleration at the low end of engagement and negotiation and mediation at the high end of engagement. Issues of power, relational distance, and interpretive frameworks facilitate or create barriers to conflict engagement. Conflict can also be used to create engagement in organizations and communities. Finally, communication design and game based mechanisms are advanced as approaches to increase engagement in conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, Engagement, Mediation, Negotiation, Communication Design, Serious Games, Community

### **Engagement in Conflict: Research and Practice**

Engagement is ever-present but largely implicit in research on conflict. A quick search for “conflict engagement” on Google Scholar reveals two primary areas where engagement is explicitly considered in relation to conflict: family and marital conflict (e.g., Cichy, Lefkowitz, & Fingerman, 2013), and community or civil engagement as it relates to international conflict and peace/society building (e.g., Friedman & Desivilya, 2010). Engagement in these studies is rarely articulated or clearly defined as anything more than one-dimensional action. Studies in family and marital conflict often consider how level of engagement (i.e., presenting of issues, voicing complaints) influences marital or family dynamics compared to avoiders (e.g., Gottman, 1993). While these studies view engagement as both productive and destructive; the act of responding in some way (including an eye roll) is all that is necessary to be considered engagement. Studies of engagement related to larger scale conflict may consider how engagement in conflict may influence other areas of civic engagement, such as social entrepreneurship (Friedman & Desivilya, 2010) and peace building (Rocha Menocal, 2011).

While there are other studies that address engagement and conflict explicitly, such as organizational conflict (Hardy & Phillips, 1998) and conflict in health organizations (Gerardi, 2007), the concept of engagement is implicit rather than explicit in most conflict scholarship and there is little systematic review of what is meant by engagement. The chapter presents *engagement in conflict* as an alternate to conflict engagement. The premise for *conflict engagement* is any sort of reaction post conflictive event(s) whereas *engagement in conflict* represents meaningful action toward resolution.

The limited literature on engagement in conflict is both a problem and an opportunity. It is a problem because conflict management is inherently about engagement, and theorizing engagement would be useful in advancing the study and practice of conflict. It is an opportunity as the lack of clarity allows for integration of the best of conflict research and related concepts from other areas of study. This chapter has four primary aims. First, we explicate the concept of engagement as it relates to conflict. Second, we define conflict and identify different conflict management strategies as they relate to engagement. Third, we identify key approaches to conflict management, such as negotiation and third party intervention, and explore engagement within these contexts. Additionally, we explore different goals of engagement, including dispute management and the use of conflict to spur engagement. Fourth, we advance two areas where we see potential for further advancing conflict engagement research and practice: communication design and experiential (game-based) approaches.

#### **Defining Conflict Engagement: Constructive Engagement through Dialogue and Argumentation**

To better understand engagement in conflict, we draw upon key elements of theorizing about dialogue and participation as foundational to our definition of engagement. Specifically, we draw from literature on dialogue and dialogics (e.g., Barge & Andreas, 2013; Broome, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014), and normative pragmatics (e.g., van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993) to define ideal notions of engagement. In a later section we draw from the organizational communication literature on engaged scholarship (e.g., Barge, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008) as a foundation to

explore the role of conflict scholar/practitioners and practitioner/scholars as they contribute to both theorizing and practice of engagement and conflict.

Dialogue and dialogic models of engagement have been well developed and conceptualized in the public relations literature. Taylor and Kent (2014) define engagement “both an orientation that influence interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions” (p. 384). The authors argue that dialogue theory provides an appropriate framework by which to explicate engagement as it delineates the steps necessary for organizations and publics to enact engagement and it “assumes accessibility, presentness, and a willingness to interact” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 387). Similarly, Johnston (2016) defines dialogic engagement as “a dialogic, reflexive, and interactive process generating interest, knowledge, involvement, or action” (p. 274). Dialogic communicators care about the beliefs and values of others and are open minded, patient, and empathic. Drawing on similar Buberian traditions in discussing dialogue and peacebuilding, Broome and Hatay (2006) view dialogue as transformative discourse that “acknowledges the complexity of other people’s experience and seeks understanding” (p. 630).

Normative pragmatics (van Eemeren, Gorrtenorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993) is a line of argumentation theory that seeks to identify and bridge the gap between real and ideal forms of argument. Argumentation is seen as different than other forms of dispute resolution in that it seeks resolution, not acquiescence or settlement. Ideal conditions of argumentation include the ability for unlimited discussion, expansion of ideas, ability to comprehend and understand arguments advanced, and consensus rather than force in decision-making. Often, these ideal conditions are not met, but systems can be designed to aid in ideal argumentation (Jackson, 1998). Kent and Taylor (2014) share a similar sentiment and argue dialogic communicators design interactions to aid in mutual understanding. Importantly, trust, risk, and interaction lead to engagement and dialogue, and discourse rules are necessary but not sufficient for this to occur. The logic of dialogue in public relations shares philosophical roots and is isomorphic with the logic of many conflict, negotiation, and mediation models, including those in argumentation (e.g., van Eemeren et al., 1993) and design (e.g., Harrison, 2014), sociology (e.g., Merry, & Milner, 1993), and law and business (e.g., Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011), among others.

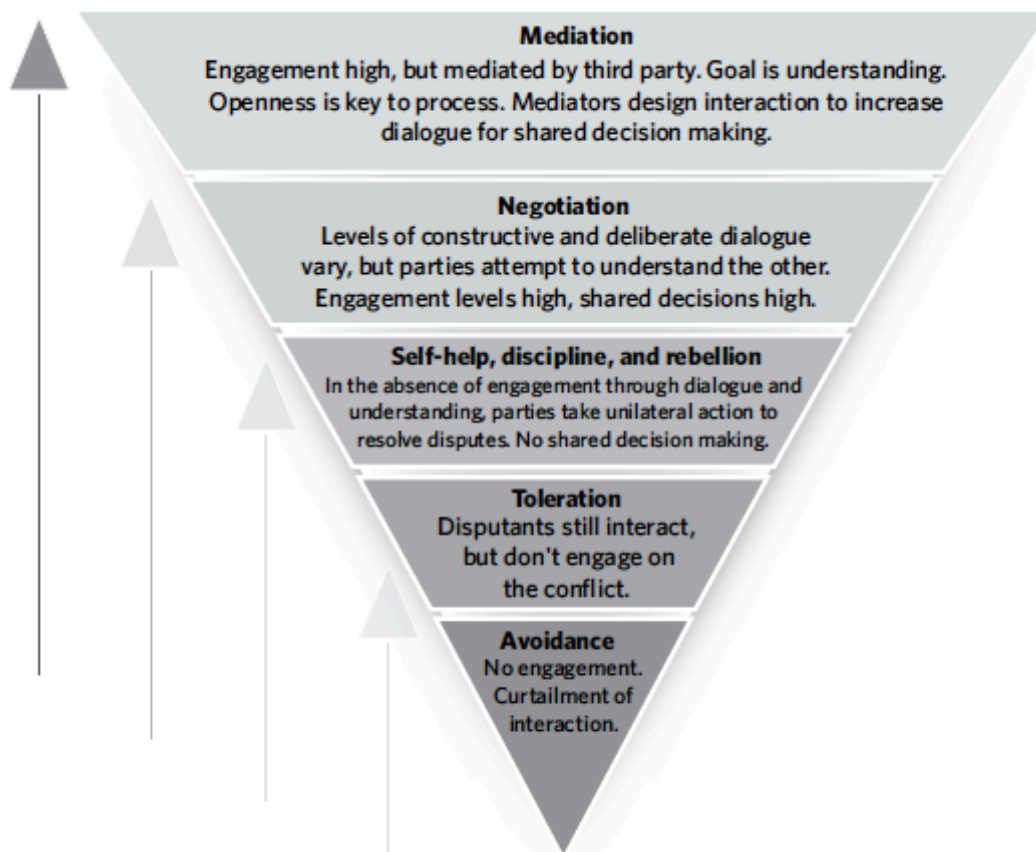
Ultimately, then, our definition of engagement comes from both dialogic and normative pragmatics approaches. We define *engagement in conflict as a process of equal, voluntary, constructive, and deliberative dialogue and argumentation designed to elicit full understanding and shared meaning between two or more parties with the goal of resolving conflicts through shared decision-making and problem solving*. Approaches to conflict vary, with some approaches more fully embodying these principles of engagement while others such as avoidance or self-help have no, or minimal, levels of engagement.

### **Defining Conflict and Conflict Management**

A definition of conflict is necessary to explore the concept of engagement as it relates to conflict in more depth. While there are numerous definitions of conflict (see Putnam, 2006), most share agreement on key components, including perceived or real incompatible goals, values (and morals), norms, or interests (e.g., Putnam & Poole, 1987; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001) between at least two interdependent parties (e.g., Hocker

& Wilmot, 1978; Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005) who see the other party as “potentially interfering with the realization of these goals” (Putnam & Poole, 1987, p. 522).

At a broad level, conflict management typically refers to processes where individuals, organizations, groups, or nation states take steps to manage or resolve a dispute. Black (1990) identifies five elementary forms of conflict management that encompass a wide range of strategies disputants use, including negotiation, settlement, self-help, avoidance, and toleration. These strategies vary on levels of confrontation (actively approaching the other disputant and airing the grievance, either vocally or physically; Morrill, 1991), and engagement. Figure 1 below illustrates the progression of engagement by conflict management style. As individuals move away from non engaged strategies, engagement, dialogue, and equitable representation and voice become more prevalent.



As individuals move away from avoidance, they progress from a lack of interaction to interaction, and on to full engagement. While self-help is usually not constructive in the engagement sense, we place this as higher level engagement than avoidance or toleration because in some cases of rebellion (such as protests) there is an attempt to increase understanding by the other party, and there is often a goal of using rebellion as a way to bring the other party to the table for dialogue and constructive engagement.

*\*Original figure created by authors for this chapter.*

**Figure 1. Conflict Management and Degree of Engagement**

Confrontational styles include negotiation (handling of grievance by joint decision), or settlement (handling of the grievance by non-partisan third party), as well as

some forms of self-help. Within negotiation, individuals also vary in their degree of ideal engagement, with collaborative problems solving for mutual gain, win-win in Fisher, Ury, and Patton's (2011) terms, representing the ideal process of dialogic engagement. Compromise is often present in negotiation and may represent fully informed decisions, or may be a result of less ideal processes of dialogue where key information about needs, resources, and alternatives are missing. Forcing (i.e., threats) or accommodating (i.e., giving in to avoid further conflict) strategies are used in place of ideal dialogic approaches, and represent less engaged processes of collaborative conflict resolution. Similar variation in engagement occurs in settlement or third-party processes. Mediation is the most fully engaged, where disputants are present voluntarily, presumed to be equal in power and resources, and search for mutually desirable solutions to problems. Key to most models of mediation is that the mediator facilitates dialogue and engagement, but that disputants create and test solutions and outcomes themselves (e.g., Moore, 2014). Ombuds processes have engagement between the ombud and at least one disputant, but may or may not bring disputants together in a search for resolution. Rather, the person who brought forward the grievance may wish to remain anonymous, and the ombud may act unilaterally or with each disputant individually (e.g., Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Rowe, 1995). This presents serious constraints on dialogic approaches. Representing even less engagement would be arbitration or adjudication processes. While disputants are engaged in presenting their cases, they are limited by rules and laws of evidence, and seldom talk directly to each other. While the goal of these processes is resolution, they are not win-lose outcomes and are not by mutual agreement.

Additionally, confrontational approaches may be constructive or destructive, with constructive approaches using dialogue to help understand the source of the problem and find mutually agreeable solutions, as in the case of negotiation and some third-party settlements. Constructive approaches all involve levels of interaction, dialogue, and discussion between individuals, groups, or organizations, and typically have the goal of improving processes, solving problems, or addressing individual or community concerns – meaning that they have some level of engagement.

Self-help (unilateral action) may (i.e., acts of rebellion) or may not (i.e., covert retaliation or noncooperation) be confrontational (Baumgartner, 1984), but is seldom constructive. Non-confrontational forms of self-help include acts such as sabotage of work products or workplace theft (e.g., Morrill, Zlad, & Rao, 2003) and anonymous calls to the police against noisy neighbors. Confrontational forms of self-help may include public and ritualized acts of vengeance, such as honor killings (e.g., Pely, 2011; Reider, 1984) or state sanctioned public punishment (e.g., Foucault, 1977). Acts of rebellion may also take the form of protests, strikes, or other public forms that give unilateral voice to a dispute. These may be productive in fostering engagement by increasing understanding of the issue or creating opportunities to bring other parties to the table for dialogue (e.g. Barnes, 2006; Elam, 2001). Often, these more confrontational and destructive approaches typically move past dialogue to some sort of active confrontation, such as armed conflict, hostility, or abuse (e.g., Putnam, Burgess, & Royer, 2003). In destructive conflict, voice may be literal (e.g., verbal abuse) or symbolic (unilateral aggression), and disputants generally are not concerned with mutual wellbeing.

Avoidance (curtailment of interaction) and toleration (inaction) are the last two elementary forms of conflict management, and these approaches constitute non-engaged

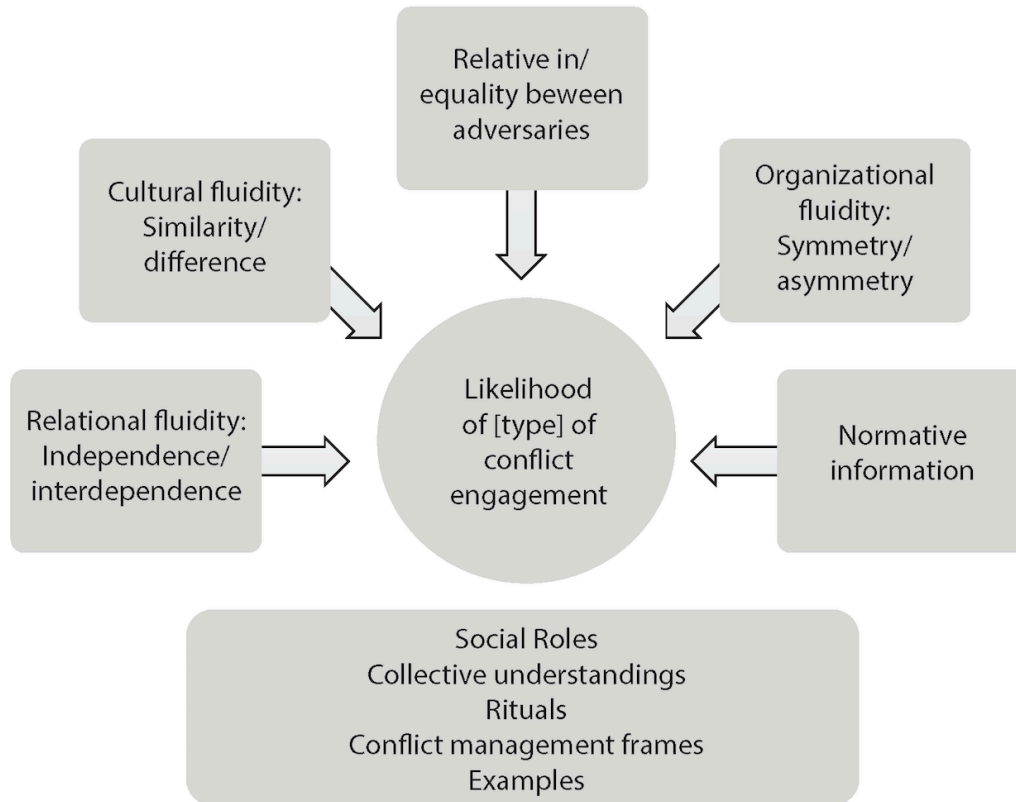
and non-confrontational forms of conflict management (Black, 1990). Avoidance is an active form of conflict management as it involves deliberate action to avoid the person, circumstance, or discussion of the source of the conflict (Felstiner, 1974). This is often seen in conflicts between neighbors in suburban neighborhoods where there are few social ties (Baumgartner, 1984), or in cases of fleeting relationships (Harrison, 2007). Toleration is an inactive approach and is more focused on learning to live with the conflict or grievance. Morrill (1991) describes instances of poor decision making, alcoholism on the job, and billing issues as conflicts that executives tolerate, and that they often resume friendly relations with the offender.

While engagement and joint processes of mutual conflict management are typically seen as the most productive and desirable, non-confrontational approaches such as avoidance and toleration are probably the most prevalent, and can be functional in their own right. Dialogic engagement requires parties who are willing to discuss difficult issues, and requires knowledge, skill, openness, and a desire for mutual solutions. Many conflicts occur between actors of unequal power, who have little desire for change, and where attempts at confrontation and engagement may actually make matters worse. In such instances, avoidance and toleration are logical approaches to conflict management.

#### **Facilitators and Barriers to Conflict Engagement**

The selection of type of conflict management process presupposes certain conditions, some of which facilitate engagement and others that raise barriers. Morrill (1995; see also Baumgartner, 1984 and Black & Baumgartner, 1983) identifies durable patterns of pragmatic social interaction, consisting of social structural and interpretive features, commonly found with different types of dispute resolution processes. Social structure consists of vertical dimensions (power, distribution of resources), horizontal dimensions (distribution of social intimacy, division of labor), and corporate dimensions (capacity for collective action). Symbolic (symbols people use) and evaluative (normative status, history of social control) structures constitute interpretive features and help enable scripts, schemas, and frames to interpret and act upon conflict.

## Social Field Model of Conflict Management



*Figures adapted with permission from Morrill (2017), and based on the work of Black (1990) and Morrill (2017).*

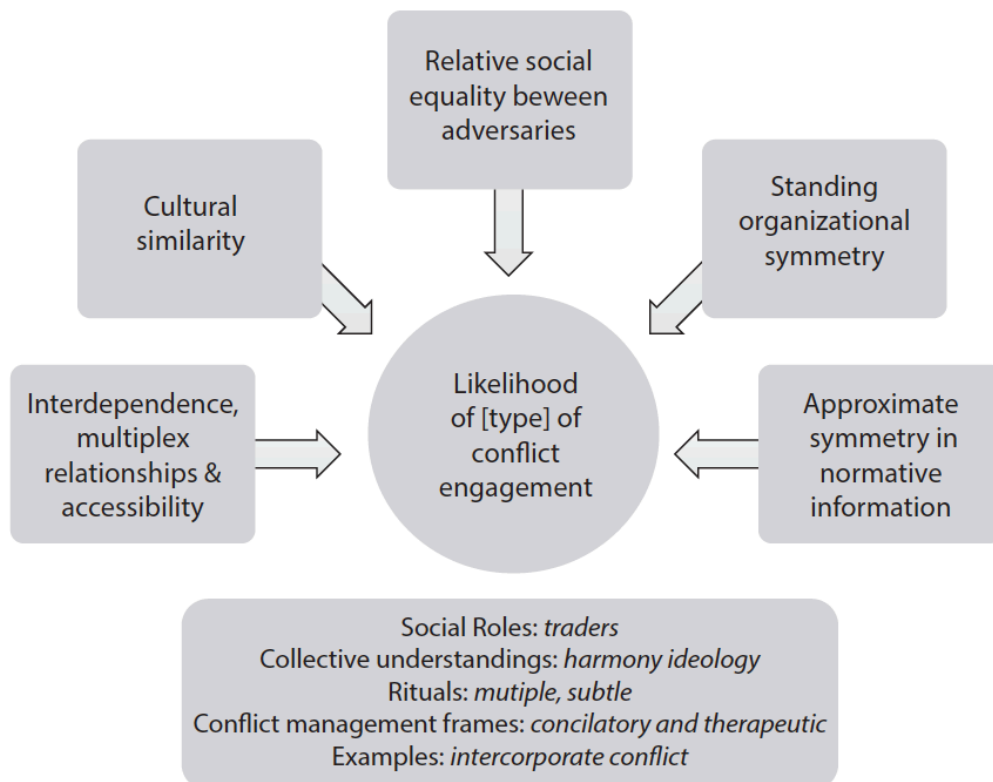
### **Figure 2. Generic Field Model of Conflict Management**

These dimensions of social and interpretive structures vary across relationships and influence how conflict management is likely to occur. For example, the vertical dimension of power and resources influences can be characterized as equal or unequal. Equal power and resources is likely to facilitate discussion and joint decision making as there are fewer options for force or coercion. The horizontal dimension of intimacy refers to the strength of social ties within a relationship or community. Strong social ties embedded within relationship networks provide support for constructive approaches to resolve conflicts and restore harmony (e.g., Nader, 1991). Similarly, relative equality in the capacity for collective action precludes one side from gaining advantage in more destructive forms of conflict management and facilitates engaged and collaborative approaches to resolution. Interpretive dimensions refer to shared knowledge and history with the other disputant, and provide a foundation for understanding their actions. Shared interpretations and positive normative histories help create conditions for dialogue and engagement, where different meanings and negative normative histories make those processes more difficult.

Negotiation, for example, is more likely to occur when the social structure consists of relative social equality, standing organizational symmetry, and interdependence and multiplex ties. Interpretive structures consisting of symmetry in normative information and symbols and rituals that support shared understandings of

social roles around concepts such as trading and harmony further support the likelihood of negotiation occurring (e.g., Morrill 1995; Nader, 1991). Each of these dimensions supports conditions necessary for dialogue and engagement. There is a sense of equality and connection which supports joint decisions rather than forced ones, collective understandings help facilitate trust, and multiplex ties provide incentive for mutually beneficial solutions. Negotiation is a voluntary process, and without equality, trust, and connection other forms of conflict management, may be more likely to yield the results the more powerful party desires.

### Social Field Model of Negotiation



*Figures adapted with permission from Morrill (2017), and based on the work of Black (1990) and Morrill (2017).*

#### **Figure 3. Social Field Model of Negotiation**

Third-party settlement approaches are both similar to and different from negotiation. Disputants may share similar social and interpretive structures as in negotiation, but often lack that shared symmetry and understanding with the third party. Disputants typically have unequal social status to third parties, organizational asymmetry, relational distance, and asymmetry in normative information. Additionally, social roles may be more similar to that of superior/subordinate with deference to authority. This allows a third party to be seen as high in social status and with an ability to wield some degree of authority over proceedings. Depending on the nature of the process, the third party may help facilitate engagement (as in the case of mediation and ombuds processes; e.g., Harrison & Morrill, 2004), or create barriers to constructive engagement by limiting



open interaction and dialogue between parties (as in the overly structured rules for discourse found in courts of law (e.g., Conley & O'Barr, 1990, 2005).

Avoidance and toleration both have social and interpretive structures that discourage engagement. Avoidance is likely to occur when disputants have functional independence and uniplex ties, share little normative information, and have relative social equality. Social roles consist of a sense of atomistic individuality, and there is shared understanding of the importance of autonomy. These ultimately lead to frames of indifference and can be seen in interactions between such disputants as one-shot consumers and suburbanites (Baumgartner, 1989). These characteristics can also be found in certain types of organizations, such as law offices, where partners act with a great deal of autonomy (e.g., Morrill, 1995) and interference by other partners is seen as highly inappropriate, or universities where relationships between students and faculty members are fluid, and avoidance may be the preferred conflict management process. For example, students can simply choose to take classes from other professors in the future rather than deal with the stresses associated with pursuing a grievance against a faculty member (e.g., Harrison, 2007). Toleration involves more interdependence and less social mobility, but shares other characteristics with avoidance. Employees, for example, may have a much more difficult time avoiding their coworkers or boss in the future than students do with professors – changing jobs and organizations is much more difficult than registering for classes with a different professor.

While negotiation and third-party settlement processes are the most likely to lead to engagement, they need certain conditions to occur. Attempting to force negotiation on disputants of unequal power may lead to discourse and an outcome, but it is unlikely to reflect key dimensions of engagement such as voluntary and open dialogue, and mutually beneficial solutions. Additionally, in conditions of moral conflict, such as many intractable environmental disputes (e.g., Brummans et al., 2008), the lack of normative information and shared interpretations make constructive conflict engagement unlikely – and ironically, true engagement is what is needed to create those shared understandings. Ultimately, these field models suggest the importance of working toward changing social structures to enhance the likelihood of true conflict engagement occurring.

### **Engagement in Confrontational Approaches: Negotiation and Mediation**

Processes such as negotiation or mediation are inherently communication based and work on the assumption that parties in dispute are willing to engage others in finding resolutions to problems and disagreements. Prominent paradigms in negotiation vary on their degree of openness and collaboration, with interest based approaches focusing on dialogue and collaboration while position based approaches typically involve less sharing of information and a focus on self-interest (e.g., Fisher, et al., 2011). Constructive engagement ideally strives for full and open discussion of the interests and needs of the parties involved in the negotiation, but this type of openness is reliant on trust and established relationships. In the absence of complete trust, Fisher et al. (2011) provide key strategies to help insure a focus on the issues and avoid making the conflict affective. By focusing on issues, using objective criteria, and separating the people from the problem they hope to enable constructive engagement and problem solving. Lax and Sebenius (2006) follow their lead and discuss the importance of preparation and creating optimal conditions prior to negotiation. By making sure negotiators understand the needs and interests of the other party (as well as their own) negotiators are more prepared to

engage in sequences of negotiation and bartering to reach mutually beneficial solutions. While much of the negotiation literature strives to avoid emotion and focus on rational problem solving, Fisher and Shapiro (2005) actually argue that emotion can help create opportunities for engagement and trust. Emotions signal concerns which can be addressed during negotiation processes, and positive affect, affiliation, and respect for autonomy can all facilitate trust. These characteristics are more likely to be found in ongoing relationships or negotiations with long-term prospects rather than one-shot negotiations.

Mediation processes also vary on their degree of engagement, based on the level of formality and adherence to rules in a specific mediation approach (Moore, 2014). Mediators often view their roles very differently. Kolb (1983) discusses mediators who fall into categories of either orchestrators or dealmakers, where orchestrators help the parties come together and make their own deal, and dealmakers see themselves as the force that pushes them to make the deal that the mediator sees as best. Still other mediators, such as Friedman (Friedman & Himmelstien, 2008), see themselves as simply helping parties come to an understanding of the problem, and the onus is on the parties to be willing to engage in dialogue. Donohue (2006) describes this as a relational development model where participants also transform their relationships through empowerment and recognition. Similar differences in engagement processes can also be seen in other third party dispute resolution processes, such as ombuds processes, where disputants typically decide on their own levels of engagement in consultation with the ombud (Harrison, 2003; Rowe, 1995), or arbitration or adjudication where engagement is codified and limited, with little concern for getting parties to engage in constructive problem solving (e.g., Conley & O'Barr, 2005).

Mediators encourage conflict de-escalation through establishing strategic mechanisms such as: affirming a shared understanding among parties, maintaining neutral dialogic spaces, and working towards agreement (Kriesberg, 1998). Within this framework, mediators employ an understanding-based approach to conflict resolution that aims active participation of all parties through support autonomy, issue framing, and looping (Friedman & Himmelstein, 2008). Given that mediation is a synergistic activity, intermediaries play a critical role in ensuring all voices are heard. Through neutral contextual framing, mediators are able to highlight substantive issues that validate differing viewpoints. Due to the centrality of a shared understanding in mediation, looping serves to vocalize and confirm potential conflict traps. It is important to note that understanding in this context does not imply agreement. As noted by Harrison and Doerfel (2006), critical to resolution is the perception of fairness and not the regulatory guidelines by which resolution is reached. Dispute resolution processes have steps and protocols designed to accomplish certain goals, but the enactment of these processes often leads to unintended consequences. Disputant perceptions of the motivations and consequences of those protocols and actors are likely to influence their acceptance and evaluation of both the process and outcome. For example, while most disputants view ombuds as neutral, fair, and engaged, others view them as organizational actors whose first concern is to protect the institution. Perceptions of fairness in the design of these systems are important for both utilization of the system and evaluation of the system (Harrison et al., 2013).

### **Using Conflict to Create Engagement**

Our definition of conflict engagement focuses on dialogue as a way to resolve conflict, however, the role of conflict as a means to engagement is an important paradox to engagement. Two primary areas of have focused on using conflict to enhance engagement: organizational conflict and community/peace building engagement.

The late '90s saw an upswing in viewing conflict as constructive and a way to increase engagement and productivity, especially in organizations (e.g., De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997). Researchers advocated for increasing or stimulating conflict as a way to reduce groupthink (Turner & Pratkanis, 1997) and increase performance (De Dreu, 1997). Researchers found that a combination of problem solving with contending (De Dreu, 1997), forcing (Van de Vliert, Nauta, Euwema, & Janssen, 1997), or minority dissent (De Dreu & De Vries, 1997) are important for spurring productive engagement, productivity, and problem solving. In line with our definition of engagement, Jehn (1997) concludes that teams and groups with higher levels of trust and respect are better able to cope with higher levels of cognitive conflict. Donnellon and Kolb (1997) are not quite so optimistic, however, and argue that even formal mechanisms designed to resolve grievances might be problematic in cases of diversity or bias, and those in power benefit more than the individual faced with discrimination. Orbe (1998) and Collier (2005) described the process by which members of non-dominant and/or marginalized groups (e.g., non-Whites) must continuously negotiate identity within asymmetrical social structures.

Collaboration often serves to diminish conflict through the maintenance of functional workflow; however, this strategy negates the influence of power distribution (e.g., Warren et al., 1974). In such instances, collaboration (engagement without conflict) serves to maintain the status quo (organization interest) and reinforces hierarchical structures instead of fostering true allegiance (Hall, 1989). According to Fine (1991), within organizations, managers have the responsibility to counteract power dynamics through the creation of balanced and open expression that is free of *privileged discourse*, divisive language, and encourages *harmonic discourse*, language that integrates multiple viewpoints. Nagda, Yeakley, Gurin, and Sorensen (2012) present a model of sustained intergroup critical dialogue which encourages ongoing interaction between groups of different power as one potential way to increase engagement and address these types of conflict.

There has also been long interest in conflict as a key to community engagement. Johnson (2016) discusses community engagement as “the philosophy or activities an organization undertakes to connect with, encourage participation by, or involve community members, beyond stakeholders” (p. 273). One key early example of this is the San Francisco Community Boards (SFCB; Merry & Milner, 1993). According to DuBow and McEwen (1993) the SFCB was incorporated in 1976 with the goal of mediation and conciliation of conflicts and violence that occur between people who know each other. The SFCB subscribe to the philosophy that community based conflict resolution is a “long term investment in the health and stability of individuals and communities” (p. 126). The SFCB exemplifies the use of conflict resolution programs to spur community engagement by relying largely on volunteers. They operate on the premise that by training community residents in dispute resolution skills (i.e., active listening, facilitation, issue development, conciliation), they can encourage residents to address local problems. However, while the SFCB had many successes, community governance and resident

empowerment were largely localized to the running of the SFCB (Thompson & DuBow, 1993).

The SFCB are just one example of the importance of conflict for community engagement. We also see the importance of constructive engagement for protracted social conflicts (Coleman, Hacking, Stover, Fisher-Yoshida, & Nowak, 2008). Protracted conflict (Azar, 1990), also known as intractable conflict (Kriesberg, 1998), refers to a unique subset of social conflict categorized by enduring systemic inequalities and remnants of discriminatory practices (i.e., segregation; human right violations). Generally, protracted conflict is more resistant to resolution (Coleman, 2003) and thus requires the unpacking of historical events and presumed separateness through nonpolarized dialogue (Broome, 2013). Purposeful discourse serves not only to mitigate violent responses, and overtime redefines norms and institutional climate to evolve to a culture of peace (Broome, 2013; de Rivera, 2009). Conflict or tension embedded within intentional dialogue is a vehicle to understanding other (Buber, 1958) as well as working through differences (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

### **Conflict and Engagement Scholarship**

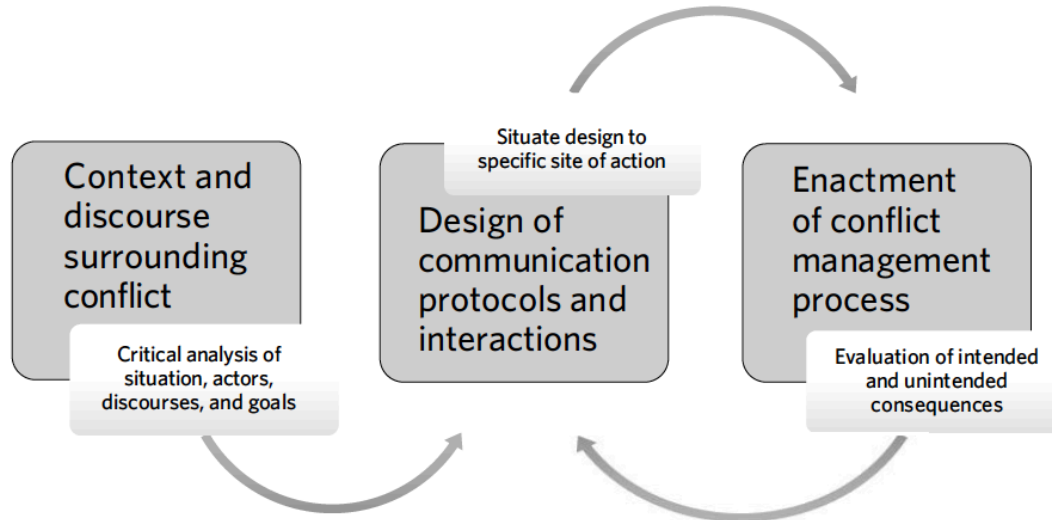
According to Avruch (2013) one way in which the emergence of conflict studies engagement can be observed is through the evolution how the field of conflict has defined itself over the past 40 years – from conflict regulation (e.g., Wehr, 1979), to conflict management (e.g., Sandole & Sandole-Staroste, 1987), to resolution (e.g., Burton, 1990), to conflict transformation (e.g., Lederach, 1995). Avruch (2013) argues that the nuances in language offer insight to operational differences that more directly reflect the “desire to get deeper into the root causes of the conflict and to induce more profound and sustained changes in the conflict system and the relationship among the conflictant parties” (p. 10). This is not an issue of semantics, but instead an acknowledgment of a shift in the way research on conflict and engagement is approached and how multiple voices are engaged. Fundamentally, conflict engagement scholarship shifts to a neorealist position in which conflict – and the root of conflict (nature) – are catalysts inducing change. Through balance and stability (vis-à-vis engagement of multiple voices; see Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008) optimization can be reached; however, conflict is assumed to be an inherent qualities of the human experience and ever present. This shift to transformation and change puts engagement at the center of conflict studies.

Key to this process of transformation is research that captures conflict processes in action, and that specifically examine how different conflict management strategies can enhance processes of constructive conflict engagement. This requires a shift away from some a variable analytic approach toward a more process oriented approach to research. This does not mean experimental research is not useful, but that outcomes of such studies need to capture different kinds of data, including the interactions of disputants. While journals such as *Negotiation Journal* often publish practitioner accounts of various mediations, negotiations, or ombuds processes (e.g., Bauer, 2000; Gadlin, 2000) that describe specific cases and explain key approaches used, much of this literature focuses specifically on the perspectives of the practitioner and the voice of the disputant is seldom heard. Hearing disputant voices, motivations, and interactions is key to understanding their choices and levels of engagement.

We do see more of disputant voices in field studies or in studies that capture actual dispute resolution in practice, such as the work by Jacobs and Aakhus (2002; see also Aakhus, 2003) on mediator practices. Field research and research that captures the process of dispute resolution in situ has much stronger potential to contribute to engaged theory because of the interaction between researchers and disputants or conflict resolution specialists, and the opportunity to understand what elements of the dispute and disputant are facilitating or disrupting constructive dialogue. Focused on knowledge production as opposed to knowledge transference, engaged scholarship acknowledges diverse viewpoints and expertise (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). The richness of field research to explore engagement can be seen in work by Harrison and colleagues on ombuds processes (Harrison, 2003; 2004, Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Harrison & Doerfel, 2006) where they explore processes of transformation, and how disputant motivations and ombuds strategies intersect to reshape the conflict. Putnam and colleagues work on intractable conflict demonstrates similar processes of transformation (e.g., Brummans et al., 2008). In addition to these more processual approaches, we see communication design and interactive approaches as key areas for future research to advance engagement and productive conflict engagement.

### **Communication Design to Increase Conflict Engagement**

Engagement is critical to resolving disputes in productive ways. One avenue that has potential to improve both engaged dispute resolution processes and engaged conflict research is a communication (as) design approach (e.g., Aakhus, 2007; Aakhus & Harrison, 2015; Harrison & Morrill, 2004). Communication design is a theoretical approach in its own right that focuses on creating or engineering communication practices and protocols to achieve desired processes and outcomes (see Figure 4: Communication Design Process). Communication design stems from early work in normative pragmatics (van Eemeren et al., 1993) on the design of argumentation and dispute resolution systems. Jackson (1998) expands on this sense of ideal argumentation and lays out key elements of a design approach for disputation. Many of the elements of communication design highlight key principals of engagement, including critical discussion and ideal models of discourse. Normative pragmatics is also value oriented toward “critical examination of discourse as a form of social engagement” (p. 188). Ultimately, Jackson (1998) defines discourse design as a “deliberate effort at management of talk” (p. 184). Aakhus (2007) elaborates on this and frames communication as design as attempts to make the impossible possible. This management of communication to achieve desired goals can be achieved through features that can be designed into or out of a communication process or interaction (Jackson, 1998), including mechanisms to encourage or evaluate expert opinion in decision-making (Jackson, 2015). These *design features* can take the role of either *protocols*, such as the typical steps found in a mediation process, or the design of specific *discourse acts* to guide conversation and dialogue to a preferred goal (Harrison & Morrill, 2004), such as when mediators select a certain thread of argument they feel is productive while ignoring other stories disputants tell. For example, a mediator may focus on the timing of handoffs in child visitation rather than narratives about irresponsibility – timing is concrete and much easier to solve than responsibility (e.g., Jacobs & Aakhus, 2002).



*\*Original figures created by the authors for this chapter.*

#### **Figure 4. Communication Design Process**

Harrison and Morrill (2004; also Harrison, 2014) elaborate on these design features (i.e., creation of dialogue, critique of process, etc.) in relation to mediation and ombuds processes. For example, most mediation processes are designed with interactions and protocols to gain early understanding of the dispute, but to quickly move toward resolution processes rather than blame. However, as Harrison and Morrill (2004) point out, designed features can have unintended consequences as well; therefore, attention to unintended consequences is a key element of the design process (Harrison, 2014; Jackson, 1998) as it allows for the refinement of design and improvement of the process. An example of this can be seen in the use of time to “cool out” disputants by an ombud. While this strategy has the intended goal of calming disputant emotions to facilitate engaged dialogue, in some cases it had the unintended outcome of disputants seeing the ombud as powerless and unwilling to move forward in resolving their case (Harrison & Doerfel, 2007). By necessity, design brings key stakeholders to the process to share in understanding, explore existing practices, and situate solutions to specific sites of action (Aakhus & Harrison, 2015; Barbour, Gill, & Dean, 2015; Harrison, 2014).

It is important to remember that design alone is not enough to create engagement (see O’Brien – Chapter xx) – as Taylor and Kent (2014) remind us, rules are necessary, but not sufficient. Equally important is trust and a willingness to engage. Interaction and dialogue can help facilitate this, but appropriate care and time must be dedicated to these issues. For example, Harrison and Doerfel (2006) show how an ombud was able to create conditions of trust through the use of active listening strategies and the use of unrestricted time for disputants to give voice to their concerns. Procedural strategies do not guarantee the perception of procedural fairness, which as the authors note is essential to deescalating conflict and transforming problematic situations into opportunities for rebuilding organizational trust (Harrison & Doerfel, 2006).

Ultimately, a communication design focus encourages critical reflection of desired outcomes and the ways in which communication can be designed to help achieve the ideal form or system. Specific conflict protocols are designed to focus on guilt, blame, or reconciliation, for example. However, systems designed to focus on guilt are

likely to preclude reconciliation because the exclusive focus is on placing blame for historical acts rather than discourse designed to find common ground for a shared future. Design encourages an evaluation of a specific context or site of action (Nelson & Stolterman, 2003), and the application of principles unique to that context as a way to improve communication and interaction processes (Harrison, 2014). Examination of key disputation systems, such as mediation (e.g., Jacobs & Aakhus, 2002), the San Francisco Community boards (Merry & Milner, 1993), or ombuds processes (Harrison, 2014) can help us understand key elements of design that influence engagement. Critical examination of the circumstances under which they work to encourage engagement (e.g., Harrison, Hopeck, Desrayaud, & Imboden, 2013) can help us refine disputing processes to encourage constructive engagement.

### **Games as Mechanisms for Engagement in Conflict**

Contrary to work in conflict engagement, this chapter outlines engagement in conflict as a proactive means of resolution. In order to best accomplish this, strategies in which individuals are less reactive to one another and to the event, are essential. There has been recent growing interest in the role of experiential learning opportunities (ELOs), such as game-based experiences, in the creation of bilateral spaces of purposeful conflict, or *conflictive engagement* (Wendorf Muhamad, 2016; see also Carcioppolo, Wendorf, & Tran, 2015). Games provide a clear example of how engagement can be presented in a way that reduces resistance can lead to resolution in conflict situations. Perhaps more importantly individuals are often unable to rehearse proactive/constructive (or any really) reactions to conflict. Games are a safe space in which individuals are not subjected to negative consequences and can practice and rehearse proactive and constructive scripts and schemas (and ways of managing destructive approaches) to enhance engagement and productive conflict resolution. Games use mechanisms such as elaborative narrative and character absorption, role identification or parasocial relationships, enactive learning, and cognitive-emotional processing, to provide contained areas in which difficult topics (i.e., gender equality, violence and harassment, sexual exploitation) can be thoroughly discussed with minimal consequences and/or repercussions (e.g., Wendorf Muhamad, 2016; Stokes, Seggerman and Rejeski, 2006). Serious games, or ELOs, hold the potential to serve as disruptors of systems as they provide a point of entry that garners less resistance from participants due to unobtrusive persuasive and prosocial subtext framed within entertainment media.

Commonly, there has been an underlying directionality to conflict – moving individuals out and away. To this end, various strategies, such as mediation, have been developed in an effort to reach *the other* side of conflict. In this relationship, conflict is viewed as a barrier to engagement and thus must be overcome. Conversely, ELOs drive individuals to conflict as a means of engagement. Games strategically position individuals in simulated environments that manifest underlying conflict, thus permitting individuals to openly process difficult and potential threatening situations. This process of shedding light on conflict through focused provocation challenges and disrupts systems and beckons individuals to engage with each other resolutely for the achievement of a common goal. In order for games to facilitate this process they must: a) create experiences structured around predetermined specific goals; b) encourage interpretation from participants so that learning and future problem solving is internalized; and c) provide participants with immediate feedback during the experience (Gee, 2007).

According to Abt (1970) serious games serve to highlight issues of great significance through raising questions that are not easily solved. Experientially-based role-playing scenarios provide an avenue for exploring how conflict arises (source), descriptive factors of conflict (how does it manifest and consequence), and potential resolution (rehearsal of strategies). Specifically, games invite participants to a fully engaged experience by providing facilitated spaces in which ideology, judgment, and negative implications are suspended, also known as *safe spaces*. These safe spaces allow for the expression and processing of a broader range of emotions (e.g., confrontation, reactivity) in where the intention is to simply become present to said emotions, dissonance, or conflict, and not seek their immediate resolution. Resolution then becomes a byproduct of collective processing through enacted situations that mirror real-life difficult social contexts. It is through this collective efficacious processing that engagement is attained. In this way, facilitated ELOs serve as activators of *conflictive engagement* in social settings through a process that includes information dissemination, retrieval of stored information, acquisition of new information, and enacted or simulated cognitive-emotional responses.

Traditionally, within organizations experientially-based strategies have been employed as learning tools that facilitate discussion. More frequently, conflict resolution based games present an opposing viewpoint in order to gain understanding of how others might feel, think, and process different scenarios. Through this process it is expected that participants participate in active listening, turn taking, and other pre-determined rules. The premise being that during these sessions of role-play there are no right or wrong answers, but instead open exploration of potential conflictive issues. Often, however, this strategy is used reactively (post emergence of conflict) as opposed to preemptively and does not consider elements such as tension as part of the engagement process. This is a key distinction as it lays out the goal of the game or simulation – to cool down conflict (resolve) and not to explore deeply the reasons why conflict emerged. To some degree, the sessions become about making sense of the conflict from the viewpoint of the other instead of engagement in conflict as a way to challenge disparate attitudes or beliefs. Although these strategies might serve short-term goals, they often fail to create spaces that purposefully disrupt systems that might breed conflict and/or the mitigating factors around the situation.

Beyond the more common role-playing strategies for conflict discussed above, there are other innovative ways in which conflict and engagement is enacted through experientially-based strategies. One such game is *Golombiao*, a conflict resolution game for Colombian youth developed by UNICEF and Colombia Joven (Colombia Joven, 2014). *Golombiao* is a modified version of traditional soccer in which youth must execute the values of non-violence, gender equity, pluriethnic diversity, and others. To start, team members meet game advisers or mediators (as there are no referees) on the field for a briefing. During this time all players actively participate in developing agreements for game play. Some agreements, however, are built into the game and non-negotiable, for example (1) first point must be scored by a female complying with gender equality and (2) thereafter, all points (goals) must be alternated between female and male until all players have had the opportunity to score. At the end of the match individuals again gather on the field with game advisers and discuss which team they believe upheld the pre-established agreements (game winner). Conversely, *Golombiao* is not singular



conflict scenario based actively, but instead positions individuals in a shared space that fosters tension through dismantling social constructs.

We see value in both traditional and novel forms of serious games for engagement in conflict processes. Traditional games have the potential to create constructive engagement around existing conflicts, while more novel approaches may work to alter systems that create conflict situations and provide opportunity for increased engagement overall. The body of scholarship on games is relatively new and growing, and we see great opportunity for both theoretical development of how serious games can increase engagement and productive conflict management, as well as opportunities for the development of new serious games themselves. We also see serious game design as compatible with the process of communication design presented above – with games serving as new protocols for conflict resolution.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of engagement in conflict is ever-present in the literature, but has received little formal elaboration. In this chapter we set forward a definition of constructive engagement in conflict and show how different styles of conflict management embody engagement. Additionally, we identify barriers and facilitators to engagement in conflict, and how engagement is enacted in mediation and negotiation processes. Conflict can also be used to spur on engagement in other areas, such as communities and organizations. Research and practice on conflict has also benefitted from different levels of engagement with scholar/practitioners and practitioner/scholars working toward improving both conflict resolution in the real world and theories for conflict management. Finally we advance communication design and interactive approaches as promising ways to facilitate productive engagement in conflict.

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