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CONFLICT FRAMES OF REFERENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DISPUTE PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

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Previous research has shown that disputants differ substantially in how they experience, or cognitively "frame," conflict—even the same conflict. We explored the influence of cognitive frames on negotiation processes and outcomes. Results suggest that such frames significantly influence the processes and outcomes of conflict along three specific dimensions.

Conflict must be effectively managed for an organization to achieve its goals (Roth & Sheppard, 1989). Before it can be managed, conflict must be acknowledged and defined by disputants. It may be difficult, however, for disputants to agree on what is in dispute in a shared conflict since they may experience, or frame, the same conflict in quite different ways. This is not to suggest that objective reality does not exist, only that disputants' subjective experience is their reality and thus determines the nature of the conflict for them (Klar, Bar-Tal, & Kruglanski, 1987). Although researchers have explored the specific ways in which disputants define or frame conflict (Donnellan & Gray, 1990; Pinkley, 1990; Roth & Sheppard, 1989), they have yet to examine the consequences of different conflict frames. The current study advances understanding of conflict frames by exploring their evolution during the process of negotiation and by examining their influence on the outcomes of negotiation.

Conflict frames are the lenses through which disputants view a conflict situation (Pinkley, 1990). They are perceptual sets or orientations (Deutsch, 1975) that lead disputants to focus on some characteristics of a conflict situation while ignoring others. Thus, conflict frames are pre- or metaschematic and serve to guide disputants' selection of the information they will perceive and interpret in terms of their schemata (Pinkley, 1990). Con-

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flict frames are manifested in disputants' verbal descriptions of conflict situations (Pinkley, 1990).

Frames have been characterized in research in conflict management (e.g., Roth & Sheppard, 1989), sociology (e.g., Goffman, 1974), and cognitive psychology (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) as thematic perceptual dispositions that increase the salience of frame-relevant information and decrease the salience of frame-irrelevant information. Thus, conflict frames invoke particular schemata and scripts and guide, perhaps at a subconscious level, individuals' information search, processing, and evaluation (Mather & Yngvesson, 1981).

Of course, the concept of conflict frames is predictively useful only to the extent that the frames that disputants use to acknowledge and define conflict can be systematically described—for instance, can a disputant's perceptual orientation be characterized as a point in n-dimensional space? Several researchers have agreed that the cognitive frames individuals use to understand conflict situations have reliable dimensions (e.g., Donnellan & Gray, 1990; Roth & Sheppard, 1989). Pinkley (1990) used multidimensional scaling to identify the conceptual dimensions necessary and sufficient to represent people's cognitive interpretations of conflict. Those data revealed three orthogonal dimensions of conflict frames: (1) relationship versus task, (2) emotional versus intellectual, and (3) cooperate versus win.

The first dimension, relationship/task, refers to variation in the extent to which disputants focus on the ongoing relationships with the other parties to a conflict. Disputants with a relationship orientation focus on interpersonal concerns and the relationship; disputants with a task orientation instead concentrate on material aspects of a dispute, such as money or property settlements. Pinkley's second dimension, emotional/intellectual, reflects the degree of attention disputants pay to the affective component of a dispute. Some disputants focus on the feelings involved, such as jealousy, hatred, anger, and frustration, and others focus instead on the actions and behaviors that occur. Pinkley's final dimension, cooperate/win, suggests that some disputants see both parties as responsible for the conflict and focus on minimizing the benefit to both parties, but others blame the other party and so concentrate on winning or at least maximizing their own gain, even at the expense of the other party. Pinkley's (1990) three dimensions together describe the perceptual frames disputants bring to a conflict situation and thereby systematically explain how people can perceive even the same conflict in quite different and possibly contradictory terms.

The study described in this article built on Pinkley's (1990) identification of the dimensions of conflict frames by exploring how they contribute to conflict processes and outcomes.

HYPOTHESES

Conflict Frame and Negotiation Process

Bartlett (1932) described frames as dynamic, changing patterns as opposed to static structures. Further, Donnellon and Gray (1990) postulated

that negotiation is a process of framing and reframing the parameters and definition of a dispute. Just as past experiences help determine the cognitive frames that a disputant brings to a dispute, new experiences during the dispute, such as interaction with the other disputant, should also influence the disputants' frames. Specifically, one disputant's focus on and discussion of particular aspects of a dispute is likely to make those aspects of the dispute more salient for the other disputant. Donnellon and Gray argued that negotiators exposed to the dispute interpretation of the other party are likely to alter their own interpretation to incorporate the other disputant's frame. As disputants share information and raise the salience of the issues important to each other, disputants' cognitive frames should become more similar. Thus, a first set of predictions concerns changes expected to occur in disputants' cognitive frames as a function of their negotiation interaction.

> *Hypothesis 1: Disputants' conflict frames will converge, or become more similar, during negotiation.*

Conflict Frame and Negotiation Outcomes

The second set of predictions concerns the effects of disputants' conflict frames on conflict outcomes, or settlements. These hypotheses focus on disputants' postnegotiation frames—the frames disputants have *after* they have negotiated—because, as noted above, negotiation is expected to alter the way disputants frame a conflict. In fact, it should be precisely these changes in the way disputants frame a conflict that help them move from conflict to resolution. Predictions were made regarding four components of conflict outcome: monetary gain, the relationship between disputants, disputant satisfaction, and issues included in the settlement.

Disputants' conflict frames were expected to influence the types of issues included in settlements. Because conflict frames lead disputants to focus on some characteristics of a conflict and ignore others, conflict frames determine what issues disputants believe need to be negotiated and specified in a settlement. In particular,

> *Hypothesis 2: Disputants whose postnegotiation cognitive frames are relationship-focused will include in final settlements more relationship-maintenance issues than will task-focused disputants.*

> *Hypothesis 3: Disputants whose postnegotiation cognitive frames are emotion-focused will include in final settlements more methods for reducing the negative affect arising from disputes than will intellectually focused disputants.*

No predictions were made about the types of issues that will be included in the settlements of disputants with cooperation- or winning-focused frames. The cooperate/win dimension reflects differences in perceptions of how resources should be divided. Thus, this dimension does not imply what issues a settlement should include.

In many real-life conflicts, disputants have complementary preferences—they can jointly maximize their settlements by cooperating and trading trivial issues for important ones rather than competing with each other (Thompson & Hastie, 1988). Fisher and Ury (1981) argued that excessive concern with relationship-maintenance issues at the expense of more task-related considerations may inhibit effective conflict resolution. Further, several researchers (e.g., Carnevale & Isen, 1986) have argued that focusing on emotions during negotiation can lead to suboptimal decisions. Finally, Thompson and Hastie (1988) found that disputants who perceive conflict in "fixed-pie," competitive terms fail to discover potential integrative trade-offs, thus obtaining outcomes of lower monetary value. Thus, we predicted that

> *Hypothesis 4: Disputants who are relationship-focused, emotion-focused, or winning-focused after negotiation will achieve lower joint monetary outcomes than, respectively, task-, intellect-, or cooperation-focused negotiators because of their failure to find integrative monetary trade-offs.*

Complementary preferences offer disputants the opportunity to create value (increase the size of the pie) by discovering integrative trade-offs; however, claiming value—determining how much or which pieces of the enlarged pie either disputant demands or receives—is a conceptually distinct process from creating value (Lax & Sebenius, 1986). Relationship- and emotion-focused disputants are expected to focus on nonmonetary aspects of conflict, such as continuing a business relationship or receiving an apology. These negotiators are expected to focus on claiming nonmonetary outcomes. Cooperation-focused negotiators are expected to find more ways than those focused on winning to gain monetary value in exchange for concessions of less value. Thus, the amount of the resource pie obtained by cooperation-focused negotiators should be worth more than the amount obtained by winning-focused negotiators. Thus,

> *Hypothesis 5: Disputants who are relationship-focused, emotion-focused, or winning-focused after negotiation will achieve lower personal monetary outcomes than, respectively, task-, intellect-, or cooperation-focused disputants.*

METHODS

Subjects and Scenario

The hypotheses were tested in the context of a dyadic negotiation simulation. Subjects were 150 master of business administration (M.B.A.) degree candidates. Of those reporting gender, 82 subjects were men and 56 were women. The subjects' ages ranged from 22 to 44 years, and their mean work experience was 3.6 years. Subjects volunteered to participate in partial fulfillment of a required course on negotiation.

The subjects were randomly assigned in dyads to roles in a conflict scenario in which two salespersons employed by the same company negotiate the distribution of sales territories. One of the salespersons, described as part of the company's "old guard," has more experience and seniority. The other salesperson is said to be new to the company but to currently have the highest sales in the company. The dispute is described as one of a series of disagreements between the old guard and the "young Turks." The "role-play" is a scoreable negotiation, in which actual dollar values of settlements can be calculated for each disputant, and thus monetary gain can be used as a measure of outcome; the negotiation scenario contains opportunities for integrative trade-offs that enhance joint outcomes.

Procedures

There were four phases in the experimental procedure. In phase 1, the role-play materials were distributed, and subjects familiarized themselves with the assigned conflict scenario and their own role descriptions. The subjects were informed that the negotiated outcomes, whether settlements or impasses, would be posted following the negotiation and discussed in a classroom context.

In phase 2, subjects filled out a prenegotiation questionnaire that included these three questions: (1) "Briefly tell me what you think this conflict is really about?" (2) "What do you think is at the heart of this conflict?" and (3) "What do you want to come out of this conflict? That is, how would you like to see this conflict settled?" These three questions, which were taken from earlier research (Pinkley, 1990), were used to assess the way subjects initially framed the conflict scenario.

In phase 3, the subjects were given 45 minutes to negotiate in dyads. In phase 4, they filled out a postnegotiation questionnaire that contained four questions concerning disputants' (1) postnegotiation descriptions of the conflict (Pinkley, 1990), (2) descriptions of the settlement obtained, if any, (3) satisfaction with the settlement, measured by responses to a single seven-point Likert-scale item, and (4) perceptions of how the negotiation affected their relationship. Those perceptions were measured as the sum of subjects' responses to two 7-point Likert-scale items: "To what extent did the negotiation improve or patch up existing problems in the business relationship?" and "How willing would you be to continue to do business with this individual?"

Two graduate students blind to the purpose of the study rated the degree to which each subjects' descriptions of the conflict scenario both before and after the negotiation and the contents of the settlement obtained reflected Pinkley's (1990) dimensions. After receiving a brief description of each of the three dimensions, each rater judged each subject's descriptions using three 7-point scales with ranges from 1, relationship, to 7, task; from 1, emotional, to 7, intellectual; and from 1, cooperate, to 7, win. To prevent contamination effects across measures within individuals, the raters evaluated the subjects' prenegotiation, postnegotiation, and settlement descrip-

tions separately.[1] The raters' assessments proved highly reliable. We measured reliability using the procedure recommended by James, Demaree, and Wolf (1984); Table 1 gives coefficient alphas. The ratings for the descriptions represent the subjects' prenegotiation frame, postnegotiation frame, and settlement measures, respectively.

RESULTS

It is important to note that every level of the three dimensions of conflict frames was represented in disputants' descriptions of the conflict. This finding corroborates Pinkley's (1990) finding that disputants do frame even the same conflict quite differently.

Table 1 gives the intercorrelations of the three dimensions of conflict frames. The three dimensions proved to be statistically independent, with no "pairwise" significant correlations emerging.

Changes in Conflict Frames During Negotiation

Several statistics were computed to examine changes in disputants' frames during negotiation. First, we calculated the difference between disputants' frames within dyads across all three dimensions and before and after negotiation. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed a marginally significant multivariate main effect for time for the differences across the three dimensions ($F_{1,67} = 3.89$, $p = .05$) and a significant multivariate interaction between time and conflict frame dimension ($F_{2,134} = 4.50$, $p < .02$). In partial support of Hypothesis 1, follow-up analysis revealed convergence within dyads of disputants' cooperate/win ($\overline{D} = -0.92$)[2] and emotional/intellectual dimensions ($\overline{D} = -0.31$), though only for the cooperate/win dimension did this convergence reach significance ($t_{69} = 3.35$, $p < .01$). The relationship/task dimension did not converge ($\overline{D} = 0.18$, n.s.).

In further support of Hypothesis 1, follow-up nonparametric analyses also revealed significant relationships between the size of the prenegotiation differences within dyads along the conflict frame dimensions and the amount of change in disputants' frames for the emotional/intellectual ($\chi^2 = 34.45$, $p < .01$) and relationship/task ($\chi^2 = 23.47$, $p < .01$) dimensions only. If disputants' differences in frames were large before a negotiation, significant change occurred along these two dimensions; if prenegotiation differences were small, significant change did not occur along these dimensions. No significant relationship was found for the cooperate/win dimension.

Finally, separate regression analyses for the three dimensions of conflict frames revealed that, with a subject's own prenegotiation frame controlled for, the other disputant's prenegotiation frame significantly influenced the focal person's postnegotiation frame for the relationship/task ($\Delta R^2 = 0.034$,

[1] For example, the raters evaluated all the prenegotiation descriptions first and then shuffled and scored the postnegotiation descriptions.

[2] $\overline{D}$ specifies the mean of the different scores.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations[a]

Variables	α	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Prenegotiation frames															
1. Relationship/task	.95	5.86	1.98												
2. Emotional/intellectual	.87	6.24	1.50	.04											
3. Cooperate/win	.91	2.84	2.37	.11	−.13										
Postnegotiation frames															
4. Relationship/task	.96	5.75	1.90	.39*	−.04	.00									
5. Emotional/intellectual	.83	6.37	1.40	.02	.30*	−.13	.14								
6. Cooperate/win	.89	1.86	1.90	.07	.00	.42*	.18*	−.16							
Settlement descriptions															
7. Relationship/task	.84	6.50	1.28	.07	−.00	−.06	.23*	−.00	−.02						
8. Emotional/intellectual	.82	6.80	1.01	−.01	−.00	.08	−.02	.29*	−.07	.08					
9. Cooperate/win	.83	1.22	0.96	−.12	−.09	.05	−.13	−.22	.26*	−.12	−.29				
Negotiation outcomes															
10. Disputants' relationship		10.57	3.02	−.06	.04	−.01	−.22*	.20*	−.08	−.22*	.18*	−.09			
11. Disputant satisfaction		6.14	1.06	.20*	.11	−.01	−.05	.25*	−.02	−.10	−.06	.01	.14		
12. Personal monetary outcome		9,661	1,193	.16*	−.09	−.10	.16*	.13	−.20*	.11	−.05	−.19*	−.12	.11	
13. Joint monetary outcome		19,343	2,266	.17*	−.09	−.07	.17*	.11	−.20*	.11	−.07	−.22*	−.15	.09	.93*

[a] $N = 134$.
* $p < .05$

$F_{2,140} = 3.85$, $p < .05$) and emotional/intellectual ($\Delta R^2 = .10$, $F_{2,142} = 9.757$, $p < .01$) dimensions but did not for the compete/win dimension ($\Delta R^2 = .00$, n.s.). Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that disputants' conflict frames influence each other during negotiation.

Conflict Frames and Negotiation Outcomes

As Table 1 shows, an analysis of disputants' postnegotiation conflict frames demonstrated a significant correlation between the relationship/task and cooperate/win dimensions. Also shown in Table 1 are the correlations among disputants' postnegotiation conflict frames and the contents of disputants' descriptions of the settlements. In support of Hypotheses 2 and 3, disputants' past negotiation conflict frames were significantly correlated with the contents of the settlement descriptions. Of the 75 negotiating dyads in the study, only 1 failed to reach agreement.

A MANOVA examined the effects of the three dimensions of disputants' conflict frames across four outcome variables: disputant satisfaction, perceived future relationship with the other disputant, personal monetary outcome, and joint monetary outcome. Personal monetary outcome is the total dollar value of the settlement obtained by each disputant, and joint monetary outcome is the total dollar value of the settlement obtained by a dyad and provides an indirect measure of the extent to which disputants were able to integrate their preferences. As Table 2 shows, significant multivariate main effects were found across the four outcome variables for all three dimensions.

Four univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) examined the effects of the postnegotiation conflict frames on each of the four separate outcome variables (Table 2). The postnegotiation measures of the relationship/task and emotional/intellectual dimensions had significant effects on the perceived future relationship between the disputants. Thus, findings support Hypothesis 2. Disputants with a relationship or an intellectual frame were more likely to report that the negotiation had been good for their relationship with the other party. The postnegotiation measure of the emotional/intellectual dimension significantly affected disputant satisfaction with the negotiation. In support of Hypothesis 3, disputants with intellectual frames were more satisfied with the negotiation. The postnegotiation measures of the relationship/task and cooperate/win dimensions also had significant effects on both personal and joint monetary outcomes, with both task- and cooperation-focused disputants achieving significantly better outcomes. Contrary to our predictions, the emotional/intellectual dimension did not relate to personal or joint monetary outcome. These results support Hypotheses 4 and 5 in that cooperation-focused disputants obtained significantly better monetary outcomes. Contrary to the predictions of Hypotheses 4 and 5, disputants focused on tasks also obtained significantly better monetary outcomes, and relationship-focused disputants did not.

TABLE 2
Results of Multivariate and Univariate Analyses

Variables	Wilks's Lambda	β	*F*	*t*	R^2
Multivariate model	.765		3.15**		
Relationship/task	.895		3.90**		
Emotional/intellectual	.926		2.64*		
Cooperate/win	.888		4.19**		
Univariate dependent measures					
Disputants' relationship			3.40*		
Relationship/task		0.33		−2.44*	
Emotional/intellectual		0.33		1.82*	
Cooperate/win		−0.07		−0.51	.049
Satisfaction			1.93		
Relationship/task		0.02		−0.44	
Emotional/intellectual		0.15		2.39*	
Cooperate/win		0.01		0.25	.020
Personal monetary outcome			6.37***		
Relationship/task		145.27		2.81**	
Emotional/intellectual		9.66		0.14	
Cooperate/win		−190.06		−3.69***	.103
Joint monetary outcome			6.61***		
Relationship/task		293.79		2.96**	
Emotional/intellectual		−57.41		−0.43	
Cooperate/win		−381.90		−3.86***	.107

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

It is certainly not news that members of organizations differ in how they cognitively experience what goes on around them—in particular, the conflicts in which they are involved. It is important news, however, that those experiential differences can be characterized systematically and that those systematic differences have implications for the type and quality of settlements individuals obtain.

Disputants' conflict frames mutually influenced each other, converging during the process of negotiation. This finding is interesting because it implies that an individual's conflict frame may be at least in part a function of context and therefore susceptible to change. Whether conflict frames are states or traits and how they evolve across conflicts should be explored further (Bryne & Kelley, 1981). The present findings further imply that the greater the difference between disputants' frames, the greater the convergence during negotiation. Care must be taken when interpreting these results, however, because all but one dyad in this negotiation reached an agreement. It may be that disputants with very disparate frames would fail to

reach agreement. Perhaps convergence is not a necessary result of negotiation but is instead a necessary prerequisite if a negotiation is to be successful. Clearly, this pattern should be studied further.

What implications do differences in disputants' conflict frames have for the processes and outcomes of conflict? The results of this study show that disputants receive settlements of the greatest monetary value, both in terms of the resources they find to divide through integrative trade-offs and the portion of these resources they obtain, when they and their negotiating partners have task rather than relationship or cooperation rather than winning frames following negotiation. It must be remembered, however, that although a task orientation may promote good monetary outcomes, relationship-framing is associated with continued and perhaps improved working relationships. Thus, the combination of frames that produces the outcomes of the highest value may depend upon the kinds of issues disputants value.

Disputants with cooperation frames also monetarily outperformed those with winning frames. Past research has suggested that cooperation-oriented disputants are better able to find the integrative trade-offs that enhance joint gain (Fisher & Ury, 1981). In this study, they were more successful than negotiators focused on winning at detecting and implementing advantageous exchanges and consequently obtained greater pieces of the monetary pie. An important question for future research is whether this pattern would also hold in a distributive (zero-sum) negotiation.

Neither individual nor joint monetary gain was correlated with disputant conflict frame on the emotional/intellectual dimension. However, that dimension was the only one to relate to disputant satisfaction with the outcome. This finding may account for the failure of past research to document a relationship between the value of the settlement obtained and negotiator satisfaction. It may be that the two are not related. One mechanism may influence value and another, satisfaction. In this study, relationship/task and cooperate/win frames determined the type and value of an outcome, and emotional/intellectual frames determined disputants' satisfaction with the outcome. The results of this study thus imply that one dimension of disputant frames, the tendency to focus on actions or facts rather than on the affective experience, accounts for differences in satisfaction.

The results of this study underscore the importance of viewing dispute settlements as multidimensional. Some negotiators produce outcomes that focus on issues other than monetary gain, such as the relationship between the two individuals. Differences in conflict frames reflect differences in conflict focus. Although what a negotiator focuses on is not the same as what the negotiator values, differences in focus were found to affect the type of issues included in settlements. It seems important to determine if frame produces outcomes independent of a negotiator's utility model, or payoff table.[3] The

[3] A utility model represents the value the negotiator assigns to each possible outcome (continued)

results for our relationship-oriented negotiators are a case in point. These subjects obtained lower monetary gain than task-focused subjects but reported a higher probability of continuing and improving the relationship. If conflict frame is unrelated to a negotiator's utility model, despite the fact that it influences outcome, relationship-focused negotiators should report a utility model much like those provided by task-focused negotiators but obtain a different total score for outcome. If, instead, utility model and outcome are highly correlated, relationship- and task-focused negotiators should report very different utility models, but similar total outcomes. The question is whether frame merely influences negotiators' ability to obtain what they value or whether it also influences whether they value what they obtain.

Integrative bargaining is premised on the notion that disputants may value two components of a settlement differently. For instance, when both disputants value money, two of the items in dispute may have complementary monetary values for them. These differences in value allow for the occurrence of mutually beneficial trade-offs, the basis of integrative bargaining. In addition to trading differentially valued components within dimensions of settlements, disputants who see a conflict in terms of different issues may be able to trade gains related to the issues in which each primarily frames the conflict. A disputant who frames what is in dispute in terms of relationship issues may be willing to trade task issues seen as less central to the conflict to reach agreement; a disputant who frames the same conflict in terms of task issues would have complementary inclinations. If such scenarios are valid, negotiators should learn to anticipate or at least understand the conflict frames that their opponents bring to disputes. Indeed, it may be important to determine if managers can learn to recognize the conflict frames of others and whether such information is of strategic use in negotiations.

These possibilities highlight the double value of communication and information collection as negotiation tools. Previous researchers have touted communication and information collection (e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981) as important tactics for identifying the values different disputants attach to settlement components, thereby allowing the identification of potentially integrative trade-offs. As this study demonstrates, disputants frame the same conflicts differently, which suggests that communication and information collection are critical to identifying what issues each party feels are in dispute. It is important that those intervening in a conflict both be sensitive to the possibility of differences among disputants' conflict frames and acknowledge those differences when identifying issue trade-offs that will promote satisfactory conflict management. This argument is not intended to suggest that conflicts cannot be negotiated or resolved by disputants with different conflict frames, only that information about those differences might

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across and within the issues to be negotiated. In this study, each negotiator received a payoff table that specified their assigned utility model.

help disputants to understand the perspective of the other party and increase the value of the settlement for both parties. Conflict frames may provide an important tool both for improving the quality of negotiated agreements and for enhancing the ability to resolve disputes among organization members.

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