

Dealing with Conflicts in Social Work – A Discussion on Thomas-Kilmann Model Applicability in Social Work

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Abstract. *Dealing with conflicts is not one of the major discussions of social work practice and theory, although, as argued in this article, the purpose of social work is to operate with conflicts. Generally, conflicts can occur in diverse situations such as at the individual level, with service users and other professional partners, or when working with groups and communities, and even at the social level with state institutions. Taking into consideration the complexity of the concept, this article provides a typology of conflicts within profession and also discusses a potential theoretical model of intervention when approaching conflicts within social work. The Thomas-Kilmann model/instrument (TKI) has been extensively used in the last few decades within social sciences as a veritable tool on how to deal with conflictual situations, but not used in social work. Therefore, the paper serves as an initial discussion for further empirical studies and theoretical considerations.*

Keywords: conflicts, social work conflicts, Thomas-Kilmann model

Introduction

Social work is a profession which aims to achieve social well-being. According to IFSW's definition (2014), social work has the mission to act in favor of social justice, social change and social cohesion. Moreover, the ethical principles of the profession underline the role of social workers as agents of change who engage in actions of challenging discrimination, institutional oppression, unjust policies and practices (IFSW, 2014). These are only some of the macro-actions that directly generate conflicts (e.g. social workers vs power holders/political climate), because, in fact, a social change requires to challenge status quo which frequently shows resistance to change. This proves the fact that social work encourages not only social change but also conflicts, when there is the need to fight in favor of social justice or defending human

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rights. However, for a better understanding on how conflicts can appear within and around social work, there is the need to discuss the concept of conflict and situations when it manifests.

Conflict – conceptualization

In broad terms, a *conflict* defines a situation of disagreement or resentment between two or more parts, when their goals or interests seems to be incompatible (Deutsch, Coleman, 2014 ; Kelley *et al.*, 2003 ; Nicholson, 1992). A definition that can resonate well to social work is provided by Lewicki *et al.* (1997), who understand conflict as a form of „interaction of interdependent people who perceived incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving these goals” (234). In social work philosophy, this definition might relate to the idea that the mission and goals of the profession is not shared by other stakeholders who can be states, political actors, other professionals, or even the clients of social work who show resistance in collaborating with the professionals. In any case, conflict as a component of social work action is not a new debate. Netting *et al.* (1993) argue that „conflict is inevitable in social work practice. There will be times in the experience of every macro practitioner when incredible resistance is encountered in addressing the needs of oppressed population groups” (255).

However, as a result of its applications in several domains and disciplines (e.g. politics, management, sociology, social work, education), the term *conflict* has been debated and interpreted in many other ways. From a sociological perspective, conflict is a normal part of human society and it is a result of imbalanced distribution of the „scarce resources”, which in a Weberian view refers to power, status, and class (Weber, 1947). Also, another prominent sociologist on conflict theory, Karl Marx, sees conflict as fundamental element of social and class transformation (Marx, [1859] 1971).

It is acknowledged that the Marxist theory is the root of the radical approach in social work. In Ferguson’s (2011) view, Marxism focuses on dealing with essential aspects in society that can obstruct its development, such as class domination, inequality, exploitation, distribution of wealth ; but in order to challenge these aspects, social workers should engage in conflictual situations.

The idea of state domination as a conflict generator is also supported by Burton (1979), who argues that conflicts appear as a result of unfulfilled human needs created and maintained by the state institutions. Adapting the pyramid needs of Maslow to conflict theory, Burton classifies these needs as follow : *safety/ security* (stability), *belongingness* (the need of being accepted in a collective), *self-esteem* (the recognition of the abilities/capabilities), *personal fulfilment* (possibility of achieving the potential in every aspect of life), *freedom* (the condition of enjoying personal choices without physical or political constrains), *cultural security* (conditions of having the possibility to practice own religion, language, ideas), *identity* (to be recognized as an individual with personal characteristics), *participation* (having the possibility to influence the civil society and to be politically active), *distributive justice* (a fair distribution of resources/wealth among all people belonging to a community). Technically, the activity of social workers is strongly related to the fact that these needs are not collectively

satisfied, and moreover, social workers take the lead to solve the conflicts and often, for instance, they become part of the conflict when strongly advocate for the rights of the clients.

Types of conflicts

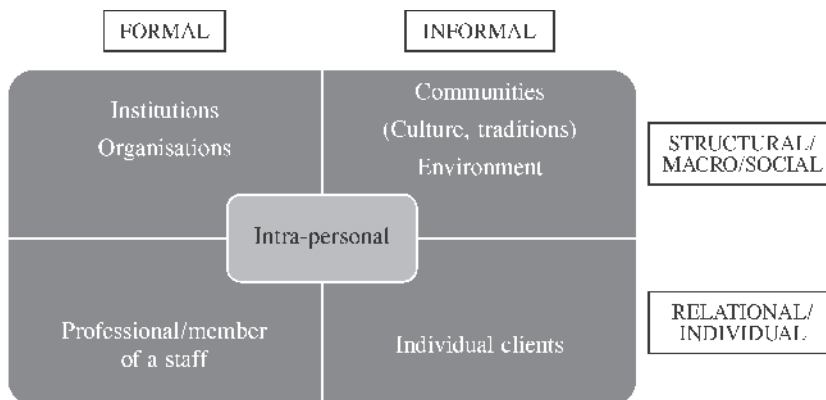
As mentioned above the level of conflicts could be different and they do not refer only to presence of violence, but also imply the presence of any kind of tension that can disturb the good functioning of an individual/community. Folarin (2013) acknowledges in the literature several variations of conflicts in human society. The first type of conflict is *intra-personal*, or as coined by Lamb (2008) – „man against self”, basically defining the internal conflicts determined by internal struggles of a person with their habits and minds (e.g. anger, depression, addiction). A second type of conflicts refers to *inter-personal conflicts*, „man against man”, which involves two people and can appear in fights, sport competitions, or implicit hostility in a couple. The third type of conflicts that Folarin (2013) mentions is related to outside factors: *society and nature*. Here social phenomena (such as human trafficking, corruption, poverty) and environmental issues and disasters (such as climate change, epidemics, hurricanes) are included. Another type of conflicts refers to structural conflicts, such as *inter-group conflict* (e.g. ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, minorities vs majority); *intra-state conflicts* (appear as a result of imbalanced power and resources in a specific society/state); *inter-state conflicts* (between states, and can lead to wars); and *global conflicts* (e.g. First and Second World War).

Regarding social work, there are several studies that highlight the conflicts at intra-personal level (e.g. personal values vs professional values vs religious belief) (Comartin, Gonzalez Prendes, 2011; Osteen, 2011; Stewart, 2009; Valutis, Rubin, 2016). These can be, for example, situations when a social worker with religious beliefs would need to work with a service user who does contradict, to some extent, their religious values (e.g. member of the LGBTQ+, sex-workers, or drug addicted persons). Here, the professional is in a position of inner conflict in which they will have to manage the tension religious belief vs professional values.

Additionally, as aforementioned, social workers may experience other types of conflicts, for example, with individuals (clients or colleagues), communities, or institutions (Furman, 2001; Reamer, 1982). Some examples that illustrate these situations can be when a social worker faces resistance from a service user to work on an issue, and similarly, when other professionals (teachers, medical doctors, psychologists) refuse to cooperate in a specific case. More structural conflicts can happen when professional values enter in conflict with measures undertaken by an institution or organization (e.g. a law that affects social work clients), or when a social worker would face cultural values/beliefs of a community (e.g. early marriages).

Based on these discussions, I review the potential conflicts in social work as following (figure 1): *Intra-personal conflicts* (personal values vs professional ethics and dilemmas) and *conflicts with other parties* (other professionals, clients, institutions/organizations and cultural/traditional communities/environment crisis). Where the

intra-personal conflicts can also be understood as an intersectional result of the other domains of conflict. For example, a social worker can have an innerconflict when working with a client of whom circumstances oppose to the norms and policies of a specific institution. Also, there could be the situation when another professional (e.g. teacher) does not want to work with a specific community because of various reasons, and the social worker needs to mediate the tension or to take sides.



Source : Author’s classifications of conflicts in social work

Figure 1. Level and types of conflicts in social work

Taking into account this analysis, the domains that generate conflicts can have different dimensions. The first dimension refers to the *formal* aspect of professions and institutions dominated by policies, procedures, ethics, and services. The *informal* dimension comprises aspects and activities of everyday life that influence the behavior of individuals (e.g. religious values, traditions, customs, elements of the culture, natural factors) and they are not part of the institutionalized context. A third dimension involves the aspect of *individuality*. Moreover, this describes the cases when a social worker has a conflict with a singular person, which can be a client or other professionals. Finally, the *structural/macro* dimension refers to conflicts generated by a social worker and a group of individuals which might include communities, families, institutions, organizations, and the state.

Dealing with social conflicts

However, it is globally acknowledged, with a clear mission and goals social work has different degrees of power to produce social change and therefore to solve or to deal with social conflicts (especially at the structural level), or to minimize the consequences of the social conflicts. In fact, it is very difficult to specify when social work intervention wins over a conflict. However, there are some indicators that can be used in order to measure the success of social work involvement.

For instance, there are countries with a long and rich history of social work profession such as the UK and USA, but also with an advanced economy, where social

workers developed a strong voice and contributed to important social changes in society, such as policies against poverty or laws against discrimination (Hare, 2004 ; Higginbotham, 2011), but this does not mean that the overall conflict has been crushed and poverty or discrimination was eradicated. Also, social work systems from Scandinavian countries gained international recognition of good practices because of the positive results in the areas of child/family protection and youth work, especially in working with migrants and refugees (Berg-le Clercq *et al.*, 2014 ; Orange, 2017). However, this does not mean that the community issues were totally solved.

On the other hand, there are cases such as African countries where social work has mainly a curative role and little power to solve the social problems and to produce a substantial change. This happens due to the lack of qualified social workers, economical constrains, the weak identity of social work profession in the region (Chitereka, 2009). This is the case of impossibility to reach notable social change, and therefore, illustrates the powerlessness of winning important battles with the social conflict.

Particularly, in Romania, after three decades from the re-establishment of the profession, social work is still in the process of building its own identity. Additionally, the Romanian social work system was severely affected by the post-communist slow transition period and institutional disorganization, as well as by the impact of neoliberalism (e.g. austerity, high level of managerialism and bureaucracy) (Lazăr *et al.*, 2016). These factors prevented social work profession to perform significant social changes.

On short, success of the social work profession over social conflicts depends on several factors and situations. These can be related to the development of the profession (e.g. qualified staff, infrastructure), the economic situation of each country or region, the prestige of the profession in a specific jurisdiction, or the regional goals targeted. However, taking into account the evaluation of the profession, the influence of the current social movements, the impact of technology/social media, and the topic of conflicts, social work needs more discussions and research that will have the goal to improve the conditions of the profession to get a positive result over the encountered conflicts.

In order to approach and deal with conflicts, social workers assume some crucial roles. There is the role of *advocate* that adopts conflict as a part of social intervention at every level, from micro (individuals, families) to mezzo (communities) or macro-social level. As examples could be mentioned : tackling social injustice, oppression, violation of human rights. These could mean to represent the interest of under-privileged people (communities, groups, families), to act to change their situations. In this context, the social worker is the one who assists and gives the people „their own voice to their wishes, needs and aspirations” (Asquith *et al.*, 2005, 19). Referring to individual level, a social worker can become an advocate when supporting individuals who are in conflict with an institution or with other members of their families or neighbors. On the other hand, there is the role of *mediator* or *facilitator*, who has the main goal to solve the conflict, which involves social workers in the processes of conflict resolution and conflict management (Parsons, 1991).

Conflict resolution generally defines a process of mediating disputes and which involves a third-party intervention (Heery, Noon, 2017) ; where in this situation, social workers can play the role of mediators. More concretely in social spectrum, conflict

resolution represents the „methods and process of negotiation, arbitration, and institution building which promote the peaceful ending of social conflict” (Brown *et al.*, 2018). The presence of peaceful ending or non-violence is a widespread goal in the interpretation of conflict resolution (Keefe, Koch, 1999 ; de Matos, 2014 ; Reardon, 2001). This goal is part of social work role as well.

As plagued by the IFSW, social work aims to contribute to peace building through „developing frameworks of respectful dialogue leading to cooperation and lives built on equality and justice” (Martinez, Truell, 2019, n. p.), from which I interpret that for social work, conflict resolution means realizing or contributing to social change ; and this social change should be built on the pillars of social justice and equality, and in the benefit of the oppressed.

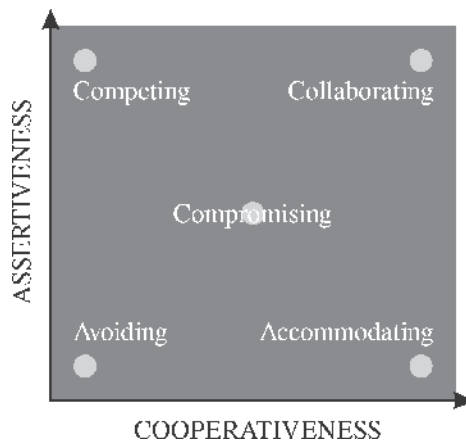
Conflict management, on the other hand, defines an intervention which aims to affect the course of the entire conflict situation in a way that negative aspects, such as hostility or violence, are eradicated/diminished. Therefore, the new context offers the possibility to find and to provide an acceptable solution for every party involved in the initial conflict (Bercovitch, 1983). The main difference between conflict resolution and conflict management consists in the way of approaching the conflictual situation. If for the former, resolution, the aim is to finish, to end the conflict, for the latter, management of conflict, the goal is to explore the conflict and to make progress, as it is used as a technique to develop teamwork (Correia, 2005 ; Hempel *et al.*, 2009 ; Somech *et al.*, 2009). This article, however, explores another approach/ tool widely used in dealing with conflicts, the Thomas-Kilmann model, through which I generate a discussion on its applicability on social work settings.

Some insights of section I :

- Conflict is a normal fact of human existence and social work profession does not make exception ;
- Because of the nature of defending human rights and promoting social justice, social work is in a permanent relation of conflict with oppressive regimes/states/ societies ;
- Conflicts in a society have multiple sources, but essentially they start from unfulfilled needs of people ;
- Social workers should involve themselves in conflicts in order to address the needs of the service users ;
- Social workers can have conflicts at multiple levels : with self (intra-personal), with other individuals (clients, professionals), or macro (state, institutions, communities) ;
- Socio-conflicts such as social injustice, discrimination and poverty are difficult to manage ;
- Conflict resolution and conflict management are two possibilities in approaching conflicts in social work ;
- There is a need of research which can contribute to the field of conflicts in social work.

The Thomas-Kilmann model

The model developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (1976) is a conceptual instrument that assesses conflict styles and helps organizations to better handle the potential conflicts in a team. Widely used in large companies, this model also gained popularity among public institutions. Essentially, the Thomas-Kilmann instrument (TKI) evaluates the behaviors of individuals in a conflict situation, how they react to certain situations and what is the most appropriate way to intervene. TKI is determined by two dimensions: assertiveness (how much we care about our own agenda) and cooperativeness (how much we care about the relation with the other part/s). Based on the low or high degree individual predispositions to these two indicators, there will result five possible styles in dealing with the conflicts: avoiding, competing, compromising, accommodating, collaborating (figure 2).



Source: <https://kilmanniagnostics.com/>

Figure 2. TKI Conflict Styles

Explanation of each style :

Avoiding : Not responsive at the needs of other part, nor interested in achieving a specific goal. Refuses conflict.

Competing : Very focused on their agenda/goals and much less interested on the needs of others. Tries to win at any price, even using their power or position.

Accommodating : It is the opposite of competing. Basically, they neglect their own needs in order to satisfy the need of the other because they care about the relationship more than about their own goals.

Compromising : It is the middle ground between competing and accommodating, which offers a quick and reasonable solution for both parties, but it does not explore in-depth the situation/conflict.

Collaborating : This happens when both parties are working together to satisfy the concerns of both. They are exploring the situation in order to find a creative solution to meet both needs.

Although some of the styles/behaviors might sound relatively unfavorable, they have demonstrated their effectiveness in different situations. For instance, in an emergency situation or in conflicts that deal with institutional issues, the competing style seems to be the most suitable to utilize. Moreover, when both parties look for a rapid and temporary solution, compromising might be the right attitude. When an issue is not important and the confrontation is highly consuming, then using the avoiding strategy might represent a good solution. Additionally, accommodating represents a good reaction when the relation with the other party is more important than temporary personal needs. And finally, cooperating is the best choice when dealing with concerns on long terms, or when there is the need to see other perspectives/views in a specific issue.

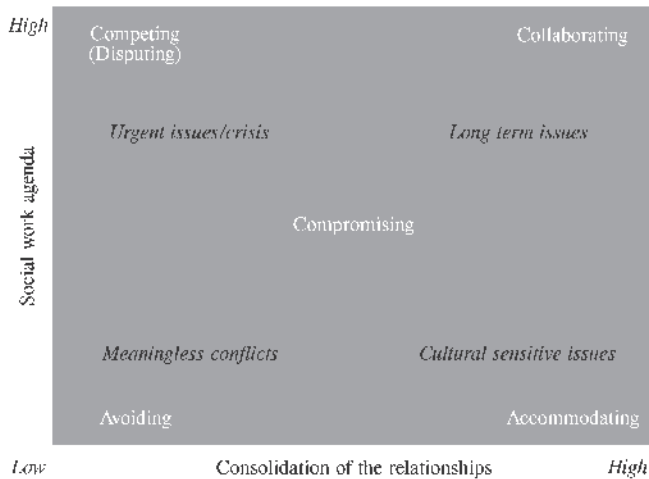
Applicability of the Thomas-Kilmann model in social work

The model has been applied to several professions and fields. There are empirical studies using TKI in professional areas with high predisposition to stress such as health care (Reich *et al.*, 2007), educational management (Riasi, Asadzadeh, 2015), or negotiation contexts (Koley, Rao, 2018; Shell, 2001; Zarembo, Kersten, 2006). Studies in social work using this method were not found, therefore this article aims to bring into discussion a possible adaptation of TKI for the social work profession.

As discussed in the first section, social workers can face conflicts on multiple levels : social, community, individual or inter-personal. Using the frameworks set by the Thomas-Kilmann model, I argue that by analyzing the level of conflicts and assigning them to social work contexts and values, a new theoretical framework in dealing with social work conflicts can be advanced.

It is important to mention that the two dimensions of TKI on conflicts are well matched with the social work profession. Contextually, social work acts in the spirit of human rights, social justice, and the best interest of the clients, therefore, the horizontal axis – *cooperation* – refers to the level of attention offered to services users and their needs, and to consolidate the relationships with them, which is supposed to be of high interest. The other axis, *assertiveness*, relates to social work agenda, which often are the formal frameworks, such as laws, codes of practice, or professional ethics.

Figure 3 shows situations of conflicts that can hypothetically happen in social work practice, and possible solutions to these circumstances.



Source : Author's adaptation

Figure 3. TKI adaptation to social work conflicts

The *cooperating* approach is a suitable strategy when working with issues that need a long term solving. For example, working with people with addictions is a long process that requires involvement contribution of both social worker and services user. Another example could be working with marginalized communities, where social workers should understand the needs of the community, and the clients will have to comprehend and to take into consideration the concerns and demands of the social workers.

The *accompanying* style is required when professionals first come into contact with marginalized communities that have values which are considered contrary to the norms in the context in which they live (e.g. Roma communities, Muslim communities, indigenous). It is acknowledged that social work interventions in cultural or minority communities should consider the aspect of cultural sensitivity (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2015 ; Gray, Allegritti 2003 ; Weaver, 2000). Therefore, being open and aware that there could be cultural differences within marginalized communities, and not amplifying the existent cultural conflict, may be a fitting approach which can be utilized by social workers.

Avoidance can be used as a method when the objective of the conflict is not important and does not deserve time or other resources. For example, when a small conflict arises in the office with another member of the staff and does not directly affects anyone's work/activity.

The *competing* (or in a social work context, the *disputing*) approach is always necessary in emergency situations (e.g. abuse in family, domestic violence, evictions), but also when there is the need of structural change in favor of the disadvantages/the profession. This style is indicated for actions that require radical and structural changes and it might include actions such as lobby and advocacy, protests, marches.

Finally, the *compromising* approach can be applied in a crisis situation when a need for urgent solution is more important than a long term one. For instance, in the case of a disaster resulting from the manifestation of a natural phenomenon, members of a community lose their homes and the only possible solution that can be obtained by a social worker is an overcrowded temporary shelter. This is just a short-term answer, and more interventions should be undertaken to improve the conditions, and then the type of conflict intervention will switch to competing/disputing.

Conclusion

Conflicts in social work are complex and they are part of the everyday activity of social workers. Moreover, in many contexts conflicts cannot be solved, but only explored and maybe diminished. In essence, this article discusses a model that can eventually help social workers to deal with conflicts in certain situations, and at the same time, to act in the best interest of the profession and their service users. The Thomas Kilmann model recognizes the complexity of the conflicts and that there is not a single suitable way to manage them. As in social work, every conflictual situation is different, and all deal with specific issues that cannot be solved in one manner. Therefore, this paper aims to provide an initial framework for future investigations, debates, and interventions in the field that can improve the quality of the profession and the lives of disadvantaged people.

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