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Modern Conflictology: Between Fear of Conflict and Love to Conflict

Boris I. Khasan*

*Siberian Federal University
79 Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041, Russia*

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The article presents the current state of conflict as a problem and work experience concerning past, today's and future conflict situations. The author describes trends in the development of conflictological ideas and risks of possible extremes evolving during the hasty application of technologies. It was proposed to stick to the constructive approach, according to which the most important technological component of practical work with the conflict is retaining a resolved contradiction with the help of conflict structure (form).

Keywords: conflict, conflict phobia, love to conflict (conflict philia), conflict structure – form, contradictions, mediation, negotiations.

*And yet not a nail was invented not
for the crucifixion, but for the sake of
less practical things.*

Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

For more than seventy years ago, Margaret Follett, the British expert on organizational psychology, had an attempt to change radically the attitude of researchers to conflict. She offered to look at the conflict as a phenomenon, which possesses not only unambiguously negative features, but characteristic positive functions as well. This approximated the end of “conflict phobia” era. But until the beginning of the 1990s, this tradition was nonetheless dominant. Fear of conflict, like any other fear, is a bad counselor. And if one relies on it as a main basis for conflict practice, it is quite clear why we got what we got. For many centuries of the so-called cultural life

we have still had a demonstration of force or its application as the most convincing argument in any dispute. All the art of conflict is yet reduced to the ability to defeat the enemy. The fact that every victory over another person turns out to be not a conflict resolution, but rather its reproduction, is not new anymore. Without any doubt, the idea proposed by Margaret Follett was to draw researchers and practicing psychologists near to a completely new view on the problem – the conflict was to be studied not as a phenomenon itself, but as a shell for some specific content.

However, there was some move down in the other direction. A new synthetic area of

knowledge began to form actively and that is it – conflictology [see, for example: Antsupov et.al.].

Since I do not have anything against such attempts at cooperation (especially as for quite a long time I myself have pointed out that the conflict understanding requires manifold approach (cf. Aleshina)), now I should note that the tendency was aimed at technologizing the very process of conflict. Works devoted to negotiating and mediation gained high popularity. Therapy of conflict experiences gained its garland with organizational forms of interaction between conflicting parties. And it is evident that practical psychology will be able to be closely contacted with the procedural law. And it would be great if there was some consistency in this way. But I doubt that conflictology will develop unlike the law, which is for the most part self-concentrated, rather than concentrated on resolution of contradictions in legal form.

Conflict is only a form, in which we can present a contradiction for ourselves to try to resolve it. Of course it is important not to forget that any form to work properly must be specifically organized. We are still taking shell for its content and thus, it should be noted, have not learned to treat this form, i.e. organize and interpret reasonably. It might have been though that we have not learned it yet, because do not make difference between the form and its content. Hence there can appear many illusions, the most common of which is the illusion of the possible victory of one person over another. This illusion is closely related to the most resistant human misconception that the improvement of artillery equipment is a synonym for enhancing human power. Or, in other words, the strong one is one who is armed. Therefore, the attitude to conflicts from the time of M. Follett has developed in the form of overcoming fear through mastery of conflict techniques. It was assumed that application of psycho-techniques

for behavior in interpersonal (intergroup, etc.) conflicts is the way of mastering the form, and with its help also the content, which is concealed in this form.

In my opinion, it was a necessary period in overcoming conflict phobia. Indeed, it is important, instead of avoiding conflicts, to try to deal them seriously, to get involved in this matter. But not to be involved in conflict as it is. This is unnecessary, in my opinion. The whole world has been selflessly “playing” for centuries the war with the hope of winning.

No, I mean another interest. It was important to try to put the conflict on the object stage, to see not only its own construction, but what is presented to us through it as if through a special tool.

I must say that is not so easy to grasp this very function of the conflict, the formal and instrumental one. Controversy is carefully hidden in a package of the conflict. The package, in turn, looks like either very scary or very attractive, and more often it combines both these qualities. Surprisingly, nobody wonders at human curiosity to the atrocities, disasters and everything that can terrify. In this connection, no matter how critically we perceive psychoanalysis, Freud and his followers made the most fruitful attempts to understand this human paradox. But does psychoanalysis even in its most compelling reasoning show us an acceptable way? [See a letter from Freud to Einstein “Why War?"]. And this topic is far from exhaustion.

We are dealing with fairly obvious now ambivalence, which, when taken to extremes has the most astonishing range: from conflict phobia to conflict philia, from panic feat of conflict resulting in the avoidance, to fervent curiosity (cf., for example, all kinds of martial arts, war games, detective genre, thrillers, etc.).

Between these extremes lies (as always, the truth is in the middle), noticed by many, but not

yet sufficiently self-reflected, a relatively new strategy, which is to use a form of conflict to retain contradictions in the resolved form. This form should provide search and testing of adequate for this contradiction means for its resolving (for the contradiction and not for a conflict form representing it). So, for example, negotiations are fruitful only when they are not a form of struggle disguised as a temporary consent, but ***when they allow revealing with the help of their participants genuine contradictions that led to the collision, or those that can cause collisions, if not promptly detected and minimized for joint activities.***

I do not want to detract from the need to negotiate according to certain rules, the need to develop technologies and techniques of mediation and arbitration, but the most important thing is that we now call the conflict competence, the ability to understand how in the negotiation process these contradictions that during this process might and should be resolved are presented. From this perspective, ***any effective negotiation process is a joint research work of its members.*** And this work may have, I think, should have some educating outcomes that are connected with finding by participants of real contradictions of their life and activities.

But what this means for researchers and practitioners? First of all, the fundamental focus **not on the elimination of conflict, but its retention as a subject of study.** Both in creating research position and in the development of negotiation technologies there can be (should be) formed an independent stage with its instrumentalization, in which the conflict form is defined as a material for research **for finding and special reforming of a contradiction, represented in this conflict.** To do this, first

of all, is necessary to get rid of the conflict's emotional evaluation or at least temporarily postpone (psychologically) such evaluation, which is either negative (as dangerous) or positive (as desirable), and update the rational component of this conflict form itself.

In other words, it is possible (obligatory) to ask a question to the past, actual or future conflict – what for?

Such an approach to the study of the nature of the conflict (specific conflict form) implies a technical attitude to the conflict as a certain construction, which is designed for something, which should reveal some contradiction, make it visible and therefore manageable. Both negative as well as positive attitude to the conflict, formed in advance to it, as any a priori modality, prevents qualitative definition of such a structure.

In the history of culture it can be found pretty many similar examples of such research and constructive work, e.g. analysis of the products of art (works of art), which, from our point of view, are nothing but conflict structures, in which it is represented an essential controversy at the expense of artistic form (cf. Vygotsky “... the social technique of feelings”).

– What for?

– To get a possibility of productive experience.

If we follow this position, it will be important to distinguish between spontaneous and specially arranged conflicts; the latter include the technique of negotiations. In its own turn the process of constructing the conflict, to which we suggest to resort for forming and retaining the conflict, is intolerant to conflict phobia predispositions and to conflict philia predispositions as well (the last one is another extreme, which has nothing in common with the productive orientation).

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Современная конфликтология: между конфликтофобией и конфликтофилией

Б.И. Хасан

*Сибирский федеральный университет
Россия, 660041, Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 79*

В статье обсуждается современное состояние проблемы конфликта и практик работы с прошедшей, актуальной и перспективной конфликтной ситуацией. Описываются тенденции в развитии конфликтологической мысли и риски крайностей, формирующихся при поспешном применении технологий. Предлагается опираться на конструктивный подход, согласно которому важнейшим технологическим компонентом практической работы с конфликтом является удержание за счет конфликтной конструкции (формы) разрешаемого противоречия.

Ключевые слова: конфликт, конфликтофобия, конфликтофилия, конфликтная конструкция – форма, противоречия, медиация, переговоры.
