

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution

CONF 320 Syllabus

Professor Sara Cobb

Fall 2014

Robinson Hall A349

Office Hours: Thursday 9:00-10:30 and by appointment

Location of Office Hours: TBA

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Introduction

One can argue that indeed, all conflicts are “interpersonal” in the sense that conflicts function of the relations between (inter) persons. Conflicts in organizations, in families, in communities, within and between nations, are, from this perspective, inevitably “interpersonal.”

Traditionally, social sciences differentiated between macro, mezzo, and micro levels of analysis; macro referred to those processes at a large or global level; mezzo referred to intermediate levels, often to institutions or organizations; and micro referred to the everyday, local processes of daily life in small groups. This category system made sense for the study of conflict as long as we presumed that the number of people involved would be critical to understanding conflict dynamics.

Today, however, it is often painfully obvious that the micro (small groups) level is fully embedded in the macro level, as persons make sense of Self and Other (supposedly micro), on a daily basis, using broad cultural categories and stories that operate at a global level. Micro conflicts can have tremendous consequences at a global scale, and conversely, macro level conflicts play out in daily life, here in our lives, in Northern Virginia. The blurring of these categories (micro, mezzo, and macro) makes the project of the “levels of analysis” of conflict less viable, and perhaps less useful.

So while the title of this course suggests a focus on family conflicts or everyday conflicts between individuals, this course will instead be presuming that interpersonal conflicts are critical to all conflicts, regardless of the level of analysis. As conflicts are personal and relational, we will approach interpersonal conflict analysis and resolution as *foundational* to the study of all kinds of conflicts---those in families, those in large organizations, those in international relations, and those in community settings.

First, we will begin our study of interpersonal conflicts with a personal exploration of conflict, using our own experiences as a lens to understand important theoretical

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frameworks for the analysis of interpersonal conflicts. From this foundation, we will explore a series of conflict domains, examining in each case the “interpersonal dimension” in both family, as well as workplace conflicts. We will have case studies drawing on real cases, as well as guest speakers.

Second, we will explore the use of a *narrative lens* for some preliminary approaches to conflict resolution *practice*. Drawing on case studies and simulations, we will explore how to transform stories in interpersonal conflicts. While this practice indeed is a lifelong practice, this course will provide some concrete tools for both analyzing and intervening in interpersonal conflicts, our own, as well as others’. From this perspective, the course is intended to provide students with the theory and tools needed to develop know how, practical wisdom, for the resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

Learning Goals

This class will provide students with the analytic skills needed to:

1. Become increasingly aware of one’s own patterns in interpersonal conflicts
2. Identify patterns of interpersonal conflicts in families and workplace settings
3. Conduct an analysis of an interpersonal conflict
4. Develop skills needed for collaborative group work;
5. Identify specific intervention tools that could be used to support the evolution of a given interpersonal conflict;

Assignments / Grading

There will be three written assignments, as well as a group presentation assignment.

1. *Reflection Paper (20%)*: This paper will detail the nature of the interpersonal conflicts that you routinely have with others. You may draw on specific examples, but you do not have to. The point of this reflection piece is to provide you an opportunity to look at the pattern of conflicts in your life. You may draw on theories and frameworks that are presented in class.
 - a. **Due date: September 18**
 - b. 3-5 pages;
 - c. Materials from lectures and readings should be explicitly referenced.
2. *Case Study (25%)*: This paper will allow you to demonstrate your analytic ability at the analysis of an interpersonal conflict (your own conflict, or any interpersonal conflict). You are to use theoretical frameworks from the lectures and readings for this analysis. This paper should end in recommendations for practical approaches to the resolution of this conflict.
 - a. **Due Date: October 30th**

- b. 7-10 pages
- c. Materials from lectures and readings should be explicitly referenced.
- 3. *Class Participation (25%)* Students are expected to attend class and participate in discussions and simulations. Roll will be taken each class.
- 4. *Blog (20%)*
 - a. There are two entries required. Each one should integrate the experiential learning with the class readings.
 - i. **Entry #1 is due one or before October 5th.**
 - ii. **Entry #2 is due by October 10/23rd.**

Papers will be graded for clarity (30 pts), analytic creativity (40pts), and the reference of course materials (lectures and readings) (30pts). The blog will be assessed by the number of responses you get from your fellow students (negative or positive). Zero responses will be equivalent to a C-; 1 response = C; 2-3 responses = B; 4 and over responses = A. Each blog will be with 10% of your final grade. Papers should be submitted electronically to be at scobb@gmu.edu

Assignments	Dates
Reflection Paper	September 18
Case Study	October 30
Blog Postings	#1 Before October 5 th #2 Before Oct 23 rd

Required and Recommended Readings

Required texts are on the GMU Bookstore website; click on “Textbooks” and then fill in the appropriate information on the drop down menu. This class is CONF 320, Section 002. There are two books (Hocker and Wilmot’s *Interpersonal Conflict* and White’s *Maps of Practice*. There will be additional readings posted on Blackboard during the semester, articles that will be accessible on Blackboard.

Honor Code Violations

Learning is a process that requires people to work through difficult materials and assignments. While collaboration is certainly important to learning, for this class, written assignments, unless otherwise specified, are to be done by each student, by himself or herself. Further, only original material, created by the student, should be submitted.

For definitions of plagiarism please see Mason’s Honor Code, as well as definitions of violations at

http://www.gmu.edu/academics/catalog/0304/apolicies/#TOC_H11. For information about how to cite other's work, please contact the Writing Center at Mason. See <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>.

I plan to routinely use online tools to search students' papers for plagiarism. If a student hands in a paper that contains a section or sections that are plagiarized, I will file an accusation against that student with the Honor Committee. Further, should there be a finding from the Honor Committee that plagiarism was committed; I will give a "zero" as a grade for that assignment to that student. Given the relatively small number of assignments for this course, this could mean that the student fails the course. Finally, I will not provide students who have committed plagiarism any opportunity to re-write their papers.

ADD/DROP Deadlines for Course

Last Day to Add or Drop without Penalty: September 2

Last Day to Drop: September 26

See <http://registrar.gmu.edu/calendars/fall-2014/> for the academic calendar for the fall, which lists important dates.

Disabilities

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the [Office of Disability Services](#) at 703.993.2474 or ods.gmu.edu. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Email and Blackboard

Mason uses only Mason e-mail accounts to communicate with enrolled students. Students must activate their Mason e-mail account, use ONLY Mason email to communicate with the instructor for this course; as Mason email is critical to the delivery of information pertinent to this course, it must be checked regularly. Course materials will be archived in BlackBoard. To Access Blackboard see <http://ondemand.blackboard.com/students.htm>. You can also follow these instructions:

- 1.Go to <http://mymason.gmu.edu>.
- 2.Login using your NETID and password.
- 3.Click on the 'Courses' tab.
- 4.Double-click on [201470.72888 CONF-320-002 \(Fall 2014\)](#) under the "9.1 Course List" heading.

I will be using Blackboard as an organizational tool, posting materials related to the course on the site, and sending you collective emails.

Course Topics/Readings

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Part 1: Analysis of Interpersonal Conflicts

1. **8/28** Introduction to Interpersonal Conflicts
 - a. Review of Syllabus and Course Requirements
 - b. Introduction to Social Constructionism
 - c. Case Simulation in Class
 - d. Readings:¹ Chapter 7

2. **9/4** The Nature of Interpersonal Conflict
 - a. Lecture
 - b. In class simulation
 - c. Reading: Hocker and Wilmot: Chapters 1-3

3. **9/11** The Role of Emotion in Interpersonal Conflicts
 - a. Lecture
 - b. Professor Dr. Carlos Sluzki: Shame and Humiliation Model
 - c. Readings: Hocker and Wilmot, Chapter 6

4. **9/18** Conflict Styles and Human Development
 - a. Readings:
 - i. <http://developmentalobserver.blog.com/2010/06/09/an-overview-of-constructive-developmental-theory-cd/>
 - ii. http://www.shiftingthinking.org/?page_id=449
 - iii. Hocker and Wilmot: Chapter 5
 - b. Experiential Exercise assessing your development

5. **9/25** Workplace Conflicts: Power and Culture in Organizations
 - a. Guest Speaker: Samantha Hardy
 - b. Reading:
 - i. Hocker & Wilmot Chapter 4
 - ii. TBD (from guest speaker)

6. **10/2** Strategies for Addressing Conflicts
 - a. Apologies and Forgiveness
 - b. Integrative Negotiation
 - c. Third Party Intervention
 - d. In class negotiation simulation
 - e. Readings: Hocker and Wilmot: Chapters 8, 9 & 10

¹ All reading assignments are to be completed for the class date where they are listed. Note that there is reading for the first class.

7. **10/9** Changing Narratives
 - a. Externalizing and Re-Authored Conversations
 - b. Readings: White: pp.9-128
 - c. Cobb (on Blackboard)

8. **10/11** Workshop 9:00-5:00
 - a. Location TBA
 - b. Experiential Exercise in Conflict Transformation: Externalization and Re-Authored Conversations

9. **10/16** Changing Narratives
 - a. Remembering Conversations, Unique Outcomes and Scaffolding
 - b. Readings: White 129-164 and 219-292

10. **10/18** Workshop
 - a. Location TBA
 - b. Experiential Exercise in Conflict Transformation: Remembering Conversations, Unique Outcomes, and Scaffolding
 - c. No readings!