

Theories of Conflict [Term]

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There are no data independent of theory, no observations not made from a perspective. Data alone do not tell us anything; they do not speak, but are interpreted by people.

- Carol Gilligan (1993) Reply to critics. In M.J. Larrabee, An ethic of care: Feminist and interdisciplinary perspectives, 207-214. New York, NY: Routledge.

About this course

This interdisciplinary course introduces you to important theoretical perspectives on our understanding of conflict. We will examine the nature and dynamics of conflict and the assumptions on which we base our understandings. We will also examine the impact the various perspectives have on how each of us responds to conflict.

After a general introduction to the concepts of worldview and “perspectivism,” and the connection between these concepts and specific conflict theories, we will survey various perspectives on conflict and test them out in application. Specifically, we will explore conflict in relation to the body, the non-conscious mind, the strategic mind, language and symbols, the co-creation of meaning, and systems and structures. Emphasis will be on comparing and distinguishing key dimensions of these perspectives, such as the nature and sources of conflict, conflict escalation, conflict response, and the nature of the third party role.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Recognize how your own beliefs, values and life experiences inform the way you experience and relate to conflict;
- Understand how worldviews, ideologies and broad belief-systems shape our individual and collective understanding of conflict;
- Identify major theoretical approaches used to understand conflict;
- Be able to use these approaches to analyze specific conflict situations;
- Understand how these approaches to conflict analysis influence choices for appropriate conflict response; and
- Appreciate the strengths, usefulness and limitations of each approach used to analyze conflict.

To accomplish this, we will follow an interactive format, using regular group discussion and class activities to clarify and build upon our readings. We will be watching film clips, discussing case studies, and drawing on your own life experience to enrich our understanding of conflict, whether in interpersonal, inter-group, socio-cultural domestic or international contexts. **As a result, advance completion of all assignments, regular class attendance, active class participation, and regular reflection, is essential.**

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Attendance Policy

Although this is a theory course, as described above, class sessions are designed to be highly interactive, with a significant amount of learning and insight emerging from class discussion and activities. Moreover, since this class meets only once each week, ***missing two or more classes is presumptively excessive*** and can be the basis for involuntary withdrawal from the course. If an emergency prevents your attendance, it is your responsibility to contact me in advance or as soon as is practicable. In addition, lateness and/or poor preparation will adversely affect your final course grade.

Readings

This course has a fair amount of reading. I have tried to spread it out, but strongly recommend you plan ahead so as to pace your own reading. I will assume you have completed and are ready to discuss each reading before the class in which it is covered. We will read the following:

1. All readings are listed on the syllabus and posted on Canvas. We will use one text, *Perspectives on Conflict: Insights for Professional and Personal Practice*, Kenneth H. Fox (Bloomsbury Academic, 2026), hereafter “*Perspectives*”. This text will be supplemented by a variety of articles and other resources as listed on this syllabus and as posted on Canvas.

Reading Worksheet

In order to assist with course readings, I have developed a *Reading Worksheet* for your use. The worksheet is specifically designed for readings that focus on a particular perspective or theory of conflict. The worksheet is not designed for readings related to the general concept of “perspectivism” covered in class session one or to the occasional video assignments.

The worksheet can help you in three ways: First, it will assure that you are prepared for class, and have focused your efforts on understanding those portions of the readings that are most relevant to the theory we are studying in a given week. Second, it will help you remember things that you read before class, and save you the trouble of rereading. Third, it will help you organize your thoughts for the final paper as you go along at each class meeting, so it is not too large a project at the end. The worksheet is posted on Canvas.

Laptop/Tablet/Smart Phone/Electronic Device Policy (for in-person class sessions)

While electronic devices can be useful tools for taking notes and recalling readings and other course materials, they can also become a source of distraction (for you and your classmates). As a result, ***only Canvas (including related files) and word processing/note-taking programs*** may be open on any electronic device during class, unless expressly instructed otherwise. Use of electronic devices for purposes unrelated to class (such as checking email, texting, viewing or using social media, surfing the web, etc.) is strictly prohibited. Such use may result in **not being allowed to bring into class or use your electronic devices in class for the balance of the semester and/or a final course grade reduction**.

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Artificial Intelligence and Writing Assistance Web Sources and Software.

One important learning outcome of this class is that each student can demonstrate their ability to independently generate, analyze, reflect upon and articulate their own original ideas and insights. I expect students to create and submit only their own original writings and other submissions. I expect students to follow the law school's policy with regard to academic misconduct as it relates to artificial intelligence and writing assistance software and other similar technology (such as but not limited to Chat GPT, Claud, Jasper Chat, and Grammarly).

Assessment and Grading

On-line Discussions (combined 20%)

You will participate in two (2) on-line discussions, which together will total 20% of your grade. Discussions will be posted and take place on Canvas. All students are expected to participate in the discussions and must make at least three (3) postings for each discussion: one (1) original substantial answer to the posted question(s) and a minimum of two (2) additional substantive responses to other students' original postings. Specific grading criteria are discussed at attachment 1 to this syllabus. I strongly encourage you to read the grading criteria before participating in the first discussion.

Canvas Discussion 1 - Week 2. This discussion will focus on the idea of perspective in analyzing conflict. You will be expected to include in your postings specific reference both to readings and in-class activities. Question(s) will be posted by []. Your original post will be due by 11:59pm, [], with two additional required postings due no later than 10:00am on [].

Canvas Discussion 2 - Week 11. This discussion will focus on the differences between the individualist and constructionist perspectives we will have covered to date. You will be expected to include in your postings reference both to readings and in-class activities. The specific question(s) will be posted by []. Your original post will be due by 11:59pm, [], with the additional required postings due no later than 10:00am on [].

Multi-perspective Conflict Case Study (10%)

Due no later than 11:59pm, [day prior to class session week 6]. The purpose of the activity is to practice purposefully observing and analyzing a complex social conflict from multiple perspectives. During week 7, we will watch a documentary on Northern Ireland. You will use a set of theory-specific observation forms to closely observe this documentary. After watching the movie and completing the observation forms, you will write a short individual analysis and reflection on this activity. This formative activity will help prepare you for the final analytical paper.

Final Reflective Paper (20%)

Due at 11:59pm, [end of final week of class]. You will turn in one paper reflecting on what insights you are gaining about the way different perspectives on conflict relate to your professional and personal life. The purpose of the reflective paper is to encourage you to be a purposeful and reflective professional. The specific assignment will be posted on Canvas. This assignment is **NOT anonymous**. You should put your **name** on the reflective paper.

Final Analytical Paper (40%)

Due no later than 11:59pm, [finals week]. You will write an in-depth (approximately 12 – 15 page) analysis of the film *12 Angry Men*. Details of the assignment will be posted on Canvas. This assignment **IS anonymous**. Only use your **exam number** on this assignment.

Class participation (10%)

As discussed above, attendance, preparation and active participation are essential. Failure to fully and actively participate may lower your final class grade by one step (e.g. from B- to C+). Exceptional participation may raise your grade by one step (e.g. from B+ to A-).

Plan of Study

Week 1

Introduction to Course and Perspectivism

Perspectives, chapter 1 - Introduction

Perspectives, chapter 2 - A Language of Conflict.

Perspectives, chapter 3 - Cultivating Capacity for Conflict Practice.

Smith, R.C. & Eisenberg, E.M. (1987). *Conflict at Disneyland: A Root-Metaphor Analysis*, Communication Monographs, 54, 367-380.

Week 2

The Body and Somatics

Perspectives, Introduction to Part Two (pp. 55-61)

Perspectives, chapter 4 – The Body

On-line discussion #1 opens today and closes before class 3.

Week 3

The Nonconscious Mind

Perspectives, chapter 5 – The Non-conscious Mind

Week 4

The strategic Mind

Perspectives, chapter 6 – The Strategic Mind

Week 5

Continued examination of the non-conscious and strategic mind

[Optional additional readings]

Week 6

Multi-perspective Case Application

View film *Mirror-Mirror: Northern Ireland* and analyze based on theories studied so far.

No new readings.

Note: Multi-perspective case study is due at 11:59, [prior to class 7]

Week 7

Review of multi-perspective case study and application to the law and conflict practice

No new readings

Week 8

Language and Symbols

Perspectives, chapter 7 – Language and Symbols

Rogers

Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist' View of Psychotherapy*. Mariner Books (1989), Chapters 2, 3 and 6.

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Week 9

The Co-creation of Meaning

Perspectives, chapter 8 – The Co-creation of Meaning

Week 10

Folger, J.P. and Bush, R.A.B. (1994). *Ideology, Orientations to Conflict and Mediation Discourse*. In *New Directions in Mediation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Coben, J., Fox, K. and Love, L (2018). A Conversation about Facts, Stories, and Truth in Mediation. In *Dispute Resolution Magazine*: ABA

Week 11

Application of Cognitive, Social Constructionist, and Discourse Analytic theories to two models of Mediation. No new readings.

Week 12

Structural Perspective; Social Structure Theory

Fox, K.H. (2024) The Conflict Ecosystem. In *Perspectives on Conflict: Insights for Professional and Personal Practice (pre-publication manuscript)*

On-line discussion #2 opens today and closes before class 13.

Week 13

Application of all theories to conflict situation: *View 12 Angry Men*.

View film and group analysis

Week 14

Group work and synthesis. No new readings. **Last day of class.**

NOTE: Final reflective paper (named assignment) is due by 11:59pm, [].

NOTE: Final analytical paper (anonymous assignment) is due no later than 11:59pm, [].

Attachment 1

Theories of Conflict

Suggestions for on-line discussions (see rubric for specific grading criteria)

As provided in the course syllabus, “you will participate in two (2) on-line discussions, which together will total 20% of your grade. Discussions will be posted and take place on Canvas. All students are expected to participate in the discussions and must make a minimum of **three (3)** postings for each discussion: One (1) original substantial answer to the posted questions (approximately 600-800 words) and a minimum of two (2) additional substantive responses to other students’ original and responsive postings (approximately 400-500 words each).” With respect to additional postings, more than two (2) responses may but do not necessarily influence your earned points with respect to “seriously and respectfully” engaging other postings.

Approach discussion questions from the perspective of your work or professional experience and based upon your personal interactions. Stronger posts will demonstrate the *thoughtfulness of your original posting and how seriously, and respectfully you engage in responding to, and building upon, the original postings and responses of your classmates.*

Among the factors I consider when reading your postings are the following:

1. Did you carefully read, understand and respond directly and fully to **all parts** of the discussion prompts? In the past, I have noticed some students respond selectively to one or two parts of the question prompts but fail to address **all** parts that were asked or, instead of **responding directly** to the questions, they drift off into a discussion of non-responsive/unrelated themes.
2. Does your initial posting go beyond a simple descriptive answer to include your own analysis **and critical reflection**? Do not simply to repeat back what was covered by the course material. I am looking for evidence of how you **grapple with the ideas** we are studying. When you offer a personal opinion, relate it directly back to the question prompt(s) and course content. Explain on what foundation your opinion is based.
3. Did you make **specific and appropriate use** of the readings and other course materials? Do not simply drop in a reference. Instead, demonstrate **how you understand the readings** and how you incorporate them into your own analysis.
4. Think of these discussions as a real conversation with your classmates. In your responses, **build upon** the ideas of others so as to advance discussion forward with greater insight. This includes responsive posts that respectfully offer alternative analysis, perspectives, or insights. *Short affirming postings alone (e.g. a couple of short sentences) are not sufficient to count as responsive posts.*
5. Finally, did you re-read, edit and proofread your posts? There is a big difference between a single-draft stream-of-consciousness posting (which is typically very weak) and a post that has been thoughtfully edited for clarity and depth (which is typically a stronger posting).