

THEORIES OF CONFLICT

Course Overview

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 concept of perspectivism and the connection between perspectivism and specific conflict theories, we will survey various conflict theories (representing different perspectives) and test them out in application. Specifically, we will explore sample theories from the biological/physiological, psycho-dynamic, social-psychological, symbolic/communication, social-constructionist/ relational, and social-structural perspectives on conflict. Emphasis will be on comparing and distinguishing key dimensions of these theories, such as the nature and sources of conflict, unique insights into conflict and conflict response, and the nature of the third party role.

Course Competencies

1.0 Understand Multiple Dimensions of Awareness

1.1 Understand the matrix of awareness:

1.1.1 Awareness on three levels – self, other, and context

1.1.2 Awareness in three dimensions – cognitive, emotional, and embodied awareness

1.2 Articulate ways in which the matrix of awareness gives insight into your own personal lived experience in relation to conflict

1.3 Articulate ways in which your own lived experience has shaped the ways you personally experience and understand conflict

1.4 Articulate ways in which your own experience helps you view more clearly others in their conflicts

2.0 Understand the Concept of Perspective in Relation to Conflict

2.1 Be able to articulate the difference between “theory,” “perspective” and “worldview”

2.2 Understand how your own worldview influences the way you make sense of conflict

2.3 Understand how your own worldview influences which theories appear more applicable to analyzing conflict situations

2.4 Understand each of six major theoretical approaches used in the course to understand conflict and how they relate to one another

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3.0 Analysis and Application

3.1 Be able to understand how a specific theory reveals its own insights into conflict situations.

3.2 Be able to correctly apply a specific theoretical approaches to analyze a conflict situation

3.3 Be able to articulate the usefulness and limitations of a specific theoretical approach used to analyze a conflict situation

3.3.1 Recognize theory-specific insights into a conflict situation

3.3.2 Distinguish theory-specific insights into a conflict situation from insights gained from your own idiosyncratic perspective

3.3.3 Distinguish theory-specific insights into a conflict situation from insights gained from other theory-based perspectives

3.3.4 Recognize the limitations of a specific theory into understanding a given conflict situation

3.4 Be able to articulate the logical implications a specific theory of analysis has on conflict identifying and evaluating conflict response strategies

4.0 Implications for professional practice

4.1 Be able to articulate how a conflict practitioner's own perspectives influence their choices for what is an appropriate conflict response

4.2 Be able to articulate how specific theories, and the major theoretical approaches to conflict analysis overall, influence a conflict practitioner's choices for what is an appropriate conflict response

4.3 Be able to articulate how your understanding of conflict analysis from multiple perspectives informs your professional practice

To meet these course competencies, you will view videos, complete case studies, participate in regular discussion groups, and complete a variety of activities designed to clarify and build upon your readings. Completion of all readings and related activities is essential to fully benefit from the class.

Readings

Unless otherwise noted, all readings are from the text *Perspectives on Conflict: Insights for Professional and Personal Practice*. Kenneth H. Fox (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026). I have tried to spread the readings out as evenly as possible, but I strongly recommend you review the course plan of study carefully so as to pace yourself appropriately over the eight weeks of the course. See the specific course modules for each module's readings.

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[If appropriate for asynchronous online teaching, add the following: In addition to readings, there are weekly video introductions, PowerPoint presentations and additional assignments (such as TED Talks and YouTube videos). Links will also be posted on Canvas.]

Reading Worksheet

In order to assist with course readings, I have developed a [Reading Worksheet](#)  for your use. You do NOT turn it in. The worksheet is specifically designed for readings that focus on a particular perspective or theory of conflict. The worksheet is not designed for the Week Zero readings, those related to the general concept of “perspectivism (in Week One),” or to the occasional assigned videos or other similar activities.

The worksheet can help you in three ways: First, it will assure that you are prepared for the weekly discussions and that you 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 better remember previous readings, allowing you to draw comparisons that build a more complex understanding of conflict. Third, it will help you organize your thoughts for the final paper as you go along, so it is not too large a project at the end. The worksheet is linked above and also posted in your Canvas course. Remember, this worksheet is a study tool for your own use.

Grading

- Online Discussions (7): combined 35%
- Multi-perspective Conflict Case Study: 10%
- Reflective Essay: 20%
- Final Case Analysis Paper: 35%

Workload Expectations

An important note about the workload: This is a 2-credit course that is taught in a condensed format. This means that the 6-7 hours of weekly work you would be expected to complete in a traditional course over a 14-week term must be condensed and completed in 8 weeks, averaging about 12-14 hours per week. Accordingly, you can anticipate that the workload will sometimes feel twice as heavy as what you are used to for a 14-week 2-credit course. You should anticipate submitting work, completing readings, and viewing videos every week. The course will be intense, but you also will find it rewarding.

Discussion Posts

Discussion posts are to be treated as formal assignment submissions. The submissions (both initial and responsive posts) should be proofread carefully and contain specific citations to the readings and course materials (short-form is fine).

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Discussions are not the place for informal chit-chat. Responsive posts must actively engage with another student's post. Merely agreeing or disagreeing will not earn any points. Review more detailed [Discussion Instructions](#) before you submit any discussions in this course.

Technical Requirements

Review [Getting Equipped for Online Study \(Links to an external site.\)](#) on the [enter school name] website. This course requires you to post and respond to other students on discussion posts, download and upload Word documents, and review videos and related PowerPoints.

Standard Policies

Late or Missed Assignment Policy

This policy balances the importance of students fulfilling their professional obligations with the reality that sometimes circumstances come up that are outside one's control.

Late Graded Activity

Graded activities include assignments and discussion board posts. A student who submits an **assignment or discussion post** after the designated deadline receives a 10% point deduction for each day that the assignment is late. All deductions are rounded to the nearest whole number. A student must submit a late assignment or late discussion board post within one week of the designated deadline to receive any credit.

Missed Quiz

A student who fails to take a quiz within the designated time period for taking the quiz receives a 20% point deduction on the quiz and must take the quiz within one week of the designated time period to receive any credit.

Exceptions

A student may petition [name of professor] for an exception to this policy for good cause. Absent extraordinary circumstances, a student must ask for an exception in advance of a deadline. If an exception is granted, they will notify the student by e-mail with a copy to any course adjuncts, as appropriate.

Academic Misconduct and Plagiarism

Students must abide by the Student Code of Conduct found on the [Student Conduct \(Links to an external site.\)](#) page of the Law School Catalog. The plagiarism policy applies to course discussion forums as well as all other assigned work. **NOTE:** Use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology is not permitted for this course. To view all policies, see the [Law School Catalog \(Links to an external site.\)](#).

Copyright Notice

The content and materials in this course are provided to you pursuant to United States copyright law. They are available to you as an enrolled student in this course as an integral part of the instructional activities taking place both online and when you are on campus. This content and material may be subject to copyright protection. Unauthorized duplication or further dissemination to others is a breach of copyright law and a violation of the Student Code of Conduct.

Accommodations

Students who would like to request accommodations for a disability should contact Disability and Student Services. Students will be asked to provide documentation regarding their disability and any accommodations they have used in the past. If the disability is new, students will be asked to work with their treating professional to fill out appropriate forms to allow the school to make proper accommodations for the student.

Contact: [enter contact information]

Phone: [enter contact information]

Plan of Study

Unless otherwise noted, all readings are from the course text, *Perspectives on Conflict: Insights for Professional and Personal Practice*, Kenneth H. Fox (New York: Bloomsbury, 2026) Hereinafter “Text”. The number in [brackets] indicates page length for a particular reading.

Week Zero (Preliminary readings)

Focus for this week

In preparation for the beginning of class, please complete the following introductory readings.

Reading for this week

- Text – Chapter 1 – Introduction [15]
- Text – Chapter 2 – A Language of Conflict [19]

Week One

Focus for this week

Introduction to the Concept of “Perspectivism” in Conflict; Exploration of how our own lived experience influences the perspectives we hold.

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Chapter 3 – Cultivating Capacity [22]
- Smith, R. C. and Eisenberg, E. M. (1987). Conflict at Disneyland: A Root-Metaphor Analysis. *Communication Monographs* 54: 367-380. [13]

Week Two

Focus for this week

Examination of the physical and Somatic perspectives of conflict (“the body”).

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Introduction to Part Two [8]
- Text – Chapter 4 – The Body [22]
- Fox, K. (2018). Summary of “Taming a Dangerous Urge” based on an article from the *International Herald Tribune*. [3]

Week Three

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Focus for this week

Overview of psychological perspective; Examination of the “nonconscious mind” and sample theories.

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Chapter 5 – The Nonconscious mind [18]

Week Four

Focus for this week

Continuation of the psychological perspective on conflict. Examination of the “strategic mind”

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Chapter 6 – The Strategic Mind [17]
- Doroudi, S. A Primer on Learning Theories (open access). Please read the section on behaviorism (pages 1-6). You need not read the rest of the article.

Week Five

Focus for this week

Northern Ireland Case application: Applying multiple perspectives to a social conflict

- No new readings. Please see assignment and associated handouts.

Week Six

Focus for this week

Examination of language and symbols – a Communication perspective on conflict

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Chapter 7 – Language and Symbols [17]

Week Seven

Focus for this week

The “social constructionist” orientation to analyzing conflict

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Chapter 8 – The Co-creation of meaning [18]

Week Eight

Focus for this week

Video exercise comparing mediation theory in practice from the perspective of the strategic mind and the perspective of the co-creation of meaning.

The social structural orientation to analyzing conflict situations.

Comparison of theories as applied to mediation

- Folger, J. P. and Bush, R. A. B. (1994). Ideology, Orientations to Conflict, and Mediation Discourse. In *New Directions in Mediation* (pp. 3-25). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [15]

Reading assignments for this week

- Text – Chapter 9 – Systems, structures and the conflict ecosystem [18]
- Text – Chapter 10 – Implications for practice [18]
- Text – Chapter 11 – A Few Loose Ends [12]

Consult Canvas for final submission deadlines