

APPLICATION OF THE THEORY OF FRAMES IN ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Abstract: This article deals with the use of Frame Analysis in research and organisational conflict. The first part of the study includes the theoretical foundations of the frame analysis in its classic form presented by Erving Goffman. The following sections include a discussion of the concepts in the area of management sciences that allow the incorporation of frame theory into organisational studies. The empirical section includes an analysis of the cases of parties' behaviour during mediation in collective disputes, which were interpreted in light of the frame theory.

Purpose: The aim of the paper is examine how the Frame Analysis can be useful for the organizational conflict resolution.

Methodology: The analysis is based on the assumptions of the methodology of qualitative research in sociology. The article ends with theoretical and practical conclusions regarding the explanation of the course of an organizational conflict and the role of the mediator in resolving it.

Findings: Not only Interest Based Approach is applicable to the organizational conflict resolution procedure but also Humanistic Approach is very effective in this scope.

Keywords: Anthropology of Experience, Frame Analysis, Humanistic Approach to Management, Mediation in a Collective Dispute, Organizational Conflict.

Introduction

The term "frame" is often used in social sciences, especially in qualitative sociology. Its creator is widely recognized as Erving Goffman, who devoted an extensive 600-page book to this issue (Goffman 1986) entitled *Frame Analysis* (the Polish version was released in 2010). The "Essay on the Organisation of Experience" subtitle deserves special attention. It is this key term, namely "organisation of experience," that will be used later to explain the function of the frame analysis.

What is the meaning of "frame" in social life? This is Goffman's understanding of the frame presented by Krzysztof Konecki: "Although the frame is not clearly defined by Goffman, its metaphorical references allow us to understand the pattern by which we define situations. The frame is the "border" of a certain band of experiencing events. Frames make it possible to understand experiences, and there are many, although a few are essential. Just as the frames of paintings make it possible to focus on what is inside the painting, the frames of experience enable to understand and organize them." (Konecki 2012: p. 177) The metaphor of the frame is interesting because it draws attention to a fact from the history of art: the appearance of easel painting during the early Renaissance, the so-called *quattrocenta*. Previously, painting had a rather decorative function. Various objects

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were decorated with paintings, including altars and walls of buildings, but the painting as an autonomous work did not actually exist. The picture frame not only makes the composition and the painter's point of view extremely important. The painting was a window to the reality it presented. When approached this way, the frame is a good metaphor to define a point of reference, a context in which a fragment of reality is perceived - including social reality.

Literature review

But what is a frame when looking from a sociological perspective? Marek Czyżewski, in the introduction to *Frame Analysis*, explains this concept as follows: "Key terms of the book -<frame> (frame, interpretation scheme, answer to the question <what is going on here?>) and "framing" (applying a <frame> - interpretation scheme) (...)" (Czyżewski 2010, p. 7) The key concept in the above approach to the issue of "frame" is the "scheme of interpretation:" that is, the question "what is going on here?" This question means that the reception and diagnosis of the social situation is not obvious. One should approach the perceived situation in a specific interpretive frame, but what does that really mean? At this point, it is necessary to take a closer look at Goffman's frame and the intellectual tradition from which the theory is derived. Simply put, the frame is a scheme for interpreting experience, meaning how a person understands the interaction in which he/she participates and his/her role in it. It is no coincidence that Marek Czyżewski, explaining the concept of Goffman's frame, refers to the colloquial phrase "what is going on here?" often used by people who resolve conflicts or try to control disorganisation or chaos in social groups. Whoever finds the answer to this question and takes control of the situation will gain power over social actors. From that point on, everyone participating in the interaction will perceive and understand it according to the scheme (frame) imposed by that person.

When introducing the issue of the frame in Goffman's approach, the following typology can be indicated: "Goffman distinguished primary frames, which are fundamental to our experiencing of the world. There is nothing before them, and they are not preceded by cultural constructs. In this context, people distinguish between the natural and social frames. Natural frames are anchored to physical objects such as the body, the environment, and natural events such as natural disasters. On the other hand, the social frame is anchored in the social environment and is a derivative of planned human activities. Frames have rules of what is inside the frame and what is excluded from it." (Konecki 2012, p. 177) The natural frame may be, for example, gender and the roles it determines. As far as the social frames are concerned, an example may be the phenomenon of a generation as a community of experiences, e.g. the Generation of Columbuses, a term introduced by the writer Roman Bratny to denote a generation of young people during the occupation and World War II. Thus, their perception of the world (the frame) were affected mainly by the experiences of war. A characteristic feature of the frame is the contour, the border that separates what is inside from what is outside the frame. In other words, certain things should, or even must, be within the frame, while they are unable to. If a frame

of joke or irony is adopted for an interaction, then it is not right to be offended by such behaviour which, if taken "seriously," should inevitably trigger such a reaction.¹ They break the "let me save face" principle. For example, it is not proper for famous people to be offended by the jokes directed at them in satirical programs. Being offended in such situations is considered to have a lack of sense of humour and even lack of class.

An important issue in Goffman's theory is frame transformations. These include transpositions and fabrications. It is impossible to describe all types of transformations (Goffman has devoted a lot of space to them). Therefore, only an example of a sports competition will be presented. It is known that many sports disciplines, e.g. in track and field or in martial arts, come from war. However, in sports, no one wants to kill anyone. Almost the same activities as in war are performed, but in a different frame. You have to bow to your opponent or shake hands. You also have to follow a code that does not apply in a "real fight," e.g. you must not hit below the belt. Another transposition could be training of a sales representative, where they have to deal with difficult customers in a pre-defined staged situation, and where the customers are played by other sales representatives.

Fabrications that serve to create the impression that the observed event has a different meaning than it really had are another matter. The idea is to create an "ad hoc" new frame to confuse the recipient's perception. "The point here is to fabricate the impression that what is happening has a different meaning than what is actually attributed to it by the authors of the fabrication. These are usually manipulations and <creating impressions> to mislead the recipient of the messages" (Konecki 2012, p. 178). The case is similar when the "joke frame" is changed to the "serious frame," which is usually accompanied by the following statement: "Let's talk seriously now." However, this is not strictly a fabrication of the frame. Such an activity is best described by the term "reframing." For this purpose, "out-of-frame activities" which serve to "break the frame" can be used. Using the right joke, you can ridicule or embarrass someone, or even completely change the meaning of their behaviour or speech. This is why, in an organisation like the military, officers, non-commissioned officers, and other soldiers have separate casinos. The point is that subordinates do not have the opportunity to see their superiors in "out of frame situations" or performing "out of frame activities" that could jeopardise their authority. In this respect, Goffman's frame resembles the "scene" he described earlier, and the preparation of the frame can be compared to "behind-the-scenes activities" (Goffman 1977).

As Krzysztof Konecki states, one of the most important concepts of frame analysis is "applying a frame" (Konecki 2012, p. 179). This has already been partially mentioned in the previous part of the discussion, when specifying primary and secondary frames. This process can also be encountered during disputes or even

¹Interesting study of the role of laughter as a part of framing in social interaction gives Phillip Glenn (2003) in his book: *Laughter in Interaction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

negotiations, when the choice of language or specific concepts becomes the "application of a frame." Whoever applies their frame constructs the course of interaction on his/her own terms, and the other participants of the interaction take part in "his/her spectacle."

Experience

The subtitle of Goffman's book entitled *Frame Analysis* is "An Essay on the Organisation of Experience." Since the frame, as defined by Goffman, is to be an instrument that allows us "to control experience," it is necessary to answer the question: "what is human experience?" This is how Antoni Stępień defines experience: it is "a conscious act of obtaining information about an object through its direct and eye approach, as well as the cognitive result of this activity, formulated in the form of a judgment or empirical sentence; colloquially - experiencing something or being tested and their consequences (in the form of, for example, knowledge and efficiency), as well as participating in something" (Stępień 1997, p. 119). In the above sense, the term "participating" draws attention. In this context, experience appears as gaining knowledge through participation, as opposed to gaining knowledge in a purely verbal manner, e.g. reading, listening, etc. Edward M. Bruner, in the introduction to his and Viktor Turner's collective work, refers to the concept of experience by Wilhelm Dilthey: "Dilthey understands experience as an eruption from routine and as an attempt to express it. It is a disturbance that disrupts the daily routine, an isolated sequence of events with a beginning, middle, and ending. This is the way in which people talk about what is most significant in their lives" (Bruner 1986, p. 13). Human experience appears in this context as a journey of some kind, as a result of which a person becomes someone different than before it began.

In this context, experience can be understood as a rite of passage. This is an essentially transgressive process. It is also a process of change taking place in three stages: (1) the phase of freezing the existing knowledge, (2) the phase of unfreezing this knowledge, which can be called the liminal (transitional) phase, during which the previous knowledge turns out to be useless, (3) the phase of freezing new knowledge and identity. The liminal phase is therefore similar to purgatory, in which there is a purification of old, unnecessary knowledge and identity in order to make a place for the new (Bylok, Cichobłaziński 2015, p. 55; Czarniawska 2010, p. 156). Victor Turner calls it a *rites de passage* (Turner 1975, p. 231).² Such an approach in management sciences is used by Barbara Czarniawska in her analyses of organisational change: "In our study of the work of advisors, Carmelo Maza and I suggested that reorganisation or reform could be viewed as bringing a group of workers into a liminal state, as anthropologists called the space (and time) between one state and another (the classic example of a liminal space is purgatory)" (Czarniawska 2010, p. 156). Thus, it can be concluded that every change, including organisational change, from the perspective of the constructivist approach, is a kind

²Arnold van Gennep is the originator of the term "rites of passage" (van Gennep, 2006).

of a ritual of passage. If you look at the lives of organisations and people, it is a series of rituals of passage. Some of them are awaited and prepared, while others are surprising and are a source of great discomfort or even trauma, and individuals and groups try to avoid them with all their strength. However, this is not always possible.

Frame analysis in management

The above presentation of frame analysis shows its sociological and anthropological character. The question arises: how can this analysis be used in research in the area of management, especially organisational conflict management and resolution, including negotiations? In Polish literature, the most important author who referred to this methodological tradition, which can be broadly called constructivist research regarding organisation, is Barbara Czarniawska. Taking the above into account, a book devoted to changes in the management of a big city is particularly interesting (Czarniawska 2014). In the cited analysis, the author used a slightly different term for frame (in Polish), but it can be understood similarly to Goffman's frame. There are also attempts to use this method in research on organisational conflicts (Cichobłaziński 2011, 2013, 2016). Conflict resolution is based not only on seeking consensus in the area of interests. The search for a common point of view by the conflicting parties, which focuses on issues related to the perception of conflict interaction, seems to be significantly more difficult and primary in relation to interests. With this approach to the problem, the issues of frame, framing, and reframing seem to be fundamental.

According to Barbara Czarniawska, "changing the frame" or "reframing (...)" means a quick and flexible change in the perception of the world as the situation develops. The need to change the perception was particularly evident in relation to the metro, where employees faced the need to move from construction to operation, and Warsaw residents from the "metro under construction" to the "metro as a means of transport" (Czarniawska 2014, p. 29). Is the "change of frame" fast and flexible, is it a completely different problem? Sometimes it is. However, the first question that must be asked is: do people want to change or do they like to be flexible? The classic theory of Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance indicates that there may be serious problems with the above (Festinger 2007). It seems that the point of view, specifically due to external influence, is the hardest to be changed. And this is precisely what happens in negotiations, when both sides quite openly influence each other. When both participants of an interaction are under pressure, it is difficult to be ready to adopt a different perspective, but on the other hand, it is difficult to reach an agreement without such a change. Apart from "reframing," Czarniawska uses one more term that can be found in many publications regarding negotiation, i.e. "anchoring." It should be emphasised that, in economics, in the theory of making, and also in negotiations, "anchoring" is treated as a cognitive error (Brzezicka 2016). In the broadest sense of the negotiations, however, such an approach seems to be untenable. Every position, every point of view, profit and loss assessment has its anchor. This does not mean that what Goffman called "frame fabrication" cannot take place, which, in the case of the anchoring effect, can be called "over-anchoring."

Frames and anchors in negotiations

The term used in negotiation theory that comes closest to Goffman's frame analysis is BATNA. It is an acronym of "Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement" (Fisher and Ury 1991, pp. 50-54). This is how the authors define BATNA: "The reason you negotiate is to get something better than what you could achieve without negotiating. What could it be? What's the alternative? What's your BATNA - your best alternative to a negotiated deal? This is a measure to evaluate any proposed agreement. This is the only measure that can protect you, on the one hand, against accepting conditions that are too unfavourable, and on the other hand, against rejecting conditions that may be in your interest" (Fisher and Ury 1991, p. 51). Therefore, BATNA performs the same function as the frame performs in Goffman's approach. It makes it possible to evaluate what is beneficial and what is not. In negotiation, you can have a strong BATNA when the negotiating participant has other opportunities to obtain the negotiated value, and a weak BATNA when there is no way out. You can also carry out frame/BATNA transformations, an example of which is a bluff, where a weak BATNA is presented as stronger than it is in reality. Similar principles can be used to apply the "anchor point" in negotiations (Malhotra and Bazerman 2008). The most common use of an "anchor point" is when quoting a price. The price listed first becomes an "anchoring point" for evaluating any subsequent compromises or escalations. The "fabrication" most frequently used by sales representatives is organising promotions or providing the original price and the sale price on one tag. The difference between these prices is to inform the buyer about savings, while this is a regular Goffman fabrication, as no discount took place. Interesting application of frame analysis one can find in the paper written by Phillip Glenn (2010). The author cites the excerpt of real mediation: "Chuck picks up on the substantive framing of "rent" to state an amount (which is the current monthly rent) (...)." (2010, p. 158) In this case

Application of Frame Analysis in mediation - Discussion

A mediator assisting in resolving a collective dispute may have an impact on the process of reaching an agreement, inter alia, by reframing the way in which the parties perceive the conditions of a conflict situation in which they find themselves. All conditions are usually very complex and consist of many factors that cannot be exhaustively discussed in a short article. For this reason, attention will be paid to one problem that is quite common in conflicts between unions and employers. It is a conflict of perspectives of perceiving a conflict situation, which can be conventionally called "the need to save face" versus "agreement." In collective disputes, the main problem is often how to come out with a face while making concessions, without which it is impossible to reach an agreement (Konecki 2009). It also happens that one of the parties must completely resign from their position due to incorrect assumptions, or simple misinformation or misinterpretation of data (Moore 2003; pp. 64-65). The need to save face in a situation where, in the common opinion, good negotiators are tough negotiators, becomes a serious problem, the solution of which is the task of the mediator. Sometimes, the parties ask the mediator:

"Has it ever happened that during a collective dispute someone stepped down? If so, then how was it done?" In order to explain the need to make concessions to reach an agreement, the mediator must present a completely new "frame" for the profit and loss assessment, in the context of which giving up some of his interests no longer appears as capitulation to the opponent, but as a necessary price for which a valuable agreement is obtained.

It should be noted that it happens that the parties do not ask the mediator for help in "reframing," but take action themselves that are best interpreted with the help of Goffman's category of "frame fabrication." This happens, for example, when the parties deliberately lead to an escalation of a conflict, in the face of which concessions seem to be the only way to avoid a catastrophe. Then no one can blame anyone for being "soft" in the face of so much pressure. An example can be the management of a public hospital that led the nurses to go on a hunger strike. The concessions made in this situation seem permissible and the ownership authority, such as the Marshal's Office, knows that the employer made a "rational" decision and did not show a lack of assertiveness. The employer could make concessions earlier, thus avoiding a protracted conflict, but then would face the accusation of extravagance on the part of his supervisor. This is a typical "dramatisation of activity" as understood by Erving Goffman (1997, pp. 10-46).

Conclusions:

1. As understood by Erving Goffman, the frame analysis is a good method to be used in qualitative research on the course and resolution of an organisational conflict.
2. Each change of frame in an individual's experience is a kind of "rite of passage" in the sense introduced by Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, and as such it is often associated with strong emotions. Passing through the liminal state is sometimes traumatic, other times euphoric, but never emotionally neutral.
3. The role of the mediator is, inter alia, to ensure appropriate management of emotions associated with the change of the frame, so that the "liminal" period necessary to change the perspective/frame is not longer than necessary.
4. The mediator should understand the "fabrication of frames" activities undertaken by the parties to the conflict in order to allow for "useful fabrications" and to prevent dysfunctional "fabrications," which are most often mere manipulations.
5. Although the framing and reframing concepts have constructivist and cognitive origins, it does not mean that they must lead to cognitive relativism in the postmodern sense.

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