

Introduction to the Special Issue of Negotiation and Conflict Management Research on New Theoretical Perspectives

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It was my privilege to have been the guest editor on this special issue of *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* dedicated to new theoretical perspectives on negotiation and conflict management. Before continuing, as I wrote in the call for papers, empirical work on conflict and negotiation has continued to grow in many fruitful directions. Yet without coherent theories, it will be difficult to make sense of this growing body of work, re-evaluate our prior assumptions, and discover what new questions are critical to further our understanding. Theory provides both coherence and guidance to a field. It provides coherence by arranging ideas and findings into a coherent system of causes and effects; from this, we can establish what we know about a particular topic. This is what makes a theory practical *à la* Lewin's famous dictum—it provides guidance to the person seeking to use this knowledge. Yet theory is also of practical use to the researcher, for as much as it can tell us what we do know, it also elucidates what we do not know and what we need to know. It brings the gaps in our current understanding into focus and offers strategies for closing those gaps. In a domain as large as conflict management, one that stretches across levels (individual–group–organization–nation) and touches on potentially any kind of interdependent interaction, theory is also a means to link and align small communities of research working on regions of this vast space.

I thank everyone involved in this process—authors, reviewers, editorial board, and NCMR staff (i.e., Narelle). This would not have worked had we not all worked together.

Correspondingly, “new theory” could apply to almost anything in this vast space. As such, this special issue brings together a heterogeneous set of papers, each taking a different tack to thinking about how we might study negotiation in some new and insightful way. So while Michael Prietula and Laurie Weingart’s paper looks more deeply into the negotiation process itself (specifically offer patterns), Joachim Hüffmeier, Stefan Krumm, and Guido Hertel’s paper assesses the negotiation field as a whole (specifically the kind of research being carried out, and the kind that is underrepresented). Cleotilde Gonzalez and Jolie Martin’s paper seeks to integrate a new approach to understanding interaction across mixed motive settings (instance-based learning theory), while Adrian Borbely’s paper re-examines an established approach to understanding mixed motive situations—agency theory—in a new light. Each of these papers provides new insights that I believe will help move the study of negotiation and conflict management forward. The scope and focus vary widely across papers, but such a wide array should make it very easy for NCMR readers to find a connection with some part of this issue.

In the first paper, Prietula and Weingart (this issue) bring to light a critical and heretofore under acknowledged aspect of how negotiators choose which offers to make at a given point in time, namely the evolving state of the negotiation in people’s minds. This work is a nice follow-up to their earlier work that recasts negotiation through the lens of joint problem solving. In this work, negotiations define problem spaces that must be jointly searched, typically through offers and counteroffers (i.e., moves), to find a solution (Prietula & Weingart, 1994). Yet, moves are not simply a function of the accumulated knowledge, but rather are heavily biased toward reacting to the immediate prior behavior and response (Weingart, Prietula, Hyder, & Genovese, 1999). In their current paper, Prietula and Weingart extend these ideas by examining the patterns such path dependence creates in the sequence of offers posed on the way to agreement. The direct implications of their analysis shed light on negotiator cognition. Yet, the broader contribution is to see negotiation as the dynamic process that it is supposed to be. Even though the actual problem space in which negotiators operate is fixed, to the negotiators, the situation is evolving. Prietula and Weingart’s work provide an approach to understand this critical and yet underrepresented aspect of negotiation.

The paper by Gonzalez and Martin (this issue) also examines negotiator cognition, but more generally and across mixed motive situations. This paper brings a current general decision theory, instance-based learning theory, from broader decision-making studies to conflict. This linkage is particularly important as it has the capacity to enrich our understanding of negotiator thinking beyond the dominant approach that focuses on heuristics and biases. This is not an either-or situation, as the established thinking errors can be integrated into instance-based learning theory (e.g., how would such a bias impact a particular learning instance). Gonzalez and Martin also take a first cut at incorporating social information into the general learning and decision-making framework posed, this should also enrich our understanding of negotiator cognition. As with Prietula and Weingart (this issue), Gonzalez and Martin’s theory treats conflict as dynamic and thus also provides researchers with tools for how to study such dynamics. Instance-based learning theory has been used very productively in other dynamic decision-making tasks (Gonzalez, Dutt, & Lejarraga, in press; Gonzalez, Lerch, & Lebiere,

2003), and so it should be to the study of negotiation and conflict as well. Finally, I note that Gonzalez and Martin's work has the potential, given the formal model properties, of being incorporated into simulation models of conflict, a technique that has been used productively by many conflict scholars (e.g., Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2007).

A departure from the nuts and bolts of individual interaction, Adrian Borbely (this issue) reanalyzes the agent's role in alternative dispute resolution (ADR). Mr. Borbely, as a trained lawyer and mediator, brings a nontraditional (i.e., social scientist) perspective to the study of conflict. He argues for an alteration to the typical principal-agent relationship assumed to exist in situations where parties are independent and (presumably) equally knowledgeable. Instead, he argues that agents who are "in house" council or otherwise strongly tied to the principle create a different relational dynamic. This coupled with substantial differences in knowledge and expertise creates systematic deviations from the principal-agent framework. Such distinctions open up new research avenues for those interested in ADR mechanisms in particular. However, it also raises the larger question about the plurality of relationships that agents might have with their principles. This may suggest exploration by other conflict researchers into what a typology of such relationships might be.

I thought it appropriate to close with the paper by Hüffmeier, Krumm, and Hertel (this issue), for they have provided an interesting and insightful assessment of the current state of our field with respect to knowledge dissemination. Responding to Carsten De Dreu's (2001) critique of conflict management as disconnected to the world of negotiation practice, they have endeavored to characterize this problem objectively. They assess the state of conflict research through a number of different and interesting approaches (a kind of multitrait-multimethod approach, if you will). In the end, these authors provide clarification and of what gaps actually need to be filled by conflict researchers. But an even bigger contribution is the measurement technique itself. This will serve as a useful tool in the ongoing conversation about how conflict and negotiation research *should* be growing, as well as assessing the effectiveness of endeavors aimed at improving the status quo.

I note that although these papers are all quite distinct, there is plenty of potential for integration. Both Prietula and Weingart (this issue) and Gonzalez and Martin (this issue) take information-based approaches that lend themselves to tracking the learning that occurs over the process of negotiating. Additionally, the social implications of Gonzalez and Martin's work will have bearing on the agents and their interaction in Borbely's (this issue) Manager-Lawyer framework. Researchers seeking to use any of the aforementioned studies would be wise to think about them in light of the suggestions for how to increase the impact of our field presented by Hüffmeier et al. (this issue). Borbely's work in particular is directly relevant to Hüffmeier et al.'s push for field work with professional negotiators. The modeling and characterization proposed by Prietula and Weingart (this issue) and Gonzalez and Martin (this issue) could even be used in this capacity were one to consider how their analytical approaches might be applied to analyzing real-world interactions post hoc.

So please enjoy this special issue of Negotiation and Conflict Management Research.

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