Building Conflict Management Effectiveness
Social Work 706 (section 001) -- Winter, 2010
School of Social Work Building—Room B684

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Course Description:
This course will provide an overview of conflict management methods congruent with the demands of multiple domains and levels of social work practice. Students in all concentrations must address conflicts arising between people whose lives are interdependent whether they are board members, neighbors, or spouses. The community activist working to develop inter-organizational collaborations and the social work clinician helping individuals and families resolve disputes must both learn about the dynamics of face-to-face conflicts and the range of techniques and strategies available to help prevent, de-escalate, and resolve such differences. This course will offer practical suggestions for both assessment and intervention drawing from micro and macro theory and practice.

Course Content:
This course will address the development and resolution of conflict that occurs within organizations, communities, and families. Students will be introduced to sociological, psychological, and communications approaches to conceptualizing conflict processes. They will examine the interplay of needs, values, skills, and resources in conflict interaction. The role of power as a critical determiner of conflict processes and outcomes will be theoretically explored, and strategies for dealing with power imbalances will be reviewed. The influence of the diverse dimensions (including ability, age, class, color, culture, ethnicity, family structure, gender (including gender identity and gender expression), marital status, national origin, race, religion or spirituality, sex, and sexual orientation) will also be investigated. Intervention techniques drawn from interpersonal, organizational and community conflict management situations will be presented and evaluated. The professional roles of consultant advocate, therapist, and mediator will be contrasted. How professional role performance relates to one's personal conflict experience and history will also be considered.

Course Objectives:
Upon completion of the course, students will be able:
1. Describe generic conflict processes that operate in small and large systems from a variety of theoretical perspectives.
2. Assess which needs, values, intentions, skills, and resources are most influential to cooperation and conflict in specific circumstances and settings.
3. Describe the differences in conflict dynamics that may occur between intimates and strangers within differing diversity dimensions and in terms of social structural, situational, and life stage demand characteristics and contexts.

4. Demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the factors and processes involved in positive interaction and intimacy, as well as those involved in oppressive relationships.

5. Identify relevant factors involved in the prevention of conflict, the de-escalation of conflict, and the resolution of conflict.

6. Describe skills necessary to translate interpersonal conflicts into opportunities for the establishment of social justice between disputants rather than merely as opportunities for the re-establishment of social order.

7. Describe typical ethical concerns related to building conflict management effectiveness.

**Course Design:**

This course is designed to facilitate the integration of theory and practice and will involve lectures, discussions, and experiential exercises. Although, this course will frequently involve presentation of information by the course instructor or guest lecturers, the quality of the discussion will be dependent upon the case examples, observations, and questions that students bring to class in response to the topic under consideration. Therefore, student preparation and willingness to participate will be essential, since skill development depends on practice.

**Relation to the School-Wide Curricular Themes**

**Multiculturalism and Diversity.** Students will gain knowledge necessary to assess the ways in which the dynamics of conflicts differ across various diversity dimensions such as culture, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other forms of social stratification. In addition, they will learn strategies for intervention that respect these differences and are particularly suitable for fostering across group dialogue and cooperative action.

**Social Justice.** Conflict resolution can serve not only as a means to re-establish social order but also as an opportunity to establish social justice. In this class, students will be challenged to think about how different forms of conflict intervention may support or inhibit change efforts directed at increasing social justice. They will also learn how to assess whether methods aimed at establishing more just relationships actually are likely to have this intended effect.

**Promotion, Prevention, Treatment, and Rehabilitation.** Too often conflict intervention efforts are begun when conflict has already escalated and is perceived as intractable or severe. This course will help students examine the precursors to intractable conflict, which may escalate to destructive behavior. They will learn the role of conflict management skills in promoting positive interaction, preventing unproductive or destructive conflict and in deescalating conflicts that have already arisen.

**Behavioral and Social Science Research.** Programs in human services are designed under particular social, economic, and political circumstances and often become obsolete when circumstances change. Students will be introduced to selected social science models and
theories that can be used as tools to design and evaluate the relevancy and "fit" of given conflict interventions and programs to the conflicts they purport to resolve.

Social Work Ethics and Values. The many complex ethical issues encountered by social workers attempting to manage and resolve conflict will be considered. These will include the question of third-party neutrality, the role of conflict escalation in the service of social justice, how to deal with power imbalances, etc. Ethical standards of social work practice (e.g. NASW, ABSW) will be analyzed and used to assess commonly confronted issues.

Organization of the Course

The organization of this course is based on a conceptual mapping of the elements associated with understanding conflict and conflict management in a variety of settings. Topics include:

- Understanding conflict
  - Types of conflict
  - Analysis of conflict situations
  - Conflict dynamics and escalation
- Management of conflict
  - Relationships
  - Institutional structures
  - Personal and group dynamics
- Conflict resolution (as distinct from “conflict management”)
  - Legal channels
  - Alternative dispute resolution
    - Arbitration
    - Mediation
- Skills/techniques
  - Balanced empathy
  - Active listening
  - Imagining solutions

Examples will be drawn from interpersonal conflicts, organizational settings (workplaces, schools, and human service organizations), and community conflicts. The impact of race, gender, socio-economic factors, and cross-national differences on conflict management and conflict resolution will be an integral part of these discussions, as will individual variations in approaches. Guest speakers will provide examples of the application of conflict management in the five contexts listed above.

The course design draws upon a developmental model in the sense that it is intended to be flexible, responding to the specific interests of the students and mutual exploration of the broad topic of conflict and conflict management. It begins with a preliminary concept map, including examples of readings based on different elements of that map. During the course of the semester, the concept map and readings will be refined to reflect the content developed by the students and the instructor. This is envisioned as a joint learning process that will involve guest speakers, examples, from the class, and individual research.
Expectations for the class:

1. Class preparation, attendance, and participation (10 point maximum)

2. Personal conflict style—a short (2-4 pages) reflection paper involving:
   a. completing the online Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment
      <http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes2.asp>
   b. reading the article provided in which the outcomes of the Meyers-Briggs are related to conflict styles
      <http://www.mediate.com/articles/eilermanD3.cfm>
   c. based on a personal experience with a conflictual situation (or conflictual situations, generally), assess the extent to which the information from your MBTI assessment was useful in understanding your actions in that situation.
      (10 points maximum)

3. Identify an area or topic on the concept map that has particular interest for you.
   a. select two (2) of the articles and summarize the respective content in terms of the contributions/relevance to the understanding of the concepts in the map
      (2 separate submissions—a maximum of 5 points for each)
   b. find three (3) new items to add to the concept map and discuss each in terms of its contributions/relevance to the understanding of the concepts in the map—these “items” can be documents (research articles, chapters, agency protocols, etc.) or multimedia pieces (e.g., video clips, examples from popular culture, etc.). As with (a), above, summarize the respective content in terms of the contributions/relevance to the understanding of the concepts in the map. If possible, submit a PDF of documents and URLs or other access information for non-documents.
      (3 submissions--10 points maximum for each item)

4. Development of a conflict management improvement plan to a practice setting
   The conflict management improvement plan will include:
   - a description of the organizational context
   - the nature of conflicts that the plan is intended to address
   - the proposed plan, including changes to be made, timing of these changes, and the key decision-makers that would have to approve these changes
   - a description of how one would determine success of the change

   (40 points maximum)
There are three texts required for the course:


Other readings will be assigned during the year. These are available as PDFs on the course Ctools site. These readings include the following, organized by broad subject area as defined in the Concept Map for the course. Note that some are listed under more than one subject.

**Understanding Conflict**


**Management of Conflict**


**Conflict Resolution**


**Skills/Techniques**


Cloke, K. (2008). *Building bridges between psychology and conflict resolution: Implications for mediator learning*  
http://www.mediate.com/articles/cloke7.cfm

Eilerman, D. *Use of the Myers-Briggs conflict pairs in assessing conflict*  
http://www.mediate.com/articles/eilermanD3.cfm

Jamison, J. K., Bodtker, A. M., & Jones, T. S. (2006). Like talking to a brick wall:  

Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt.


**Contexts for Conflict Management**


Pelkey, S. (2009). *Provider dispute resolution: Oakland County Community Mental Health Authority Policy*


