A Meta System for Understanding International Conflict

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Abstract

This paper uses Nomology, a decision science approach to structuring qualitative decisions, to show that conflict decision-making uses a generic framework based on a succession of dichotomies. The first dichotomy is whether the two parties mainly agree or disagree. The second is whether to use direct or indirect action. These combine to form four General Political Adjustment Activities, which have corresponding dilemmas: Collaboration (Integration), Cooperation (Agreement), Confrontation (Persuasion) and Conflict (Escalation). It explores how the generic activities might be perceived in terms of Chinese culture and systems and suggests that the agree/disagree dimension corresponds to being in harmony or not. It suggests that the direct/indirect dimension appears in Chinese culture as the use of power versus guanxi or relationships through people. One difference with the West is that Chinese culture appears to put more emphasis on Conflict Resolution, i.e. the adapting process of moving in the reverse direction away from Conflict. A second difference appears to be a lack of balance within these dimensions as might have been expected within a culture influenced by Confucius, so conscious of the Yin/Yang balance in everything. There seems to be an over strong emphasis on being in harmony, and on respecting power, especially seniority and authority. This seems evident in the lack of emphasis on Confrontation rather than seeing it as a bridge whereby to pass from Conflict to Cooperation. This contrasts with the United States, which appears both to focus too much on using its power to force other countries to adjust, and to have difficulty with both Confrontation and Cooperation in international politics. It suggests that China may be very well positioned to help contribute to a stable international political order based on international cooperation and harmony-seeking.

Keywords: Decision science, Nomology, Systems, Adjustment, Conflict

1. Introduction

This paper summarises a recent paper about conflict decision processes (Brugha, 2006) and tries to elucidate some of the ideas in terms of Chinese culture and systems, as seen from a Western point of view. It seeks to add to work on applying game theory ideas to strategies about conflict by fitting them into a generic framework based on Nomology, the science of the laws of the mind. See Brugha (2005) for a recent review and an introduction to its terminology and concepts.

Nomology is a mapping process, in which gaps in systems that emerge from research are investigated and filled. This paper is about “framing and naming” activities that happen in politics. Nomology suggests that there are limited kinds of decision structure, and that all decision practice should fit into these structures. Brugha’s (1998a,b,c) research into qualitative structures that emerged from either established systems or empirical evidence indicated that decision structures are either subjective based on committing and convincing or on adjusting balances between opposites.

This idea that there are three qualitatively distinct generic types of decision process is mirrored in the modern Chinese system wuli-shili-renli (WSR: Gu and Zhu, 1995; Gu and Tang, 2000; Zhu, 2000). There are parallels between adjusting and wuli, which in both systems were described as objective, and also between convincing and shili, and committing and renli, which in both systems were described as subjective (Brugha, 2001a). Both Nomology and WSR are claimed to comprehensively account for the activities of systems. With WSR “Wu (objective existence), Shi (subjective modelling), and Ren (human relations) constitute a differentiated whole that conditions systems projects”. Interestingly, and indeed realistically, the differences between each corresponding pair illustrate very strikingly the different understandings of these processes between China and the West.
From analysis of many cases in management practice it is clear that people address adjusting problems using the same approach, which is based on asking questions that have dichotomous answers. The first question they address is “what kind of problem was it?” should it involve more planning or more putting plans into effect? Generally the second question is “where was the focus of the problem?” Is it more concerned with the people involved or more with “place” issues? Combining the answers to these dichotomies led to the formalisation of four general adjustment activities (Figure 1 Brugha, 1998a,b). This was described as an adjustment system because remediing the imbalances in the dichotomies acts as a mechanism for reducing excessive emphasis on particular approaches to solving problems in organisations. The outer ring of Figure 1 contains four proposed “general political adjustment activities” and corresponding dilemmas that will be introduced below.

Adjusting is objective in the sense that it always seeks to find a balance. How one decides on one’s commitments and convictions is more subjective, leading to the disappearance of the “pull” activity in adjustment decision-making (Brugha, 1998a).

Brugha (1998c) has described applications of development decision-making, i.e. ones that have a two-layer committing and convincing structure (Table 1). He has used this structure to describe the relationship between the stages of a project development process, such as the systems development lifecycle in information systems.

Brugha (2001b) has also shown that the implementation of this cycle uses the rules of adjustment decision-making. The processing of each stage is carried out as a third layer of activity that is embedded to an extent within the other two layers. The evidential basis he called on for this was observations of the Professional Work Practice approach in information systems (livari et al. 1998).

The idea is that there is a “proper” or objective way to carry out each development stage. The principal requirement is that there should be balance in the usage of alternative managerial approaches. For instance a manager could cause harm by bringing to the job a particular bias in favour of planning as against putting plans into effect. Having an awareness of such potential imbalances can offset such a bias. Another benefit is that the model can be used to match the needs of any task with the management styles of the existing members of a task force when recruiting new members.

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**Fig. 1. General political adjustment activities**
2. Political Adjusting Processes

Nomology’s Simplicity Principle claims that people use a limited set of decision structures, and that decision practice should fit into these structures. This claim is balanced by a strong test. If this three layer system that applies in information systems is truly a generic one it should also apply elsewhere, including to political activity (Stage 2 of Table 1), and there should be evidence of this. It makes no sense to have artificial barriers between fields and disciplines. Indeed, politics pervades everywhere, including information systems. The focus of this study is to explore this third layer in political activity. We review this first in Western terms (from Brugha, 2006), and then attempt to extend it to the East.

The idea is to test if the generic adjusting structure has shaped the constructs (see Figure 1) that people use when making decisions about politics. This is a strong test in that it is not enough to find a fit with some of them and not others. We expect that all the adjusting constructs should have meaning, although expressed in the language of politics.

Review (Brugha, 2006) of recent research into Confrontation and Collaboration Analysis (CCA) (Murray-Jones et al, 2003) confirmed these expectations. It showed that conflict processes have four phases: “collaboration” and “cooperation” (corresponding to when positions agree) and “confrontation” and “conflict” (corresponding to when positions disagree) (Figure 1). Nomology helps to understand the thinking behind the formation of constructs. Their division on the basis of agreeing or disagreeing corresponds to a change from planning (the disagreement) to putting (the disagreement into effect). The adjustment that takes place is to the “relationships” between the two parties as they move into disagreement, which may end in conflict. Consequently, the starting point is that the two parties are united. Conflict is possible but not certain. Hence collaboration should be understood to be a phase during which unity is possibly under threat and disintegration is a proposition.

Collaboration is about people, communities or nations working together, with jointly held interests. If one controls the other, the relationship need not be a happy one to constitute a collaboration, as in the case of an empire that exploits its colony. However, where there are two very distinct cultures or races, such as in Northern Ireland or South Africa, genuine collaboration should be about neither dominating the other, but based on having a common destiny because both share the same place (top half of Figure 1).

Using the ideas from adjustment decision-making, as unity declines the relationship cannot be described as collaboration; it is more separate. Cooperation is where both parties have differentiated interests. They see themselves as distinct people (bottom half of Figure 1), and not necessarily likely to have common concerns other than indirectly. Any working together is mediated by evaluating the perceptions of the parties; how will working together affect the interests of both. If the relationship declines further to the point of disagreement then confrontation takes over, and the emphasis moves into a “pull” phase and trying to get the other side to do what one wants. If this fails the last resort is to conflict to push for the result one wants.

2.1 Political adjustment activities and dilemmas

There is a difference between the two orders that the system follows. Clockwise corresponds to where a stronger party tries to get a weaker party to adjust during a dispute. Anti-clockwise corresponds to a conflict resolution process in which two parties try to adapt to co-existing with one another. International politics should be more about countries adapting to an international order rather than trying to force other countries to adjust to one’s wishes.

Brugha (2006) proposed dilemmas for each of the general political adjusting activities (see Figure 1) of collaboration, cooperation, confrontation and conflict. The dilemmas correspond to the pragmatic question whether to continue with an activity or move onto the next one in the sequence. Conflict is a push activity that relies for success on having superior strength over one’s opponents. The inability to push through to a quick

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Table 1. Hierarchy of levels of needs, preferences and values
success against an opponent during this phase leads to the conflict dilemma that one might cause an “escalation” of the conflict. Escalation need not always be bad. It can sometimes “hasten the pace of negotiations” and “makes both sides more eager to settle” (Heifetz and Segev, 2005). However, the prospect of escalation can prevent one from pushing the other side too much; this is a pragmatic choice.

The difference between conflict and confrontation is between the aggressive use of direct action to get one’s way, and the more defensive use of indirect action that tries to mediate through people (top versus bottom of Figure 1). Prior to getting into conflict it is better to try confrontation, which is a “pull” activity that tries to “persuade” the people on the other side to relent. The confrontation dilemma is “persuasion” may fail, making it difficult to avoid conflict.

Before confrontation the parties go through a phase of cooperation. The difference is that with cooperation there is still the hope that, on balance, there is scope for more agreement than disagreement between the parties. Cooperation relies on there being some mutuality in the perceptions of both parties. The cooperation dilemma is what to do if “agreement” is not achieved. This is the turning-point after which the positions disagree.

The difference between cooperation and collaboration is that cooperation recognises a distinction between the parties, whereas collaboration assumes that they are, or can be united, in some general way. The Prisoners’ Dilemma in Game Theory exemplifies this difference. Two robbers have been caught in the vicinity of a crime. Immediately the police separate them and proceed to interrogate them, trying to get them to cooperate with the authorities. The prisoners are guilty, but there is not sufficient proof. If one cooperates in exchange for his freedom the other will get a very long sentence. But if both cooperate then both will get a less severe sentence. If both are collaborators they should say nothing, in which case they will probably be held on remand for a short period pending a trial and then be freed. The prisoners’ dilemma is a collaboration dilemma: can they retain their “integration” despite the efforts of the authorities to divide them?

2.2 Presumptions about integration

The current U.S. policy about international terrorism dismisses indirect action, i.e. international cooperation and confrontation, which are in the bottom half of Figure 1. This points to isolationism as the basis of the U.S. policy of “gun boat diplomacy”. America’s isolationism comes from their history. They are a nation of immigrants who settled in wild unexplored areas and, in some cases, displaced the native Americans by force. They have never lost an international war on their own territory, or had to develop international political relationships where they were not the dominating party. For them collaboration means they have control over the relationship. The question is what determines if collaboration-based actions are acceptable, or indeed necessary? The underlying assumption is that both sides are in agreement, to such an extent that each allows the other a cushion of freedom to act. The collaboration dilemma is that the actions that appear to break this agreement may cause disintegration.

Wohlfarth (2004) has proposed that U.S. policy should turn towards cooperation, “to participate vigorously in international institutions and seek to shape the world to our own ends”. This, however, has the dilemma of depending on getting the agreement of international partners, “having to submit to constraints that run counter to our interests when, regardless of our power, we cannot carry the day in the governing forums”. His preference was for an “indirect approach rather than the direct approach in fighting terrorist threats”. Hamm et al. (2002) have also argued in favour of “world politics based on a cooperative world domestic policy”, including cooperation with the Muslim world. In reflecting on how world politics took a turn toward multilaterally backed US unilaterism in the weeks after the 11th September 2001, they suggested that, rather than complain, Europe should build its capacities to “lend its weight to shaping the 21st century’s world policy and world economy”.

The case that the U.S. could be a global policeman dealing with international terrorism suffers from a collaboration dilemma. Despite its wealth and resources, the U.S. does not have the capacity to police the whole world directly. Where it fails to do so it creates a backlash (Brugha, 2006), leading to the disintegration of support for the U.S. throughout the world. Prominent U.S. neo-conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama (2006) have recently indicated that U.S. international policy should change.

2.3 Conflict spirals and conflict resolution

Normal conflict adjusting uses a clock-wise problem-solving cycle (Figure 1). One first assumes that collaboration is possible, turning to cooperation only when there are difficulties with the relationship. If that fails one uses confrontation. One resorts to conflict only when all else fails. The adjuster controls the adjusting process, and only makes the pragmatic decision to move to the next activity when prevented from making further progress.

The reverse process (Brugha and Bowen, 2005) can occur when the adjuster loses control of the dynamic in an “adapting conflict spiral”, such as from disintegration to escalation. Conflict resolution also follows an adapting process. It starts when both parties
agree that it is a win-win game for both to turn away from conflict, and confront one another. The aim is to move from confrontation into cooperation, and from cooperation into collaboration. The other party appears to control the adapting process, in that no move can be made until both agree.

3. Chinese Attitudes to Conflict

The first application of this model led to the conclusion that U.S. foreign policy was imbalanced against using indirect action. When applying the model to help understand Chinese attitudes this author is under two disadvantages: not understanding Chinese culture, and having access only to articles about conflict in China in the English language. The aim is to stimulate a more thorough study by Chinese scholars, hopefully not to be a visitor insulting his hosts through his ignorance!

The model has three aspects: structure, dimensions and constructs. All aspects should carry a neutral tone. We look for evidence of fit, and then for imbalances in tone. These could reflect bias in the culture, or problems with the research. To check we seek confirmatory evidence from other research.

Leung, et al.’s Dualistic Model of Harmony and its Implications for Conflict Management in Asia (2002) is a good starting point because it offers a match both with the dimensions and the constructs, which are: “Aligning”, “Balancing”, “Smoothing” and “Disintegrating”. They describe the first (and most important) dimension of positions agree/disagree (Figure 1) as “Value Harmony: High/Low”. We would prefer the more neutral “positions in harmony / positions not in harmony”.

“Aligning” matches collaborating quite well in that the major task of collaborators is to try and align the activities of different groups. “Balancing” matches cooperating very well because it emphasises the importance of the relationship ensuring that there is a balance in the benefits and costs received by both sides. “Smoothing” matches confronting, but only in the sense of suggesting as a policy the avoidance of confrontation. Unfortunately, they describe this as a type of Machiavellianism, as deception that seeks superficial harmony (p. 212). “Disintegrating” matches conflict, but in a negative way that suggests that conflict is bad. Sometimes conflict cannot be avoided. Such a negative interpretation of confrontation and conflict fits the “not in harmony” aspect, and points to an imbalance. In their abstract they make an interesting reflection on this tendency:

“Conflict avoidance is common in East Asia, and the Confucian notion of harmony is often invoked to explain this tendency. We review the classical Confucian doctrines and found no encouragement of conflict avoidance in Confucian teachings. Quite the contrary, the Confucian notion of harmony embodies disagreement and open debates.”

They describe the second people/indirect action versus place/direct action dimension as “Instrumental Harmony: High/Low”. “Instrumental Harmony” is portrayed very negatively as “a means to a typically materialistic end”. This suggests a strong antipathy in Chinese culture to confrontation, which is negative on both Leung, et al.’s dimensions.

As a term “Instrumental Harmony” does not ring true. Nomology’s Principle 2 (Natural Language), claims that: “in any culture, there should be a natural language that incorporates the concepts of a nomological system (i.e. based on the science of the laws of the mind)” (Brugha, 1998a). We expect nomological terms to be prominently part of practice.

Chen and Starosta (1997-8) has identified such a set. They suggest harmony, guanxi (inter-relation), mientze (face), and power should form a framework for the model of conflict resolution and management. Guanxi, otherwise “relationships through people”, matches the people aspect in Figure 1, whereas “power” matches the place aspect. We here propose that instead of Instrumental Perspective as the second dimension, a Chinese version of direct versus indirect action might be “Power (Seniority and Rank)” versus “Guanxi, or Relationships through People”.

This suggests that mientze (face) is important. It is connected to the wish to avoid confrontation in Chinese culture. Hwang (1997-8) relates it to an “individual’s awareness about a public image formed in other’s minds. Chen and Starosta (p. 6, 1997-8) suggest that it is the “operational mechanism that connects the nodes of (a) guanxi network” and that the “Chinese endeavour to establish guanxi and give face to others to reach a state of harmony in social interaction in order to avoid confrontation and conflict” (p.7). Rather than confront another person with whom there is a problem, the strong one will avoid the problem when the costs of confronting are high (Pitta et al., 1999). Likewise the weak partner in any relationship will prefer to agree publicly and defy privately (see Leung et al.), hence the idea of “smoothing”. In both cases a concern about “losing face” (either oneself or the other person’s) can lead to an avoidance of confrontation.

Nomologically, the need for balance suggests that insufficient usage of appropriate confrontation may create a build-up of disharmony, which may later explode into an excessive usage of conflict. The fundamental concept behind confrontation is “pull” (Figure 1). Mientze (face) acts as a sophisticated mechanism that helps people to handle confrontation in a way that is sensitive to the (strong or weak) “pull” of a person’s power (seniority and rank).

We believe that extending this kind of study to other cultures could help increase mutual understanding
and reduce international conflict.

4. Reflection

My understanding of Chinese history reflects the commonality of experiences of China and Ireland with the British Empire. China is becoming once again the world’s greatest trading nation, as it used to be until the British Empire. China is becoming once again the world’s greatest trading nation, as it used to be until the British Empire. China is becoming once again the world’s greatest trading nation, as it used to be until the British Empire. China is becoming once again the world’s greatest trading nation, as it used to be until the British Empire. China is becoming once again the world’s greatest trading nation, as it used to be until the British Empire. China is becoming once again the world’s greatest trading nation, as it used to be until the British Empire.

We conclude by suggesting that the culture of the Chinese people points to an affinity for “international guanxi” through the United Nations Organisation. This could be good for China and for the world, leading to political stability and economic growth.

References

