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Managing Impressions and Forests

The Importance of Role Confusion in Co-Creation of a Natural Resource Conflict

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Abstract

Social interaction is an important—and often forgotten—aspect of conflicts in natural resource management (NRM). Building on the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction, this article explores how the concept of impression management during social interaction can help understand NRM conflicts. A qualitative study was carried out on a Swedish case involving a conflict over clear-cutting of a forest. To explain why the conflict escalated and destructivity increased, we investigated how the involved actors interpreted each other's actions. For an individual, role confusion occurs when a particular interaction creates a conflict between the presented self and the self expected from the social situation (Goffman 1956). The analysis shows that actors could not use their established social arenas to address dissatisfaction due to the fear of role confusion. Instead, they avoided informal face-to-face meetings and changed the conditions of the social situation to avoid role confusion.

Keywords: embarrassment, Erving Goffman, forest management, natural resource conflict, natural resource management, roles, social interaction, symbolic interaction

Conflicts are often described in terms of interest divergences. Blackburn and Bruce (1995, 2) define environmental conflict as ''when . . . parties involved in a decision-making process disagree about an action which has . . . impact upon the environment.'' Similarly, Ewert et al. (1999, 337) define recreational conflict as ''a condition that exists when . . . people experience . . . an interference of goals or the likelihood of incompatible goals, as the result of another person's or group's actions, threat of action, or personal/group attributes.'' According to Church et al. (2007), this and other similar definitions of conflict have led to an emphasis on examining competition between user groups (Jacob and Schreyer 1980; Barli et al. 2006; Clark et al. 2009; Hunt et al. 2009; Mann and Philippe 2009). Conflict definitions based on competition can have practical consequences in that the focus in meetings and processes is often on interests and experts, while communication is reduced to a procedural role (Hamilton and Wills-Toker 2006).

Daniels and Walker (2001) argue that definitions based on competition have significant limitations, because environmental conflicts stem from various sources in addition to disagreements and incompatible goals. Furthermore, the quality of social interaction between the actors involved is an important—and often forgotten—aspect of environmental and NRM conflicts (Owens 1985; Hallgren 2003; Hallgren and Ljung 2005; Bergseng and Vatn 2009). Theoretical models representing competition between user groups as the source of conflict explain why the actors are engaged in the issue, but not the direction of subsequent actions by the actors or why the conflict escalated and destructivity increased. When actors perceive their goals to be incompatible with those of other actors holding some form of influence over a natural resource, there are a number of potential scenarios of action along a scale from constructive dialogue to direct violence. The theory of competition between user groups as the source of conflict does not explain the connection between interest divergence and the actual scenario. Thus, information and/or knowledge about the initial interests and values of the actors involved in an NRM issue is an important component in creating a fruitful arena for participation and dialogue, but it is not sufficient to guide the design and facilitation of processes aimed at creating constructive communication. A theory that provides an understanding of actors' motives in conflict situations is needed. The perspective of symbolic interaction offers such an understanding by investigat-

ing actors' interpretations of previous action and inter-action, relations, identity, and roles.

This study adopted an exploratory approach to obtain information on why conflict escalation occurs within NRM issues. The approach was applied to examine the social interactions between actors involved in a Swedish case study involving a conflict over the clear-cutting of a forest. The aim was to identify particular aspects of NRM conflicts that remain hidden when such conflicts are interpreted using models focusing on content issues such as interest divergences, value differences, and user competition.

Method

The approach used was grounded in the tradition of symbolic interaction and an interest in understanding how conflicts develop. According to symbolic interaction reality is not independent of language but is brought into existence and maintained by communication via the construction of symbols (Blumer 1969; Carey 2007; Charon 2009). A key element of the theory is that when an individual attributes meaning to the action of another individual, an assumption is made about how the other is experiencing the situation (Mead 1934). We wanted to identify cases where we could study actors' interpretations of previous actions, interactions, relations, and identity. Through information provided by forestry professionals via a questionnaire, interviews, and workshops, we identified the present case as a relevant conflict case. Newspaper articles and official agency documents were used to identify individuals involved in this conflict, which concerned the planned clear-cutting of a section of forest. Additional participants were then selected using a ''snowball'' sampling technique, where one participant directed the researcher to another participant, and so on (Lindlof 1995).

In order to determine the actors' perceptions of the conflict, we conducted semistructured interviews (Kvale 1996). The interviews took between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed in Swedish. In line with the theoretical perspective, the interviewers did not assume any prior knowledge of sociologically relevant categories among the participants and the interview questions were open-ended—for example: What happened? How did you (and others) act? How did you react to their actions? Follow-up questions were asked for clarification purposes and to deepen the description of the issue and aspects of interest.

Interviewees included the forest owner, two Save Our Forest action group representatives, one logging company representative, one local representative from a national, nongovernmental environmental organiza-tion, and two government staff members (one from the municipal authority and one from the Swedish Forestry Board).

The material obtained was categorized according to the procedure of open coding (Flick 2006), whereby interview statements were classified according to content and the kind of social phenomenon represented. For example, mention of the loss of income associated with preserving specific trees was coded under ''economic arguments.'' Some statements belonged to several categories. During the analysis, the categories ''avoidance of face-to-face interaction'' and ''feeling intimidated'' emerged. Thus the statement ''we didn't go to the landowner's house because . . . '' was classified as ''avoidance of face-to-face interaction,'' and ''it felt like everything we said could be used against us'' was classified as ''feeling intimidated.'' These two categories formed the basis for the case description.

The emerging categories led us to search for a theory that could explain the actions of the actors. Goffman's (1956) theory of impression management emerged as one option and the material was reanalyzed to view the actions in terms of ''impression management'' and ''self-presentation.'' Particular attention was paid to situations indicated by (1) one or more of the actors involved in an interaction referring to it as strange or problematic; (2) actors reporting that the intentions of others were difficult to decode/interpret; and (3) actors reporting they did not know how to behave in a situation.

Impression Management

Goffman (1959) explored the process of self-presentation and its influence on human behaviour and established the conceptual model of impression management. This model suggests that actors in a communicative situation will try to influence how others interpret and experience the situation. When entering a communicative situation, an individual wishes to be perceived and accepted as a particular person, senses what type of conduct is appropriate for the particular situation, and has expectations on the kind of actions that will take place and what others expect from them (Eriksson 2007).

Individuals are expected to behave in a consistent manner that fits the situation (Goffman 1956)—that is, they have implicitly and intersubjectively agreed upon a common social repertoire. In any common situation, people know what is expected and present themselves accordingly, adopting different roles in a circle of friends, at a seminar, or at a meeting with potentially hostile strangers. At the same time, people want to project a certain side of themselves, for example, the outspoken friend or the knowledgeable teacher. Any

social encounter involves a balance between who those involved want to be, what people expect, and what the situation as a whole seems to demand.

Role Confusion and Avoidance of Social Interaction

People normally adopt different roles for different occasions/situations; thus, for the individual, role confusion occurs when a particular interaction creates a conflict between the presented self and the self expected from the social situation (Goffman 1956). Such confusion can arise when people do not know what is expected in a certain situation, for example, if the rules of a meeting are unclear. According to Goffman, role confusion leads to feelings of embarrassment and hence people prepare how they will act in social situations where they expect role confusion to occur, or choose to avoid such situations altogether. Consequently, it is not only the actual presence but also the imagined presence of others and expectations of what might happen in certain situations that guide people's actions.

Case Description

A forest owner decided to log a part of his forest and sent in an application to the Swedish Forestry Board in accordance with regulations. The forest bordered a small village where the forest owner lived. One morning, another village resident was walking her dog in the forest and met a man who was marking trees. When she inquired about this, he explained that the forest was going to be logged. In our interview with the woman, she described her feelings of incredulity and shock on hearing this information, and indicated how important the forest was for her and the other villagers. She decided to contact her neighbors and initiate an action group (Save Our Forest) with the purpose of investigating the logging process and, if possible, blocking it. The group then distributed protest petitions at local shops for village residents to sign. The forest owner was unaware of the opposition to his plans until faced with the petition, and his response was to write to all conceivably relevant authorities. These were the first in a series of letters, e-mails, and newspaper articles produced by the parties involved.

Prior to the logging conflict, the forest owner and the members of the action group were familiar with each other. During the interviews, the forest owner and representatives of the action group claimed that they had been on friendly terms.

The forest owner criticized the petition and pointed out that since these individuals were acquainted with him, they could have talked to him directly instead. He thought that the act of issuing a petition implied that he

was a ruthless landowner, and he felt this was very unfair. A member of the action group explained that they avoided making contact with the forest owner because they had expected that he would have been ''cordial'' and expected him to say ''everything is okay.'' The forest owner described how objectionable he thought the behavior of the action group was, and how it made him feel ignored. The action group members in turn noted that they, as neighbors, should have been informed about the logging plans for the forest because it was right in their backyard.

The action group and forest owner both contacted the relevant authorities and the local media. In response to these communications, the environmental coordinator at the municipal authority initiated a meeting between the different stakeholders so that they could listen to each other and understand each other's point of view. However, in accordance with Swedish forestry law, the decision-making mandate was in the hands of the forest owner.

The meeting took place in the forest in question. Those present included the forest owner, a forest owners' association representative, two action-group representatives, one logging company representative, a local representative from an environmental nongovernmental organization (NGO), a member of the municipal authority, and two members of the Swedish Forestry Board.

During interviews with the other participants, the behavior of members of the action group was mentioned with regard to the meeting. According to the interviewees, one member of the action group pleaded the group's cause, while the other member kept silent and took notes throughout the meeting. For example, the logging company representative explained, ''And then there was one who wrote down everything we said. It was as if everything we said could be used against us, sort of, if we happen to say the wrong thing.''

At the end of the meeting, the action group and the forest owner agreed to save several specific trees that were perceived as important. However, during logging some of these trees were cut down by mistake, according to the forest owner. In the interview the forest owner explained that he now had no contact with the members of the action group, and indicated, ''I have nothing to say.'' One member of the action group claimed that people from the village who used to be friendly are now avoiding her: ''They take big detours when they see me.''

Interpretation

The case description just given was used to make theoretical connections regarding the concepts of role confusion and self-presentation. In this interpretation, we assumed that the actors' actions and their anticipation

of the actions of others were essential components in conflict development.

The sequence of actions tended to follow a process of conflict escalation while exhibiting characteristics of emerging destructivity. Before the logging plans became known, some of the actors perceived their relationship with each other as ''friendly.'' After the petition, debate articles, the meeting in the forest, and finally the logging operations, some of the actors thought they had nothing to say to each other and that others were avoiding them. The fact that the trees were cut or that the actors realized they had different interests and incompatible goals does not fully explain the destructivity that emerged, because a conflict based on interest divergences could just as well develop in a constructive manner without damage to relationships.

With the theoretical perspective of anticipated damage to self-presentation, we investigated the emergence of destructivity and conflict escalation by closer examination of two categories from the material: avoidance of face-to-face interaction, and intimidation in the face-to-face meeting.

The Avoidance of Face-to-Face Interaction

The forest owner and the action group members had avoided meeting face-to-face even though they usually had had friendly chats when they met previously. Based on the fact that the individuals characterized their relationship as ''friendly'' prior to the conflict, they were probably used to presenting themselves as nice people.

All individuals possess the ability to select and play different roles in different contexts, and individuals are usually spared embarrassing moments due to ''audience segregation''— that is, the actor selects and plays a particular role based on a particular audience (Goffman 1956, 269). When tree felling became an issue, however, the action group initiator needed to express dissatisfaction with the plans of the forest owner.

The social arena they previously shared provided no social repertoire supporting the role of a political opponent, so in this case the action group wanted to complain to the forest owner but expected him to respond in the ''friendly neighbor'' role.

In particular, the interviewees claimed that it would have been difficult to confront the forest owner because they felt he was ''good-natured'' and that they ''didn't want to argue.'' These are interesting statements because from a commonsense interpretation, it might seem more logical to avoid him if he was unpleasant. Applying Goffman's framework, however, this reluctance can be attributed to the appearance of new roles and the anticipation of role confusion that could be expected from expression of these new roles.

Therefore, the action group created a new social arena (local media, petitions) with a new set of social roles and a new interaction repertoire— one that (they felt) included raising questions, political opinions, and expressions of dissatisfaction about the felling.

From a commonsense perspective, the frustration the forest owner expressed over the treatment he received could be understood as resulting from anger or disappointment due to the risk of being forced to give up his legal rights and/or a potential economic benefit. However, in line with Goffman's theoretical frame, the frustration originated in his perception of being questioned in his status as a socially legitimate actor. By avoiding discussing their complaints about the logging directly with the forest owner, the implication was that the action group presented him as someone impossible to talk to—that is, someone against whom force and the exercise of power were required. The forest owner's perception was that the action group produced a self for him that conflicted with what he presented.

Our interpretations just described concentrated on viewing social action as being motivated by attempts to create and maintain socially constructed roles and avoid embarrassment. A parallel interpretation is that action was motivated by a strategic rationality (Habermas 1987) of the individuals in relation to instrumental goals. For example, the action group chose to send out the petition because the group thought this would be the most effective way to achieve its goal of protecting the forest. The specific goal of the action group during the meeting was perhaps to decrease the influence of the other participants over the situation. If the goal was to decrease the other participants' influence, the goal was achieved since the other participants felt a fear of speaking freely. The explicit purpose of the meeting, to have an open dialogue where everybody could have their say, was thus undermined. Applying an interpretation based on impression management and avoidance of embarrassment provides yet another perspective. Within this framework, the goal of the actors was not simply to gain instrumental influence, but also to maintain their status as socially legitimate actors.

Ambiguity Concerning Rules and Roles at the Face-to-Face Meeting

During the interviews, participants in the meeting in the forest commented on what they called the ''tactics of intimidation'' of the action group. The meeting in the forest was ambiguously defined, as no common agenda was expressed before or during the meeting, and the mandate of the other actors was unclear to the action group. In theory, an unclear agenda could create insecurity for participants regarding the role to be presented (the ''audience'' to expect), thus raising the fear of role confusion.

The role of one action group member as ''silent secretary'' can be interpreted as a reaction to an insecure situation—that is, presenting a strong and consistent role that was difficult for others to question, due to the underlying threat of media exposure. The belief that ''everything'' was written down raised concerns from the Forestry Board and the logging company about potential misquotes and breach of confidentiality.

However, it is important for the interpretation to know that from a legal point of view, they had no need to fear media quotations. The meeting had no impact, because the right to private land ownership is strong, and changes in forest management would depend on the goodwill of the forest owner. However, the Forestry Board and the logging company still noted that they had feared media involvement, and a reasonable interpretation is that what they feared was damage to the image—the self-presentation—of their institution or company.

The action group's behavior in raising a fear of media quotes severely limited the establishment of constructive dialogue. When people could not freely express their views and opinions, understanding proved impossible and issues such as forest management were not fully discussed.

Conclusions

The actors in the case study were dissatisfied with the manner in which the logging issue arose. According to interest divergence conflict theory, this dissatisfaction is the consequence of interest divergence between different resource users who risk losing values of importance. For example, the action group risked losing the forest for recreation, while the forest owner risked a loss of income from the timber. These theoretical models explain why the actors became engaged in the issue. To explain the direction of subsequent actions by the actors and why the conflict escalated and destructivity increased, we investigated how the involved actors interpreted each other's actions. We observed that:

1. The forest owner and members of the action group had a friendly relationship before the conflict and this social arena was not used to exert influence, an aspect not explained by the interest divergence as such.

2. In actions to influence the other, actors avoided informal face-to-face interaction but still demanded formal opportunities for face-to-face interaction.

3. When face-to-face interaction did occur, participants were worried, uncertain, and dissatisfied about the role they and others played or were assigned.

In light of these empirical observations and interpretations, Goffman's (1956) theory that action is motivated by agents' desire to manage and control the impression they created in the eyes of others becomes relevant. This theory helps us explain (i) that the existing friendly relationship could not be used to initiate discussion because it could result in role confusion when contentious issues=accusations needed to be raised, and (ii) that the actors avoided meeting face-to-face to avoid risking any role confusion. When treated in a way different from their selfpresentation, people, according to Goffman, become embarrassed, and avoiding embarrassment is a central factor motivating human action (Goffman 1956; Schudson 1984). When actors anticipate embarrassment they adjust their actions or change the conditions of the social situation to avoid such a situation—hence the actors' avoidance of face-to-face interaction. Finally, the theory help explain why, in the face-to-face meeting, the action group used a strategy that intimidated other participants. The need for coping with ambiguities about the agenda may have caused the action group to use this specific self-presentation. The rest of the group adapted to that self-presentation and the logging issue was not thoroughly discussed due to fear of misrepresentations (of company and personal ''images'') in the media.

Goffman's theory that agents avoid and try to control social situations in which they anticipate they will get into role confusion, and attached embarrassment, would explain why the interest divergence between the forest owner and the neighbors developed into a destructive social interaction. However, the applicability of Goffman's theory in NRM situations still needs to be confirmed. This exploratory study identified the need for participants to have their self-presentation confirmed and the need to recognize potential effects of anticipated role confusion on communicative rationality within NRM conflicts.

A wider understanding of the significance of social interaction could be useful when designing and facilitating NRM conflict management processes. We suggest that future studies be designed specifically to examine avoidance of anticipated role confusion and embarrassment. Our suggestion for such a research design would include observations of meetings between natural resource managers, the public, and interest groups. In such meetings, attention should be given to interactional sequences and meta-discursive statements in which the agent:

- Demonstrates ambiguity or insecurity about the role she is playing and what is expected of her.
- Defends the role she is playing: for example, through explicitly pointing out her role or identity, responding defensively toward suggestions of changes of communicative patterns, making her opinion more extreme, or repeating role-specific action and statements.
- Suggests that other agents change communicative patterns (e.g., to tell a quiet person to share her views with the group).

- Avoids taking on a role and=or responsibility suggested by other actors.
- Categorizes and assigns attributes to other agents, e.g., ''you landowners,'' ''you tree huggers,'' ''you unrealistic utopian,'' or categorization through circumlocution: ''since I am a realist and pragmatist'' (indicating the other is neither realistic nor pragmatic).

These observations should be complemented by interviews with the participants of the observed meeting, in order to confirm or reject the observations of metadiscourse made by researchers with questions about experiences of the meetings.

We think the study presented is an important contribution to develop questions and criteria for a more deductive study of the importance of impression management and avoidance of anticipated role confusion and embarrassment for conflict escalation in natural resource management.

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