

SUSAN M. ROBSON

AN EXPLORATION OF CONFLICT HANDLING AMONG QUAKERS

(University of Huddersfield: unpublished PhD thesis, 2005)

Quakers (or the Religious Society of Friends) are deeply involved in conflict resolution in the international arena, but the fact that conflict also exists within the Society itself is far less frequently acknowledged; when situations that threaten to generate internal conflict arise they tend to be quickly muted or ignored. This thesis argues that the roots of this behaviour lie in the Society's organisational culture. The dominant Quaker narrative, in which the community represents the 'Peaceable Kingdom', is upheld through adherence to a 'behavioural creed' emphasising restraint, verbal moderation and harmonious relationships. This naturally leads to a cultural pattern that encourages an aversion to, and avoidance of, acknowledgement of occurrences that threaten to disrupt the harmony. The result is that disputes, left unresolved, frequently re-emerge as identity conflicts – that is, as a contradiction between the individual's sense of personal identity and their identification with the community. As there is no precedent, or vocabulary, for articulating the experience of conflict, personal narratives that run counter to the collective one remain hidden. The author argues that if conflict were viewed as a creative force, and members encouraged to tell their individual stories, this would establish alternative templates of conflict resolution and help effect a positive change in the organisational culture.

Key words: identity conflict, collective identity, organisational culture, conflict handling, narratives

Key themes:

The difficulties Quakers have in addressing, or even acknowledging, the problem of internal conflict
The contribution of a collective culture to individual perceptions and behaviour

Of potential interest to: those with a general interest in the dynamics of organisations and identity formation, Quaker culture and identity, and the resolution of internal conflict

A copy of the full thesis can be downloaded at

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/5945>

Chapter One: Introduction

The framework of the thesis

The study revolves around a series of interviews and workshops with members of the Quaker community. In the course of constructing the interviews and analysing their findings the author consulted the Society's main authoritative texts, alongside more general social science examinations of conflict, as well as drawing on her personal experience and observation. She organises the thesis into two parts: the first involves setting the context through an analysis of the relevant literature and an exposition of her research questions and methodology (Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five); the second details the series of interviews and workshops she held, and an analysis of their findings (Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen).

The underlying theories

Overall, the author's analysis is guided by a social psychology approach: she uses a social constructivist framework that focuses on the use of narrative to reveal the source of the perceived problem. The underlying theories informing this approach are taken from psycho-dynamics (the examination of the psychological forces that underlie human behaviour, exemplified by the work of Freud, Jung and Klein), family therapy (therapy that focuses on personal change), systemic thinking (the study of organisations as complex social systems), and theories of action (the study of collaborative action with a commitment to change). However, the theories the author explicitly uses to investigate the issue derive from narrative psychology (the telling of individual internal journeys) and theories of organisation that focus on how change is achieved within complex organisational structures. She believes that some of the concepts such theories employ are particularly relevant to this study in that they allow a more rigorous investigation of the relationship between individuals and organisations – the dialectical dynamic between the social context and the individual, and hence the interdependence of the social and the personal, is a theme that informs the whole thesis.

'Insider research'

Throughout the course of the study, the author analyses her role as an 'observing participant'. As a Quaker herself, she is aware that she shares the mental frameworks that she is investigating. She reveals there is a constant internal dialogue between her Quaker self and her researcher self, and this dialogue charges the questions that develop out of the research – how to achieve change within the Society by discovering positive ways of handling internal conflict – with a particular force.

Chapter Two: 21st Century Quakers in the UK

Overview

This chapter looks at contemporary Quakerism and the tensions between the community and the individual. Quaker testimonies (its underlying principles) emphasise truth, simplicity, equality and peace, but peace appears to be privileged above all. The author argues that this has had an impact on the community's interpretation of internal conflict.

Silent worship and business meetings

The privileged place the peace testimony occupies in the Society is manifest in its distinctive forms of worship and decision-making. For example, Meetings for Worship are undertaken in reflective silence. They are unprogrammed, but there are unspoken conventions and rules: if the individual feels moved to speak (to 'minister'), they express themselves briefly, in unemotional tones. This ethos also informs the conduct of Business Meetings, despite the fact that this is where most disagreements surface. Quakers learn to negotiate around each other in the decision-making processes, with little verbal noise, conforming to the idea that the only response to others' contributions is worshipful silence. The author suggests that, as the spiritual encounter is a personal inward experience, it is difficult for individuals to communicate both their beliefs and their views.

Organisation and the individual

The Society's founder, George Fox, believed individuals should be guided in all their actions by their 'Inward Light' (that is, through the direct encounter with God). However, to counteract the tendency for individuals to follow their own illumination in a divisive way, he strengthened the structure of the community. In so doing, he created the paradox that even as he rebelled against established religious authority and the idea of an all-powerful clergy, he ensured that authority was vested in the Society's structural organisation, underpinned by the indirect discipline of an unspoken behavioural code. The author cites Dandelion's (1996) theory that a strict 'behavioural creed' still governs the individual's activity in their 'Quaker time', even as they hold to a liberal culture in their 'non-Quaker time' – what he terms a 'double culture'. For example, to avoid conflict, and strengthen equality and inclusiveness, the details of personal beliefs (the Society allows for diversity of belief) and private lives are considered confidential. Power, deemed corrosive to the unity of the community, is another issue not open for discussion. This presents a problem when it comes to the need to address the power the collective holds over the individual sense of self (see Chapter Three).

Peace and conflict

Peace, a fundamental pillar of Quaker belief and behaviour, is viewed through the optic of Quaker involvement with the world. However, a strand of creative non-violence is woven into the Quaker fabric, as seen in their role as conscientious objectors in the 20th century and in their active participation in the anti-war demonstrations of the 21st. The experience of involvement in the anti-war movement has led some Quakers to reappraise their attitude to peace and conflict. Fisher (2004), for example, differentiates conflict from violence, and calls for Quakers to consider it an ally in the struggle for a compassionate society. Conflict, he believes, can be energising and creative.

Conflict, however, is interpreted by most Quakers as a personal failing; it is characterised as 'disorderly walking' – that is, exhibiting behaviour that is too deeply influenced by the mores of the outside world. Hence, the author points out, the 1931 Book of Discipline contained only one chapter on conflict arbitration within the community, and since then this has been reduced to a couple of sentences. Recently, however, an awareness of the need to address the issue of internal conflict has begun to emerge.

Chapter Three: Understanding organisational culture

Overview

This chapter analyses how the social reality of an organisation is constructed through a shared social process, and how the organisation itself becomes perceived as an independent, objective entity, exerting a powerful influence over the individuals who comprise it.

Organisational power

The processes of externalisation (whereby individuals shape their shared world), objectification (when an organisation appears to hold an independent reality), and internalisation (whereby the organisation's structures and values become part of the individual's inner life) can be mapped onto the development of the Quaker community. However, for an organisation to retain its strength, its constructed nature must remain hidden, and the power inherent in the nature and perception of the organisation obscured. Power, therefore, is not necessarily manifest through an open hierarchy but through less acknowledged ways, and is best apprehended as a circular structure affecting the identity formation of all the organisation's individual members through the internalisation of its cultural values. The negotiation of personal and collective identity is, in a sense, a game of power.

Encoded knowledge and embedded knowledge

There is general agreement about the sort of information that reveals organisational culture: a shared formal meaning and distinct patterns of beliefs ('encoded knowledge') and an informal culture, comprising shared stories, rituals and modes of behaviour ('embedded' or 'embodied knowledge'). The ways in which individuals interact can assert informal patterns of control, providing a contextual framework that shapes and endorses the 'self-evident', automatic knowledge imbibed from the organisational culture – for example, the characterisation of a 'good Quaker'. In such a context, conflict, and the changes it provokes, are deemed uncomfortable or negative as they involve dislodging individuals from the cultural patterns they have unconsciously absorbed. Thus conflict becomes a subject omitted from Quaker discussion. (By contrast, organisational theories stress the need for a 'learning environment', where conflict can be acknowledged and acted upon.)

The function of images and narratives

The organisational structures that inhibit the acknowledgement of conflict can often be apprehended by way of metaphors. One that the author finds apposite is that of Socrates' cave, or in her words 'psychic prison', where the cave's inhabitants prefer the shadows on its walls to reality. These 'shadows' are located in an organisation's collective memory, which becomes incorporated into its narratives as history, stories or images. The individual can discover a purpose in their lives by sharing in the collective understanding of a particular narrative, but they acquire their agency within this narrative only when they query how they, as an individual, fit into the corporate story.

Chapter Four: Understanding Conflict

Overview

In this chapter, the author analyses various theoretical models of conflict, particularly those dealing with conflict within organisations (including religious organisations), and different examples of conflict handling and resolution (including recent studies of Quaker conflict).

Definition and terminology

The author adopts the definition of conflict as 'differences plus tension' as most appropriate to her research, but admits that all standard definitions tend to frame conflict as negative in its outcomes. The theoretical models Quakers use generally assume the task is to ameliorate other's conflicts; for this reason, she uses the term 'conflict handling' rather than 'management' or 'resolution', with the caveat that difficulties can still arise because, although it implies individual agency, this term is again

often associated with a scenario in which the agent plays a mediating role. However, she believes it to be a useful term in the context of this research because it is also associated with organisational studies that posit an alternative view, in which individuals acknowledge their interdependence and recognise conflict as an opportunity for creative development.

Conflict within organisations

Conflict often surfaces as hierarchical tensions, revolving around a claim to 'superior' or 'expert' knowledge. Corporate cultures deal with this in different ways, but overt avoidance is generally agreed to be detrimental to the health of the organisation. More often, organisations allow opposing interests to co-exist and evolve, but prevent them from reaching expression or resolution – this is the approach adopted by the Quaker community. In this way, the true source of conflict remains hidden. Religious organisations appear to follow the same trajectory: a number of studies reveal how a congregation 'unsettled' by conflict will either re-orient itself or adapt to decline. Adaptation, however, often causes splits or a change in internal dynamics, and this leads to a re-interpretation of the original cause of the conflict as an ideological or political disagreement.

Conflict among Quakers

The author details some historical accounts of Quaker disputes and analyses a number of contemporary ones. She finds one of the most useful to be the study Collins (1994) undertook, as it implicitly refers to identity conflict. He shows how the concept of the 'prototypical Quaker' is an unspoken exemplar that is left open to individual interpretation. The individual construction is usually fuzzy, but if it is clarified and reveals itself to be different to others, it provokes conflict. The main questions that arise from an analysis of the literature are: how is conflict viewed within the Quaker community, what difficulties do Quakers experience in handling conflict, and is it possible to enable individuals to widen the repertoire of conflict-handling styles within the community?

Chapter Five: Methodology

Overview

The author outlines here the qualitative, ethnographic and collaborative methods she used in her research, addressing in the process the relationship between the social context and the individual. She emphasises the relevance of a constructivist narrative approach to an analysis of the findings.

Theoretical models of conflict handling

The author believes that none of the standard theoretical models offer a full explanation of the sort of conflict aversion practised by Quakers. The model most widely accepted by Quaker researchers is the Dual Concern model, which analyses the interaction between the separate interests of the protagonists. Her criticism of this model is that it assumes there to be a symmetry between those involved, which is rarely the case. She identifies the Narrative Mediation model as most suitable to her purposes as it studies how the interaction between social structure and personal experience produces behaviour, and how intertwined social and personal narratives shape identity. The main problem is that unless the stories of both sides are aired, they cannot benefit from narrative mediation, yet the recognition and expression of antagonistic feelings are not congruent with Quaker culture. Members are encouraged to see themselves as mediators not protagonists.

Quaker organisational structure and conflict

The Quaker culture privileges unity and the practice of averting the eyes and mind from instances of internal conflict. Such modes of conduct are transmitted through an unspoken code of behaviour that exerts a strong influence over the individual. Nevertheless, Quakers reject the idea of power (as vested in individuals) and therefore find it hard to acknowledge the inherent power of the shared image of the 'model Quaker', the ultimate manifestation of the behavioural code. The existence of conflict challenges the dominant internalised image by introducing a divergent one, and this provokes communal or individual cognitive dissonance. The power invested in the communal narrative affects the way this sense of dissonance is acknowledged and negotiated – or suppressed.

Espoused theory and theory in use

The author used Argyris and Schön's model of 'espoused theory' (an organisation's public values) and 'theory in use' (the notional values which guide everyday action and behaviour) – analogous to 'encoded' and 'embedded' knowledge (see Chapter Three) – to analyse the question of collective power. The Quakers' espoused theory of commitment to conflict resolution does not sit easily with the theory in use of 'averting eyes and mind' from personal conflict, and results in a defensive reasoning that maximises unity and minimises negative feelings. This leads to the 'depersonalisation' of individuals as they become an indivisible part of the collective, leaving no way out for the individual concerned but to leave if their personal sense of dissonance becomes overwhelming.

Chapters Six, Seven, Eight: Case Studies

Overview

This stage of the research comprises interviews with three sets of Quakers: 'key informants' with experience of holding national positions; 'grassroots Quakers' deeply rooted in the life of their local meetings; and 'edge Quakers'. The findings confirm that, within the Society, conflict is viewed negatively; there was an aversion to even considering the concept in relation to the community.

Interview findings for the 'key informants'

The interviewees' responses to internal conflict were uniformly negative. Anger was identified with the disintegration of the group and a sense of personal failure. They agreed that outward manifestations of conflict are rare but can be apprehended through 'whispering' or 'a kind of nervousness'. Although steeped in Quaker practice, they exhibited little knowledge about handling internal conflict; they knew the procedures for conflict resolution (for example, Clearness Meetings and the Meeting for Sufferings) but were reluctant to commit to whether these are effective.

Interview findings for the 'grassroots Quakers'

Overall, the 'grassroots Quakers' perceived conflict as a threat, damaging to both individuals and the community. They located sources of conflict in specific practical questions, but it appeared the original issue was often lost and the point of contention would become how to be a 'proper Quaker', precipitating identity conflict. Conflict was experienced as shocking or distressing, but it was felt that it was generally evaded before confrontation occurred by 'sweeping it under the carpet'. One embedded trope that surfaced was the unspoken accusation of being 'unQuakerly', a stance implicated with the expression of strong emotions, particularly anger. Silence, the manifestation of a 'still mind', is the Quakers' predominant characteristic, but it was acknowledged that it can be used as a 'security blanket' or to express disapproval – the author notes that the interviewees themselves appeared to naturally resort to it whenever they disagreed with the questions she put to them.

Interview findings for the 'edge Quakers'

Although the questions elicited different responses, the interviewees' sense of identity clearly rested on a shared belief that the Quaker purpose was to 'mend' the world. They mentioned dealing with instances of conflict in their working lives and clearly encountered the same issues in Quaker life, but did not deal with them in the same way; they admitted this was often because there was no opportunity for talking through issues or emotions. The interviewees emphasised the importance of controlling anger and were aware that the expression of distress was unacceptable. They held a

shared understanding of the Quaker culture, but were also aware of a dissonance generated by Quaker expectations when it came to their own experience.

Chapter Nine: Analysis of the Findings – Tensions in the ‘Peaceable Kingdom’

Overview

All the participants appeared to accept the collective identity, which is imbued with a common idea of the ‘proper Quaker way’, and exhibited relatively little awareness of the inherent tensions between individual and collective identities. This preference for the individual to conform to the commonality is counterproductive to conflict handling, which requires the development of sociality.

Interpersonal conflict and organisational culture

The reason why interpersonal conflict was experienced as uncomfortable, and the perception of it avoided, is explained by an analysis of the Quaker organisational culture. Conflict easily turns into identity conflict precisely because the harmony and unity of the group is stressed at the expense of resolving underlying disputes. Subjects of conflict tended to focus on practical matters (which easily translate into identity conflicts as disagreement is turned into a conflict over values) or on misunderstandings of the unspoken behavioural conventions. Yet even before this stage is reached, Quakers appear to practice aversion to avoid recognition of its existence. This leads to a lack of familiarity with techniques or methods of resolution – even mediation is rarely used – and a sense of discomfort or inadequacy around disputes. The collective self-image exerts a powerful hold, as revealed in the interviewees’ phraseology: they disliked the idea of ‘discipline’ or ‘obedience’ but failed to recognise the power of the community’s structure. The author argues that they appear to have transposed the espoused theory of the community as a ‘Peaceable Kingdom’ onto the microcosm of the individual, with the idea that personal behaviour should not generate conflict. As such, it could be said to have become the theory in use (see Chapter Five). Being ‘unQuakerly’ was associated with the expression of strong emotions. Hence, there was avoidance and disapproval of even moderated articulacy; the best course appears to be silence (as seen in the Quaker joke: ‘in an emergency, please be silent’). Silence provides an opportunity to reflect and be open to the Inner Light, but it was agreed that in some situations it could also deliver a hostile message.

Summary of the findings

Identity is mediated through the life of the group, but the Quaker’s individual journey is a lonely one; personal experience cannot be articulated and self-reflection may generate a feeling of

dissonance. Conflict, however, is not a private matter and cannot be addressed unless it is made public. There is always tension in identity formation: it is necessary to negotiate between an identity focused on a common shared experience and the differences between distinct individuals. The development of sociality – open-mindedness, responsiveness to the experience of others, recognition of the complexity of relationships, and a willingness to communicate this recognition – is necessary to resolving this tension.

Chapter Ten: Turning Inward – From the Collective to the Individual

Overview

Before detailing the next phase of the research process (the workshop), the author considers the position of the individual within the collective – an area of potential conflict within the Quaker community that tends to lie hidden beneath the silence. She considers the reflexivity necessary to those who handle conflicts, and how this is hampered when the issue of the power invested in the organisation's structure is left unaddressed.

Constructions of the self

The context in which Quakers live and work, and in which theoretical paradigms pertaining to this question have been developed, is that of contemporary Western culture, with its emphasis on individuality. The Quaker community, however, holds particular views of the self. The original aim was disengagement: to put aside personal life experience in order to provide a clear, empty space for the Inner Light or spirit of God to act. Since then, the focus has changed: subjective spiritual experience is privileged – each person is 'unique' and must be convinced by their own experience. The individual self, however, in Quaker terms, is there for service, not self-expression or self-gratification. A potential source of internal conflict can be found in everyday experience: most members spend time in several overlapping social contexts and inhabit different social roles that are not predominantly Quaker, resulting in a sense of the many different aspects of themselves – in essence, of the self's fragmented nature – which sometimes creates a feeling of dissonance with the unified communal Quaker identity.

The reflective practitioner

In order to deal with such situations, Quaker conflict-handlers must perforce be reflective practitioners. This can only be achieved through a process of self-reflection, which involves admitting uncertainty, reflecting on prior understandings, and engaging with a discourse concerning

how the individual's power can be generated and used. The problem is that this sort of reflection may not yield results with Quakers whose vocabulary does not include 'power'. Yet reflection (on both an individual and collective level), the author believes, could help bring the power invested in the system into focus.

Chapters Eleven, Twelve, Thirteen: Workshops and Reflection

Overview

The next stage of the research comprised a workshop of 20 who carried out reflective work about conflict over a six-month period. The group setting of a workshop is more congruent with Quaker culture than an interview procedure – for Quakers, any idea must be arrived at through a process of co-construction and be collectively validated. The period of solitary reflection following the workshop proved uncomfortable for the participants; they did not feel free to think about the experience, far less to discuss it. Those who took part in the second workshop, however, had become more reflective practitioners due to this time spent reflecting on their feelings.

First Workshop: Reflecting on Conflict Together

All but one of the participants had been associated with the Quakers for some time and all were involved in conflict resolution (in Quaker or non-Quaker circles). The workshop represented a co-operative enquiry, with the aim of gathering information about Quaker conflict handling and to see if increased self-reflection would produce a transformation in the participants. Individuals, however, appeared reluctant to disagree with each other. Another problem was that the topic attracted people used to managing conflict in public situations, and this may have influenced the responses, which concerned not what they *felt* but what they would *do* in hypothetical situations.

Follow-up Period: Reflecting Alone

Participants were asked to reflect on how they saw themselves in relation to Quaker conflict – 16 out of the initial 20 participated. They appeared to feel inhibited thinking about themselves or others: the stricture of 'confidentiality' proved a powerful constraint. The very definition of conflict also held negative connotations. One proffered example of internal conflict, however, involved a meeting where suppressed disquiet at the outcome was translated into disagreement over the process by which the decision was arrived at, questioning if it conformed to the 'proper Quaker way'. The initial concern was thus turned into an identity conflict. Only a few other participants gave direct accounts of experience of conflict; the majority conformed to the unspoken Quaker rule: 'don't ask, don't tell,

don't even think about it'. The author comments that this inhibition reveals the collective constraint on private thoughts: as the typical Quaker story is one of a solitary journey, not of interaction, the individual lacks a clear personal narrative, and this clearly has its consequences.

Second Workshop: Reflecting Together Again

All the initial participants were offered the potential to take part in the second workshop; ten took it up. The aim was to discuss the experience of being co-researchers. The stories that emerged about the exploration of the self that the process had provoked showed an increase in reflective self-awareness among the participants.

Chapter Fourteen: Conclusions – Narrative and Quaker Conflict

Overview

This chapter draws conclusions from the research by looking at the power of collective narrative in relation to Quaker conflict. The author identifies the consequence of the lack of stories about personal or interpersonal conflict, which limits the individual's ability to find alternative ways to position themselves in relation to internal conflict, and prevents them from discovering creative ways of resolving it. The research raises the question of how Quakers can be freed to articulate their experiences of conflict and produce templates for alternative ways of responding.

The power of the community culture

The author found that standard theoretical conflict models were of limited applicability to a Quaker context (see Chapter Five), although elements of them proved useful when exploring the way the culture shapes individual identity and constrains the apprehension or expression of internal conflict. The idea that the Quaker community represents the ideal of a harmonious 'Peaceable Kingdom' prevents the reframing of conflict as a positive learning experience (addressing, for example, the basic question of the relationship of the individual to the spiritual community). The stress on calmness and verbal restraint militates against the need to express antagonistic feelings, while aversion makes it difficult to analyse conflicting feelings and inhibits the use of those conflict resolution procedures that do exist. The author concludes that the cultural context has confined both collective and individual explorations of conflict, and this is potentially more damaging to the community than conflict itself.

Narrative and conflict

The narrative approach to understanding corporate culture proved the most effective way of structuring the research as it reveals the context in which conflict takes place. Individuals use a narrative structure to give meaning to their experience; they make sense of their social world through a dialectical exchange between the collective and the personal. The social consequences of the Quaker collective narratives lie in their power to shape collective life; they contain a specific vocabulary, culled from a shared repertoire of storylines, which gives them their dominant status and claim to moral legitimacy. One purpose of the community story about conflict is to maintain its narrative power – at the price of enforcing self-deception about the amount, or nature, of internal conflict. The dearth of alternative narratives has the effect of limiting the individual's power to reposition themselves within the collective context.

Conclusions

The author notes that as human beings we frequently turn to narratives to guide us in our negotiations with a complex social world. Given this insight, she believes there is a clear need for more stories about conflict handling in a Quaker context, and suggests that new narratives of conflict should be constructed that illustrate the positive aspects of acknowledging the presence of conflict, thus creating a community that can learn how to deal with internal disputes, disagreements and potentially conflictual situations. She envisages the transformation of the Quaker meeting into not only a sanctuary but also a 'school', where 'peacemaking can be learnt at a deep personal level'.

Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)