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# Interpersonal Communications at core of conflicts' escalation in Organization

The interplay of interpersonal communication escalation, people's habitus and psycho-sociological processes are more important than contextual factors

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## **Purpose:**

Develop an integrated model to analyze conflicts at work and apply it to a case study. The core of the conceptual model is constituted by the interpersonal relationships modalities using the Palo Alto school theorization (symmetrical and complementary relations framework in people's relative positioning). This model also articulates inside this interpersonal relationships structure five other dimensions: Perception processes, Life dynamics, Habitus from Bourdieu and developed by Lahire, psychosociological processes, and sociological factors (including cultural ones).

We apply this model to the case study of a Community center in a French city where a serious conflict happens with the final consequence of the closure of the Center.

## **Method:**

In depth case study by long conversations (more than interviews) with the main protagonists of the Community center and of the conflict. These talks have been completed by secondary sources and extended review of newspaper articles.

## **Findings:**

Our model reveals to be pertinent to enlighten the multiple dimensions of the conflict. In particular, we show that the dynamics of interpersonal relationships is central in the conflict development and is embedded in multiple psycho-sociological processes (perceptions processes with deep perceptive divergences between people, personal construction of Social Identity by protagonists, group thinking, active minority construction, etc.). The sociological factors, as well as the personal habitus, are embedded in the interpersonal relationships behavior, but are not determinants of people's behavior. People are partially conscious of the occurring phenomena but cannot be considered as omniscient, purely strategic actors.

## **Practical Implications:**

The case analysis based on our relational model of conflicts leads to point out several mistakes in the management of the considered organization and more precisely in the management of the conflictual relationships. Change of level 2 has been mismanaged by the top manager of the Community center and we show which alternative decisions could have been made in order to avoid the burst of the conflict. More general conflict management methods can be deduced from our analysis.

## **Originality:**

Articulation of these different concepts in an integrated model has never been previously made neither applied in a case study.

**Key words :** Interpersonal Communication; Conflict ; Social identity ; Habitus (Bourdieu) ; Psychosociology of organizations.

Paper Type: Conceptual and empirical research.

**Abstract:**

Management of conflicts is an important, maybe central, question in people's management at work. The management of conflicts is obviously related to multiple techniques. But the latter do not always give enough attention on communication between people.

We construct a conceptual frame of conflicts centered on interpersonal relations' dynamics. This frame articulates interpersonal incongruent positioning in the meaning of the *Palo-Alto school* , perception processes, individual trajectories (Bourdieu's habitus as developed by Lahire), psycho-sociological (Groups' dynamics) processes. Sociological and cultural factors are also considered.

This model is applied to the case study of a conflict in a Community Center in France. The study shows how the interpersonal communication on one hand and the identity-related collective phenomena on the other hand, build interlink sequences which explain the conflict escalation.

This case illustrates how relational interlink and psycho-sociological processes at the individual as well at the interpersonal and group levels become out of control. These dynamics construct a "complex of situation" and results in a social conflict where finally all protagonists are losers.

## **Introduction :**

This article aims to elaborate on some conflicts dynamics that are often forgotten in most of the conflicts analyses. We construct a theoretical frame dedicated to the integration of communicational and psycho-sociological dimensions with social and contextual aspects of conflicts. As our interpretivist model postulates that any conflict dynamic is specific to the situation, we show how we can operate it on an in-depth case study.

Can we explain why a conflict appears, and what are the determinants of its development? Or can we consider that such a question is misleading and requires to be deconstructed?

For more than a century multiple currents of conflicts analysis compete within the social sciences, management, and political science. Beyond the variety of analysis, two striking points appear: the difference between conflicts of tasks and relational conflicts; the processes of escalation in the conflicts. But these analytical frames appear to be incomplete as they underestimate the perception and (human) interpersonal communications processes as well as the personal dynamics of conflicts protagonists. Most of the conflicts analyses consider the protagonists as strategical actors. This means that too often it is postulated that they are in conflicts for either oppositions of interests, either personal divergences in modalities of work (relational conflicts). More, the strategic vision of actors lead to assume, implicitly or explicitly, that conflict is consciously perceived by the protagonists. We consider that such a vision is an oversimplification and a restriction of the analysis of people's perception in interpersonal relationships and particularly in conflicts.

That is why we build an approach of conflict as escalation process primarily based on human communication behavior, and not primarily on organizational and sociological factors. Nevertheless, more than questioning the primacy of such or such category, our model proposes an integration of these factors by their reciprocal embeddedness. We rely on the dynamic of complexity (Morin E., Le Moigne 1999, Morin, 2005, 2008) and refuse the double dichotomy individual-organization and radical-incremental change. We assume that the two poles of these two dimensions are actually embedded: organization (and society) is inside individuals as well as individuals construct organization and other "levels" of society by the interplays of their relationships.

For this purposed embeddedness, our conceptual frame extensively presented below articulates the approach of interpersonal behaviors in precise situations with assumption of their socially constructed nature. Behaviors develop in time, and their interplays create dynamics: our model is temporally rooted. In accordance with the processual theories of conflict, the specification of relationships as conflictual means that the relational dynamics constitute escalation processes.

In our conceptual structure, the interpersonal behaviors will be based on the analytic frame of interpersonal communication of the "Palo-Alto School" (mainly Paul Watzlawick). Using this frame, the pivotal axis of the conflict escalation will be interpreted by the disjunctions in relationships positioning of the protagonist. The social construction of these interpersonal behaviors, in which they are embedded but of which they are, in the same time, the very expression, will be based on the concepts developed by Bourdieu (mainly habitus), but in a non-determinist and non-monolithic way (as notably specified by Lahire, 1998, 2004).

However, we will explain how the perception processes of the protagonists in interpersonal relationships require to combine these two main conceptual corpuses with several psycho-sociological phenomena. The perception processes are characterized by the effects of the cognitive dissonance in the punctuation of sequences of events by individuals. As these phenomena are not of purely individual nature, we supplement them by their socialization

dynamics, firstly in terms of construction of personal social identity, by the intergroup sociology concept of Tajfel and Turner. The intergroup behaviors also articulate many structuring forces of the groups' dynamics that we assume as part of our theoretical frame (and will specify). Finally, the sociality of the interpersonal behaviors as well as the actualization of people's habitus cannot be fully understood without the integration of what appears as contextual factors, that we will consider by the notion of field as developed by Bourdieu. We will explain how this notion of field, combined with the habitus, allows to avoid the oversimplification of the pre-notion of context: as a concept, field cannot be considered without habitus and its embeddedness in the local, specific relational situation.

The construction of our conceptual model is presented in detail in the second part of the first section

We have conducted several in-depth cases studies based on our model, and we present in this article one of them<sup>1</sup>, a conflict in a Community Center in France. During the more than fifteen years of existence of the Center, the director (a woman) and several employees have lived interpersonal conflicts. These conflicts have finally resulted in a socialized, organizational conflict which finally leads to the closure of the Center. We depict the characteristics of the interpersonal conflicts dynamics: after a period of symmetrical relationships which resulted in conflict escalation (Watzlawick et al., 1967), the director tried a move to complementary relationships. Examining the divergences in the perceptions of the situation and of each-others by the protagonists we analyze the link between the denial of this move by some employees and their habitus. This investigation allows us to denote the tensions *inside* the persons' behavioral dynamics due to the plural nature of their habitus. We then propose an analysis of how the changes in positioning in relationships are the catalyst of the conflict escalation, leading to a progressive coalescence of employees in groups, one being a particular case of group thinking and leading minority effect. We finally are able to propose an explanation of the ways by which social factors are embedded in, as well as modified by, the history of the interpersonal relationships. In particular, the ethno-cultural characteristics, and particularly the differences between the director's and some employees' ethno-cultures, appears as stereotypes mobilized by some protagonists in their social identity construction, and not as "causes" of the conflicts.

The study shows how the interpersonal communication on one hand and the identity-related collective phenomena on the other hand, build interlink sequences which explain the conflict escalation. This case illustrates how relational interlinks and psycho-sociological processes at the individual as well at the interpersonal and group levels become out of control. These dynamics construct a "complex of situation" and result in a social conflict where finally all protagonists are losers.

We finally discuss some conceptual implications of the results of our interpretation of the case by our conceptual frame. In particular, we assume that the application of our structured set of concepts validates the complex nature of the human agents, neither strategic omniscient actors, neither determined social subject, but both at once. We conclude by some limits of our work, the main being the lack of integration of the storytelling dimensions, particularly the prospective dimension of stories and storying (*antenarrative*).

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<sup>1</sup> - We present only one case study, as, even in a simplified presentation, each case requires tens of pages.

# 1- THE THEORETICAL MODEL

## 1-1- Some interpersonal conflicts analyses and resolution techniques and their limits

It is not in the scope of this paper to make a comprehensive account and assessment of the whole literature on conflicts. We just mention some important points to introduce our own conceptualization.

In organizational context, interpersonal conflicts are related to conflicting interactions between individuals (Cormier, 2004). The interpersonal conflicts can be classified in various types. Classifications based on objective categories like values, interests and roles are too restrictive as they exclude situations of subjective conflicts as well as behavioral, and not substantial, categories (Deutsch, 1973). To take into account the subjective side of conflicts, two mean categories are often used: the conflicts of cognitive nature and the conflicts of relational nature. This classification is used by many authors (Guetzkow et Gyr, 1954; Walton, 1987, Hellriegel, Slocum et Woodman, 1992; Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Bréard et Pastor, 2000, Schermerhorn, Hunt et Osborn, 2002, Cormier, 2004; Mooney, Holahan et Arnason, 2007).

Depending of authors the denomination can be slightly different, but the central idea is the same: either it is the object of the conflict that constitutes it; either it is the relation between protagonists which constitutes the origin of the conflict. The distinction between cognitive and purely relational conflict is however delicate, especially in practice. More fundamentally, we consider with Deutsch and Coleman (2006, 2012) that the cognitive aspects cannot be considered as independent of the relation itself. We will then construct a conceptual frame without considering that it is pertinent to wonder if a conflict is more cognitive or more relational.

According to Diné (2007), if none of the actors of the relation (even including a third party) considers the relation as a problem, there is no reason to intervene in this relation, whatever the disagreement on work content. Then Diné (2007) proposes a definition of the conflict which does not give a central importance to the distinction "conflict on tasks or work" / "relational conflict": "The conflict is an individual representation. It begins at the moment one individual designs one of her/his relation with another individual as being problematic." (p.34, our translation). But we cannot totally accept this definition, as it postulates that the core point of conflict stays in the explicit, conscious perception of the disagreement between the protagonists.

Actually, in definition of conflicts most of authors postulate that the protagonists are conscious of the conflict. Whatever are their differences in the elements taken into account to analyze or define conflict, whatever their definition be global or processual, or on the contrary more unequivocal, almost all the authors indicate that the conflict exists only if the stakeholders are aware of it (Pondy, 1967, Thomas, 1992). Such an idea is however discussed since long (Rondeau, 1990) without being given much consideration. But if we focus on the conflict dynamics, this hypothesis is not only rather secondary but creates a dangerous bias in conflict analysis.

Indeed, a relatively wide definition of the relational conflict says that "power stakes and emotion reach such a level of intensity than the object of conflict is only a pretext to replay the more and more conflicting relational dynamics." (Cormier, 2004, p. 16, our translation). It would appear in this kind of situation an "emotional" *escalation* with invectives and

aggressive behavior, in disproportionate proportions relatively to the stakes which are *a priori* admitted by the protagonists to the conflict (Cormier, 2004; Bréard and Pastor, 2000). The idea of conflict escalation which leads the protagonist to forget the starting point of the “objective” conflict is considered by many authors (since Deutsch, 1973). We fully agree that it is a fundamental characteristic of conflicts’ dynamics but emphasize that: first these relational dynamics are processual by nature and it doesn’t require to postulate a starting point to the conflict, as it is however often implicitly stated; second, this doesn’t imply that protagonists are *aware* that they are in conflict. This is particularly the case for processual conflicts.

Boudreau (2008) considers that the processual conflict represents the kind of conflict which has been the most recently discovered. The processual conflict concerns the logistics and the organization of task fulfillments (Jehn, 1997, Jehn et Chatman, 2000, De Dreu et Weingart, 2003). More particularly, it would be related to tasks and responsibilities distribution (Jehn, 1997) as well as to delegation of resources (Jehn and Mannix, 2001). In other words, the problems at the origin of the conflict emerge at the level of how to reform the task and of “who does what” (Jehn, 1997, Jehn and Mannix, 2001; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Similarly as the escalation effect, the interest of this idea is to support that any conflict is global: even if a precise element could be considered as the triggering factor of the conflict (that we consider as restrictive, see above), due to the processes implied in the work modalities, the conflict can no more be only considered from this triggering point (Deutsch, 1973). Step by step, it is the whole global organization, at least the whole group of co-employees, which becomes at stake and at the same time “creator” of the conflict. Our own model will be completely processual –but not restricted to tasks repartition, as according to our agreement with some authors above, we assume that relational and cognitive conflicts cannot be considered as different kinds.

Anyway these all-embracing approaches, as interesting as they are by avoiding to stay in an analytical vision of conflicts, don’t pay enough attention to the psycho-sociological phenomena, in particular perception and communication ones.

In the components of conflicts emphasized by the “technical” authors (Weeks (1992), Lemaire (2010), and so on.) the question of the perception processes by actors is important - but which perception is concerned? In most of the approaches, what is looked at is the perception of the conflict occurrence by the protagonist. Most of the definitions of conflicts postulate this perception. We make a double critic to this supposition. First, it is possible to consider that conflicts exist which protagonists are not conscious of. More, the way to consider perception by people involved in the conflict is much too restrictive - processes of perceptions are of course important in the conflict processes, but it is not *only* about the consciousness of being in conflict. It concerns globally *the whole* perception processes of actors. To understand this process as a whole we must embrace the relationship in the interdisciplinary approach of dialogical principle (“*principe dialogique*”, Morin, 1990): “The dialogical principle unites two opposing notions which can repel each other, but which are inseparable and essential to understand the same reality (Morin).”(Minor-Corriveau, 2013, 93-94, our translation<sup>2</sup>)

To understand and conceptually build these processes, we have to situate the individual processes of perceptions in the frame of three dynamics: the relational phenomena and thus the communicational dimension, the individual trajectories (*habitus*) which will characterize the constructions of social identity and then the socialization of the interpersonal conflicts, the

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<sup>2</sup> -« Le principe dialogique unit deux notions antagonistes qui peuvent se repousser l’une l’autre, mais qui sont indissociables et indispensables pour comprendre une même réalité (Morin). » (Minor-Corriveau, 2013, 93-94)

way by which “social determinants<sup>3</sup>” of different natures are embedded in the two previous dynamics.

## **1-2- A communicational approach of conflicts:**

Our literature survey and related critics lead us to develop a complex approach, linked to organizational change. We construct a conceptual model to analyze concrete situations (case studies) of interpersonal conflicts. This model is actually a model of conflict escalation without postulating any starting point –starting point which would require an objective definition, then denying the protagonists’ differences in perceptions. Our model also rejects many of the limits or conceptual problems we note above, in particular the difference between tasks, cognitive or mainly relational conflicts, and the requisition of awareness of conflict by protagonists.

### ***1-2-1- A model based on complexity of the auto-eco-organization: internalization of the extern and externalization of the intern***

Our model is based at a fundamental level on the central dynamic of complexity (Morin E., Le Moigne 1999, Morin, 2005, 2008), the “auto-eco-organization”. Then it refuses the double dichotomy individual-organization and radical-incremental change. To integrate this apparently, but artificially, separated poles, we combine some concepts of Bourdieu (Habitus, dispositions, fields) with the analytic frame of interpersonal communication of the “Palo-Alto School” (mainly Paul Watzlawick), and integrate several of the most structuring psycho-sociological dynamics: Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), social Identity (in the intergroup sociology of Tajfel and Turner), groups’ dynamics (Social facilitation, *desindividuation*, social polarization, group thinking, influences of active minorities). In order to assume the social complexity, our model integrates in the “Bourdiesian *fields*” the organizational and cultural contexts.

We present in the pages below how we articulate these concepts.

First we refute the double dichotomy individual-organization and radical-incremental change such as it is implicit in many theoretical streams (Burrell, Morgan, 1979, Morgan, 1997). Radical change and regulation are not opposite; more, the subjectivity and the objectivity are not poles of a continuum: they are always inter-connected, they are permanently linked and in a dynamic way (Rojot, 2005).

We prefer to opt for hybridization of paradigms which integrates in the same movement the individual (the subjectivity) and the organization (the objectivity). There are not ontologically separated. We then lie in an interdisciplinary and complex approach in the meaning of Edgar Morin's concept of “auto-eco-organization”. We try to develop our analyses by integrating two conceptual moves: From the point of view of subjectivity, we try to take into account the *internalization of the extern* (phenomenon of interiorization); and from the objectivity side, we try to integrate the *externalization of the intern*. We here follow a now well-developed approach in the “new sociologies of organizations” (Corcuff, 2011), from a methodological stance of Sartre (1960).

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<sup>3</sup> - We will modify this denomination, as explained just below in the construction of our conceptual model.



For *internalization*, following Rojot (2005) and Diné (2007), we choose the notion of *habitus* of Pierre Bourdieu such as developed (and made more complex) by the notion of *plurality of self* (*homme pluriel*) of Bernard Lahire. For *externalization of the intern*, we lean on the concepts of so-called<sup>4</sup> systemic theories of human relations and interpersonal, as well as groups, communications, from the well-known *Palo Alto school* and particularly Paul Watzlawick<sup>5</sup>.

These two approaches complement each other, but not as if they would add to each other: actually they describe interplay dynamics which emerges *inside* individuals *as well as* in groups and then whole organizations. They are entangled in an indissoluble way although creating dynamics without coherence (a priori at least) nor, thus, common direction or parallel effects. This double approach does not postulate consciousness or unconsciousness of actors *a priori*: the degree of consciousness or even of intentionality or strategy is a partial result of these emergent processes. This belongs to the classical interdisciplinary concept of hologrammy, related to the dialogical principle: "The hologrammy indicates that the part is in the whole and that the whole is in the part (Morin). The human being exists with all his specificities, among others with his mode of unique expression, sometimes nuanced, *sometimes unconscious, sometimes contradictory...*" (Minor-Corriveau, 2013, 95, our translation<sup>6</sup>; we underline).

### ***1-2-2- A non-determinist way to use Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and dispositions:***

We use the concepts of habitus and of fields ("champs") of Bourdieu to conceptualize the *internalization* in the personal dynamics of life, *not* to opt for social class determinism. Then we articulate the concept of personality in its dynamic, complex understanding, with the concept of habitus.

Personality is a complex *historical process* that we can illustrate by the classic "personality tree": we live "parallel lives" which sometimes cross within interpersonal relational fields. We so accept the definition of personality by Jean Piaget and in a way we then situate ourselves in the structuralist stream: "Personality is a structure (...). A system of transformations which contains laws as system and which preserves itself and enriches by the very game of these transformations. (...)" (Piaget, 1968, p.6-7, our translation; first proposed in 1936). We then supplement the Bourdieu's concept of habitus with Bernard Lahire's modification: the *plurality of the self* ("*l'homme pluriel*", Lahire, 2004, 1998). Lahire insists on the non-monolithic character of habitus and of *dispositions* which result from it: they can integrate incoherencies and even internal contradictions - the weight of habitus is not "unidirectional", it does not necessarily present a global coherence, one (*only one*) logic of life. In this respect, we integrate some aspects of Boje's consideration on stories. We don't consider narratives, but retrospective stories as fragmented and disrupted, then without order (Boje, 2008). Our approach is nevertheless at the (inter)personal, not the collective, level, at the difference of

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<sup>4</sup> - The term « systemic » can be debated as we consider that it is not a pertinent characterization of the Palo-Alto School and of Watzlawick's work in particular. This debate, how interesting as it is, is out of the scope of this article.

<sup>5</sup> - For the reference (Watzlawick and al, 1967-72): we sometimes quote both the English and French references, as in the French versions of our works, we refer to the French edition. For this paper, we have used the English first version, 1967. The quotations refer to the English version.

<sup>6</sup> - « L'hologrammie indique que la partie est dans le tout et que le tout est dans la partie (Morin). L'être humain existe avec toutes ses spécificités, entre autre avec son mode d'expression unique, parfois nuancé, parfois inconscient, parfois contradictoire... » (Minor-Corriveau, 2013, 95).

<sup>7</sup> -« un système de transformations qui comporte des lois en tant que système et qui se conserve et s'enrichit par le jeu même de ces transformations. »

Boje's analysis. We focus on individuality, and we reach to scrutinize the collective phenomena from the interplay of individualities. More than the social in itself, we aim to analyse how the social is constantly recreated by individuals. More than a sociological approach, we adopt a psycho-sociological stance.

We are fully aware that Bourdieu's habitus is not only a result of personal history, but is also a producer of social structures. This is clear in the classical definition of Bourdieu (1980): "A system of durable and transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as generating principles organizers of practices and representations which can be objectively adapted to their goals without supposing conscious aim for ends and express mastering of the requested operations to reach them (...)." (1980, p. 263, our translation<sup>8</sup>)

The internalization process structures the ways people perceive the currently lived situation and act in the frame of this situation –that means, by *dispositions* as defined by Bourdieu (1980, 1994). But as structuring structures, dispositions issued from habitus don't regulate perceptions and people in a completely unconscious and mechanistic way. Of course, a great interest of Bourdieu concept of habitus is to assume the possible unconsciousness of the phenomenon : dispositions are "past experiences which, tabled in any organism under the form of schemas of perception, of thought and of action, tend, more surely than all the formal rules and all the explicit norms, to guarantee the conformity of practices and their consistency upon time." (1980).

Bourdieu links the dispositions with the concept of fields by the notion of *Doxa*. A field is the institutionalization of a perspective (point of view) in things and in habitus (dispositions). It gives to the actors their particular interests, (invisible or understandable from another perspective) and constitutes a structured space of opportunities of positions –the ways by which actors can try to reach their interests. Fields are of diverse nature. Bourdieu considers four generic fields: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. But these categories are not independent, and many specifications of fields can be made, as shown by the numerous specific analyses of particular phenomena made by Bourdieu. For example, the complete set of (possible or actual) power positions in a firm can be considered as a kind of field. Any field is manifested by attitudes and behavior not thought by the actors. The field is not conscious in the mind of actors, Bourdieu says sometimes, due to the *illusion*. Fields determine game rules that people transform into dispositions via the *doxa*, the set of ideas, norms and other pieces of knowledge which are generally accepted as obvious inside a social situation. The *doxa* is thus an unconscious dogma within the group.

But that doesn't mean that people are determined object without conscientiousness, as Bourdieu himself often recalls : "(...) it is not at all excluded that answers from habitus are accompanied by a strategic calculation, tending to realize in conscious mode the operation that habitus realizes on another mode (...)" (1980, our translation), for example.

We fully accept the double refusal of Bourdieu, of both "the extrinsic and instantaneous determinisms of mechanic sociologism [and] the purely inner but also punctual determination of the spontaneous subjectivism." (ibid., our translation).

An important characteristic of the dispositions issued from habitus is that they result of the personal history of any individual, they are not only collective. Bourdieu often insists on this point, as summarized by Lipiansky (1998): "The notion then constantly recalls that it refers to something historical, which is *linked to individual history*, and that it is located in a genetic mode of thought." (our translation, we emphasize).

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<sup>8</sup> - Due to the length of our quotations of Bourdieu, we don't systematically insert the original French text.

In accordance with the refusal by Bourdieu of any “mechanic sociology”, we consider that social agents are not *determined* by the past, despite the frequent use by Bourdieu of the term “conditioning” (*conditionnement*). Their constant recreation of thoughts and attitudes is always situated in a “here-and-now” storytelling (Boje, 2001). This here-and-now affects the ways the dispositions are reconstructed in a never-ended process that creates local and time-situated dynamic.

Bourdieu himself regularly emphasizes this actualization of the Habitus in the present, not only determined by an automatic effect of the past: Dispositions “are defined in first place (...) vis-à-vis objective potentialities, *immediately located in the present*.” (1980, our translation, we emphasize). Past and present constitutes a dialectical dynamic<sup>9</sup>.

We integrate this dynamic by the dialectic of internalization of the extern with the externalization of the intern (that is, how the current situation affects the ways the past structures the present). We not only consider the habitus and the dispositions as a structured structure, but in the same movement, as a structuring structure, that we consider as fundamentally characterized by the interpersonal relationships.

Then our conceptual choice is to apprehend the dynamics of habitus at the interpersonal level, not at a global sociological level. We consider that to analyze concrete, local situation, we cannot directly, simply and only use the sociological determinants, but that we must make a concrete analysis of a concrete situation. Anyway, our cases studies take into accounts the habitus both as *structured* structure and *structuring* structure (and maybe more as structuring, as our case study will illustrate, giving a central role to the social creativity of people in their style of communication). Also, our analysis of concrete, specific cases will encompass the sociological elements, in particular the *fields* in the meaning of Bourdieu. Of course, our conceptual assumptions will be clear only when applied to cases –that we do in this article in presenting below one of our recent cases studies<sup>10</sup>.

We aim to analyze the behaviors, the « practices », in the spirit of the most “organic” Bourdieu (as opposed to the “mechanist sociology”): “(...) the practices cannot be deduced neither from current conditions which can apparently have generated them neither from conditions from the past which produced the habitus, durable principle of their production. They can be reasoned only at the condition to place in relation the social conditions in which did emerge the habitus which generate them and *the social conditions in which it [the habitus] is performed* (...)” (1980, our translation, we emphasize).

In conclusion, our use of Bourdieu’s concepts is specific in three points at least: 1- we base our approach on the personal and interpersonal level, constructing the analysis from the interpersonal to the collective, and not the contrary; BUT we also look for the sociological “inside” the persons (integrating individual, organizational and sociological levels, not opposing them). We then don’t follow Bourdieu when he considers that “The anticipations of habitus, kinds of practical hypotheses based on past experience, give a disproportionate weight to the first experiences” 1980, our translation). Experience is always actualized (internalized, transformed, and then re-invented, externalized), and the more recent experiences have also an impact to be taken in consideration, not only the “first experiences”. 2- We consider that the dispositions inherited from habitus are not monolithic but can present

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<sup>9</sup> - The question of the different kinds of dialogisms (Boje, 2008) to deepen this dialectical dynamic should be developed but is out of the scope of this article.

<sup>10</sup> - However, we won’t be able to present the case study in all its complexity, because the level of details required to fully embrace all the elements of the concrete situation would lead to a length not compatible with an article. Some of our case studies are presented in a book in which each case is presented in more than one hundred pages.

tensions (Lahire, 1998). 3- We give great attention to the individual perceptions and specific behaviors: people are not (only) sociologic agents, they are able of creativity, particularly in their interpersonal communication dynamics.

### ***1-2-3- Interpersonal communication and conflicts: symmetrical and complementary relationships, first-order and second-order changes***

The creativity in interpersonal communication dynamics supports our use of the Palo Alto school (particularly Watzlawick) concepts to analyze interpersonal communication at the root of the externalization of the intern. We then encompass the individual "state of mind" in the current stabilized, and potentially reused, structural experience. In an apparently paradoxical way, subjectivity in interpersonal relationships creates objective situations. We use in particular the *schismogenesis* in Gregory Bateson's meaning, that is either the *complementarity* either the *symmetry* in the positioning of self (of each protagonist of the relationship) within the relationship itself.

Watzlawick and al. (1967) point out that the relational symmetry provokes a relational *escalation* in the progressive change which characterizes any interpersonal relation. Indeed in the "symmetrical" dynamics (symmetric schismogenesis in the sense of Bateson) a situation of competition can develop in which symmetrical behavior of each interlocutor leads to an exaggeration (Watzlawick and al., (1967-72), p. 66, from Bateson, and p. 134).

Within the framework of a symmetrical relation between two partners, one of them can refuse at some point this definition of the relation to suggest defining her(him)self at a high position of a complementary relation. Then the relational partner could "make a higher bid" in reaction, to define her(him)self too in high position of the complementary relation (it is the symmetrical competition for the high position of Kourilsky). "This tendency accounts for the typical escalating property of the symmetrical interaction once its stability is lost and a so-called runaway occurs e.g. quarrels, and fights between individuals or wars between nations " (Watzlawick and al., 1967: 87). A possible result can be the change of the relationship for a complementary one –if the other relational partner accepts the change.

When the other protagonist refuses the new kind of relationship, the runaway leads to a conflictual escalation which can be very explosive.

As say Watzlawick et al., (1967), "This process warrants close attention for in an ongoing relationship it cannot be left unresolved or fluctuating. If this process did not stabilize, the wide variations and unwieldiness, not to mention the inefficiency of redefining the relationship with every exchange, would lead to runaway and dissolution of the relation." (Ibid., 114). Indeed, "in a healthy symmetrical relationship, the partners are able to accept each other in their respective "suchness", which leads to mutual respect and trust in the other's respect and amounts to realistic, reciprocal confirmation of their selves. If and when a symmetrical relation breaks down, we usually observe the rejection rather than disconfirmation of the other's self " (Ibid., 86).

In the case of rejection, and if the protagonist who "proposes" the complementary relationship persists, we enter in the situation of a "change of level 1" (or "first-order change"): "Always more of the same thing" ("*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*", Watzlawick, and al., 1975, p. 45 sq.). When in a conflict situation, a logical solution is used in an inappropriate way, it can lead to the worsening of the problem rather than to her resolution. To solve the conflict inside its existing relational frame (solution, or change, of "level 1" in the meaning of

Watzlawick and al.), that only deepens the conflict. In these cases, a change of the system of relational rules would be needed, that is a change of type 2 (“second-order change”)

There is an explicit link between the changes in relational positioning and changes of type 1 and of type 2. In Watzlawick and al. (1975) changes 1 and 2 are so compared: “One takes place inside a given system which stay unchanged, the other one modifies the system itself.” (Ibid, p. 28). In type 1 change, negative retroaction loops occur within the system, loops which restore a certain equilibrium and stability of the system: they are homeostatic reactions. But Watzlawick and al. (1975) point out that in relationship systems, the interlinked behaviors can be sources of instability. The dynamic of relationship without changing the relational frame easily create escalation and runaway. This is particularly facilitated by symmetrical positioning, but can also occur in complementary relationship. In type 2 change, the systems itself, or an upper level of the system, actually changes. A classical example, now classic, is provided by Watzlawick et al., (1975, p. 26): to change a car speed by shifting the gearlever instead of using brake or accelerator (gas pedal), the latter being a type 1 change.

Following Watzlawick and al. (1975), type 2 change always constitutes a discontinuity or a shift for the persons inside the system: “(...) the second-order change appears unpredictable, abrupt, illogical etc. only in terms of first-order change, that is, from within the system. Indeed (...) second-order change is introduced into the system from the outside and therefore is not something familiar or something understandable in terms of the vicissitudes of first-order change. Hence its puzzling, seemingly capricious nature. But seen from outside the system, it merely amounts to a change of the premises (the combination rules in terms of Group Theory) governing the system as a whole.” (Ibidem, p. 39).

We emphasize that conflicts are not necessarily crated by second-order change, and that this kind of change would always be better leads for conflict resolution. Watzlawick and al. (1975) even stress that inappropriate use of first-order *as well as of second-order* change can be at the origin of “false solutions” (mainly by “terrible simplifications”) which aggravate, and even generate, the conflicts. Looking for solution can even be part of the problem, if not the problem itself (“then solution is the problem”) –even for “imaginary problems”. More generally, when in a conflictual situation, a *logical solution* is used in an inappropriate way, it becomes a part of, in not the, problem (Ibidem, pp. 44 sq.).

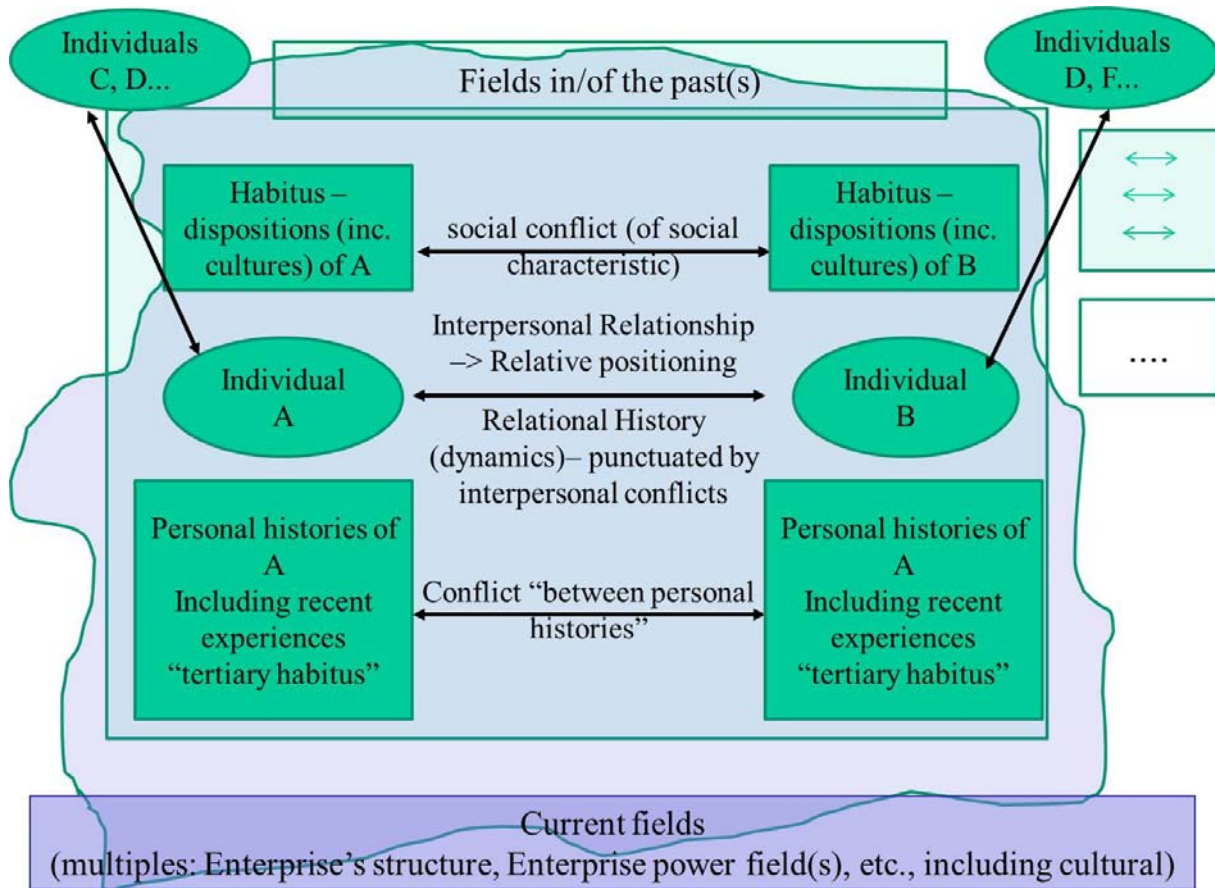
We will use this conceptual frame in our case analysis, and some examples of runaway and escalation due to symmetrical relationship and refusal of complementary one will concretely illustrate the dynamics –and will give a powerful clue to analyze the conflict.

#### ***1-2-4- Integrating interpersonal communication dynamics and positioning, habitus, groups’ dynamics and contexts***

Our conceptual model articulates the habitus and dispositions of Bourdieu with the “Palo-Alto school” analysis of interpersonal communication dynamics. We supplemented it with several dynamics which are required in order to have a comprehensive frame to analyze interpersonal conflicts.

We propose the following graphic representation as a synthesis of our conceptual model. We develop some more explanations below.

**Figure 1: The conceptual model – Three embedded experiential dynamics**



A precision: In this graph, “actions” (“action 1, action 2, etc.) means that we consider actions of actors, their actual behaviors, neither their “personality” (in a static, *immanent* point of view) nor any general characteristics. We explained above the link between “dispositions” (in the meaning of Bourdieu) and behavior. We indicate this only for individual A, in order not to overload the graph, but of course the same consideration applies to Individual B. Also, we indicate for each individual (A and B) relationships with others, as conflicts don’t imply only two persons, but also others –any relationship in part of a “network of relationships”, which is a way to consider groups. Some of these others can be the same for the two protagonists “A” and “B”. A figure with all the dynamics for several people would have been too graphically complex.

Like any graph, this is a simplification of our conceptual frame. In particular, we separate in the graph three “levels” of conflicts (interpersonal relation, social conflict, and “between personal histories”), but each of it is actually embedded in the others. More than levels, they are three sets of interlinked dynamics.

Also, this model requires some supplementary explanations and precisions.

This model is dedicated to the analysis of interpersonal conflicts. It could be used without referring to conflicts, but this would lead to a complex discussion which is not intended there. We consider that all the phenomena integrated in our model are requested in order to depict and analyze any interpersonal conflict. We add some other dynamics that we explain below.

At the core we place the interpersonal relationship in terms of relative positioning, as we explained above the central role of positioning (symmetrical or complementary relationship). Above, we indicate the “habitus-dispositions dimension” –we remind here that dispositions are embedded in the relationship dynamics (internalization of the extern) as well as these dynamics are part of the constant reconstruction of the dispositions (externalization of the intern). We consider that the recent experiences of the protagonists must not be forgotten (that we call “tertiary habitus”), particularly in the relationship dynamics (“core level”): we then specify them in the graph. It is not to say, of course, that the whole history of people (the “classical” habitus) is not without importance. At the risk to repeat, we insist on the fact that we refuse to give only social causes to conflicts, as well as we deny any social determination of individuals or primary role of contextual (for example, socio-economic) factors. Conflicts, even interpersonal, are not only matter of current relationships, but must be considered in the interplay of the three “dimensions”.

The conceptual frame and many of the concepts integrated in it have been integrated during the first case studies –in this way, our research is abductive<sup>11</sup>. We had to enrich and make it more complex as during the cases studies we considered some particular phenomena which integration was required to embrace all the dynamics we “observe” in the situations and in the talks (stories) of the protagonists. We then assumed back-and-forth moves between the conceptual framing and the case analysis. In our first versions of the case study, we did present the phenomena as we did face them in the depiction of the case; we make here a reconstruction of the global conceptual canvas<sup>12</sup>. We were then lead to add several precise phenomena and related concepts: human perceptions processes, sociocultural and professional identities, intergroup behaviors, groups’ dynamics. A special paragraph will be dedicated to the contextual factors.

On the human perceptions processes, three additions to the central model have been made. They are all related to the question of coherence in perception. Still in accordance with the Palo-Alto school we introduce in our model the fact that the protagonists’ perceptions themselves are both conditioning and emerging from the relationship positioning. More particularly, the coherence in perception is related to the *cognitive dissonance* and the *punctuation of sequence of events*. As we indicated above, habitus are not coherent, and stories themselves can be fragmented, but in their cognitive construction/perception individuals tend, consciously or, often, unconsciously, to rationalize their perception in order to construct coherent vision of what’s going on –even without the structure of a ordered narrative: despite that their stories can be constantly evolving, in the interpersonal process itself individuals construct coherence, in their positioning vis-à-vis others. We must take into account this important phenomenon. The concept of cognitive dissonance have been since long developed in psycho-sociological analyses of behaviors (since the seminal works of

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<sup>11</sup> Our research is not completely grounded as we had since the beginning a structured analysis canvas. More, the extent to which a research can be “grounded” is a huge debate –there are certainly many different “kinds” of grounded-based researches. We don’t enter it in this article.

<sup>12</sup> - We thank the anonymous reviewers of several states of this article who signaled the difficulty to follow our reasoning when presenting the theoretical elements mostly in the case study itself –even if these concepts are fully understandable in the case study itself. We also precise that we performed several other cases studies and that some conceptual elements have been required also by these others cases studies.

Festinger, 1957 particularly). Synthetically, it means that when a person faces perceived elements which are *dissonant* (which seems illogical in their relations *in the mind of this person*), she makes an effort to force them to be (more) logically articulated in order to reduce, or cancel, the dissonance. This effort can be in behavior, in attitude, or at the pure perception level. The latter is a rationalization process: ex-post, the person modifies her own perceptions structure in order to “see” things in a coherent way<sup>13</sup>.

This rationalization process is actually a particular aspect of the *punctuation of the sequence of events* (Watzlawick et al., 1967) –shortly said punctuation of events. Watzlawick points out that in the relational positioning the protagonists generally diverge in their perception of events. But their divergences don't concern events themselves, but the way they articulate these events: which ones they rely to others, and in which orders and causalities (Ibidem, pp. 35-42 and 74-80): “It is not the issue here whether punctuation of communicational sequence is, in general, good or bad as it should be immediately obvious that the punctuation *organizes* behavioral events and is therefore vital to ongoing interactions. (...) Disagreement on how to punctuate the sequence of events is at the root of countless relationship struggles” (p.37, authors emphasize). “To order sequences in a direction or in another one creates what we can call without exaggeration *different realities*.” (Watzlawick, 1977, p.54, we emphasize). We use these concepts of perception processes analyzing (rationalization from Festinger and punctuation of the sequence of events from Watzlawick et al.) in this precise conceptual sense, and not as biases to the “real” (Watzlawick, 1977).

In the frame of the interpersonal communication and perception of self, we were also led to consider the emergence of sociocultural and professional identities linked with intergroup behaviors (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986). Synthetically, Tajfel and Turner propose that in networks of relationships, individuals construct their social identity by a self-referencing to their *perceived* group vis-à-vis other groups. The considered groups exist in the perception of the persons, whatever the “actual” degree of existence of these groups (the perception of groups is a consequence of the cognitive dissonance). This construction of social personal identity is based on intergroup behaviors, which are the behaviors of a person considering herself in a group towards other protagonist(s) she considers as belonging to another group. Actually, this behavior is not separated from the interpersonal communication process: this stereotyping and identification phenomena appeared in the cases we did analyze *in the frame of protagonists' positioning*. They actually link individuals positioning in interpersonal relationship with perception of social differences, then the habitus. As our case analysis will illustrate, the social identity and intergroup behaviors are not a mechanic, one-way process. They are at the same time a result of relational positioning and an actualization of the habitus in the present situation. By rationalization against cognitive dissonance, the protagonists place in coherence their relational conflict and what they consider as their social group.

This explains why we finally had to integrate in our conceptual canvas many elements of the psycho-sociology of groups' dynamics<sup>14</sup>: Social facilitation, *desindividuation*, social polarization, group thinking, influences of active minorities. Briefly said, social facilitation is the phenomenon by which the dominant behavior in a homogeneous group is reinforced by the very homogeneity of the group and the kind of interdependence so created. It is of course articulated with habitus as the dominant behaviors of people are generated by their personal history but also by their recent (work) experiences (tertiary habitus). The *desindividuation*

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<sup>13</sup> The rationalization is also present in the way people recall the events. This is a methodological danger, as people tend to tell (coherent, rationalized) narratives and not (lived, fragmented and possibly uncoherent) stories (Boje, 2008). We precise this in the presentation of our case study methodology below.

<sup>14</sup> - We here summarize very briefly the descriptions of these elements, and we don't make references to the numerous authors and works which depict them.



process is a variety of social polarization: it designs the moment of tensions in groups' life where individuals tend to lose their self-consciousness. They stop to think as individual, don't perceive themselves for a while as an individual entity but as a "cog" (an automatic component) in the group's life. The social polarization is an effect of the relational network toward the positioning in relationship: in front of other people, individuals tend to radicalize their opinions and behaviors. It is often called the "dramatization effect": in one-to-one relationship, people are able to listen, talk with nuances and "reason", take into account the position of protagonists; but because of the eyes of an audience, individuals tend to lack their abilities of listening, to be self-critic and to avoid stereotypes.

This polarization can lead to the group thinking phenomena<sup>15</sup>, which is strongly linked to the intergroup behavior. In a group facing a decision to take or a "problem to solve", in first stages exchanges can be open, divergences can be welcomed and even encouraged. The group's thinking appears when, sometimes suddenly, a solution appears and all members of the group seem to be unanimous. From this moment, it is no more possible to discuss this solution, which becomes *the* "group's solution". Any member who would emit any objection will be at best, censured, at worst, excluded from the group. Finally, in the psycho-sociological elements appearing in groups as networks of relationships, we also had to integrate the phenomenon of influences of active minorities in groups' life, which is often linked with the group's thinking. When the majority of members of a group present divergences on a subject or in their behaviors, a coherent minority, even small, can be at the origin of a group's thinking: they focalize the rest of the members, as their procure a "solution", a way of unanimity –and of rationalization of perceptions by adherence to their position.

These particular phenomena in perceptions, in social identities and in the psycho-sociological dimensions of groups are deeply interlinked. They contribute to the complexity of the dynamics of the networks of relationships. They are both produced (or enhanced) by, and producer of, the ways by which habitus are dialectically embedded with the conflicting interpersonal positioning in relationships. These additional elements don't change the structure of our conceptual model. Each of them is related to the three embedded dynamics which constitute our theoretical canvas. Actually they are specifications of some phenomena and forces present in these dynamics.

Our global model also takes into account the fields in the meaning of Bourdieu, which we consider as embedded contextual factors. We don't list here all the potential fields, as they must be specified for each situation (case). Bourdieu postulated that some fields are general (for example, the economic field, the cultural field, the structure-functional field) but he did indicate himself that many are specific to situations –for example, the power fields in and between firms. More, each general field category must be examined in details in each situation.

We don't present the list of possible fields here, but we make an important precision. Like for the habitus and dispositions, we consider the forces which are present in the fields as both results of the behaviors of the protagonists and dialectically "environments" in which these behaviors are situated. Like habitus, the fields ("contexts") are both structuring structures (emerging structures) and structured structures (embedded in the actors' perceptions and behaviors).

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<sup>15</sup> - Some authors refuse the term "group thinking" as it implies a purely social phenomenon. They prefer to use the term of group illusion to emphasize that in this process, individuals are submitted to the illusion of unanimity in the group, and finally self-identify to the group itself.

This explains our conception of one particular field, the national culture<sup>16</sup>: we refuse the all-embracing and coherent visions of the cultural stereotypes (Hofstede, 2001, or Trompenaars F., Hampden-Turner C. (1997, 2008, for example, and for fundamental critics of the notion of culture, Alvesson, 2002, Willmott, 1997, McSweeney, 2013). The national cultures influence the modalities of (organization of) work in a neither determinist nor static way, but by the very interplay of transformations of individuals' "personal dynamics".

The personal history of any individual necessarily leads to integrate in the personality dynamics multiple cultural characteristics which influence the person's practices, representations, and even his/her values, at work, by multiple ways,. But we insist on the fact that neither these representations, practices and values, nor the ways by which they are actualized at each instant in personal life and in particular working life, are necessarily coherent, monolithic and even determinist. Simultaneously (not after nor before) these practices, representations and values (at work and outside work) dialectically exert an influence on the life dynamics of the person, in the measure, furthermore, that they are permanently built and reconstructed by actors' interplays - or rather *subjects'* interplays -of intersubjectivity, personal dynamics and specific groups dynamics inside organizations.

We then analyze the conflicts dynamics at work by combining the situation processes and influences of individual trajectories (personal histories) marked by sociological characteristics (but not determiners). We then aim to avoid both dangers of (pure) determinism and of (pure) subjectivism.

Despite the complexity added by these particular phenomena, our conceptual model is centered on a structured axis. Our question in its most synthetic version can be formulated as: how each other's, recent and long-term (*habitus*) personal history, situational factors, and self-awareness of people emerge and are reconstructed in the interpersonal work relationships and in particular in conflict situations?

We have used this conceptual framework on several cases studies of conflicts<sup>17</sup>. We present in the following section the study of one of this case.

## **2- A CASE ANALYSIS: A SOCIAL CONFLICT RESULTING FROM AN CONFLICTUAL ESCALADE FROM INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS NETWORK AND FROM SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY PHENOMENA**

We conducted a case analysis of conflict in a Community Center in France in a popular district characterized by a partially foreign origin population, of "second" and of "third" generation (of immigrants). From observations and from multiple interviews (actually, more in-depth conversations, see the methodology below) with many protagonists of the conflict in this Community Center of around thirty employees, we have been able to operate an

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<sup>16</sup> - We conducted cases studies in different countries, and the question of "influence" of national or ethnic cultures have been addressed. In the case presented in this article, ethno-cultural differences are present and considered in our analysis, see below. Of course, as we cannot present in this article several cases studies from different countries, our comments on national culture are here limited.

<sup>17</sup> References of publication in French of some of these cases studies are not inserted to preserve the anonymity of this manuscript.

"archaeology of the conflict phenomenon": how happens in a decade the move from interpersonal conflicts to the explosion of a social conflict which will finally lead to the dissolution of the Community Center itself.

From our theoretical pattern, we led an analysis of several of the interpersonal conflicts which took place in this Community Center, from observations and especially from the contents analysis of numerous conversations made with several protagonists of the conflict. We were able to show how the relationships constitute dynamic "chains of escalation" (runaway) between the various protagonists, notably as they build sociocultural and professional identities.

We conduct the analysis in two phases. First we show how the discursive elements develop and gradually congeal fundamental perception divergences among the various protagonists. The analysis grid of communication by "the Palo Alto school" (Watzlawick and al, 1967-72) allows to understand how the "*punctuation of sequence of events*" for each person is differently self-constructed within the frame of these conflicts - and then how these perceptual processes build particularly robust and self-fulfilling logics (*rationalization* facing cognitive dissonances in the Festinger's meaning).

Then we were able to identify how the organizational phenomena catalyzed the emergence of a social conflict. The elements of language of individuals were gradually enacted within collective bodies of representation (Governing Council and directors' Board of the structure<sup>18</sup>), within informal groups leading to employees' coalitions which gradually become official by creation of labor-union groups, interiorization of political discourses or sociopolitical activism linking the employees' occupational positions with the ethnic context of the district of the Community Center, etc.).

In particular, this allows us to question the cultural dimension in the case of this Community Center which is located in a "multi-ethnic" district. Even with the multiple origins of inhabitants ("immigrants of second and third generation"), it doesn't appear so much cultural different "objective phenomena" (for "ethnic" cultures as well as "social/socio-occupational cultures ") but mainly elements of discourses contributing to the social identity of people, which explains the socialization of the conflict. Our analysis illustrates the complexity of relation of the people to their *habitus*, and especially, the intricacy of this *internalization of the extern* within the processes of interpersonal communications (relative positioning of people in relationship, constructions of divergent perception logics).

Then we were able to make an "archaeological work" of birth of conflict, both at the organizational level and at the level of people's "life trajectories". A tight analysis of these trajectories using the conceptual frame of the *habitus* of Bourdieu as developed by Lahire shows how the individuals build themselves social identities through their speeches (oriented toward other people in interpersonal communication).

### **Methodology of the study:**

Our case study was mainly based on series of in-depth conversations with multiple participants of the Center (director, secretary, several employees).

Each set of conversations was based on an interview guide built from our theoretical pattern. This interview guide is constituted of about an hundred items. It covers not only work items including interpersonal relationship, past experiences for all the interviewed persons, but also

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<sup>18</sup> - A non profit organization. In France, many Community Centers are legally a particular kind of non-profit organization, the "*association*".

life dynamics and stories<sup>19</sup>. We are aware that interviews can lead to methodological flaws in the analysis, particularly with the use of a guide, due to the cognitive dissonance (rationalization in terms of Festinger, 1957, as presented above). The most dangerous flaw is to induce a narrative process different than living stories (Boje, 2008): the questions asked by interviewers can lead to a “BME<sup>20</sup> narrative” (Boje, 2008, 2001), particularly by following a structured interview. To avoid this flaw, we didn’t follow the guide during the talks –it was only a check-list that we didn’t provide to the interviewed persons. We used it to check if all the points we considered important were addressed by our interlocutors. We started the interview by a deliberately general question (on description of their current work) and we let the persons develop their talk on their own, just asking question to precise this or this points – by letting people freely talk, showing our deep interest for *all* their utterances, they all, quickly of after a long time, did tell a lot of their own personal history (from childhood till recent occupational details, through family life and education). The only request to allow this was that the interviews take time and that we express concern, interest and patience. Then, we consider that we didn’t collect narratives but living, reconstructed (not to say reenacted) stories. Of course, we are aware that there were mostly retrospective stories, and not (only) *here-and-now* ones. Anyway, we got complex, disrupted, fragmented and often full of “contradictions” stories and not retrospective structured narratives (Boje, 2008).

Interviews, of two to three hours sequences, repeated two or three times for each person, finally constitute several tens of hours of verbatim. They have been manually encoded by themes related to our conceptual structures. Our approach is, then, clearly inductive.

We add meetings with several members of the board, but without being in capacity to systematically follow the interview guide.

We did complete these conversations by an access to many internal documents, like activity reports and work notes, and we conducted a newspaper extensive research.

We reconstituted a chronology of the facts from these multiple information sources. Naturally they are not quite convergent between them, in particular between the conversations, even also with, or between, other secondary sources. This divergences being taken into account, we can however present in a first subsection a summary of the main facts such as they can be "objectively" told. We will clearly see by presenting these facts that the various protagonists of this case present, at least on some of them, completely divergent perceptions - and this will be a first entry key in the analysis of the conflicting processes in this Community center. The highlighting and the decoding of the most important precise points on which these differences of perception occur, that we present in the second subsection, will provide us the base to deepen the analysis in the third sub-section by using our conceptual frame presented above.

We show that if contextual factors and sociological determinants are effectively present, and if individual personal histories as well as interpersonal and groups’ life psycho-sociological phenomena have their importance, the heart of the conflicting dynamics is situated at the level of the interpersonal relational *positioning* between the protagonists.

## **2-1- The Community Center « Meunier » and its history**

### ***2-1-1- The so-called context:***

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<sup>19</sup> - We can provide this interview guide to readers at demand.

<sup>20</sup> - “Beginning –Middle- End”.

Let's make first a preliminary methodological remark. We write "so-called" context, because our conceptual frame clearly shows that context in the classic meaning (that is "around" people, employees and volunteers of the Center, in a narrative perspective) is interiorized in behavior and perception modes of these people. It then cannot be considered as *outside* actions of people. These contextual elements are thus not "secondary", nor first, in the behaviors interpretation, they are imbricated - not objectively imbricated, but by the (subjective) way people express them in their very behavior.

The Community Center « Meunier »<sup>21</sup> is an important organization due to its role and impact in a medium-size city of North of France, in a popular district. The population is mainly constituted by sociocultural categories of workers and employees. Unemployment rates and people beneficiaries of social benefits are important, as well as the proportion of North African immigrants' children and grandchildren (often called "second" and "third" generation). Families are often numerous, with many "difficult" youths who "roam in the district", between lack of schooling and unemployment. Economic life is not prosperous. The Center was opened at the State instigation (through its social assistance administration, named the CAF, *Caisse d'allocations familiales*, the French Social benefit office for Families, which has an important role in France). The Center was officially created on January 1st, 2000, but its construction took place in several steps.

The director, a woman, the main character of the conflict analyzed here, took the direction since the birth of this Community center. The Center has an associative status. The direction thus faces several interlocutors: beside the relations with employees and activity leaders for children and youth (some are volunteers), and with adherents, she works under supervision of a *Council of representatives* of adherents (or Governing Council), and with its emanation, the *bureau* (in French; higher rank board) (which includes a President, a Secretary and a Treasurer, completed by Vice-president, Vice-secretary and Vice-treasurer). The Council is elected during the annual General Assembly of the association. These elections are an important moment in the life of the association, as well as the Council regular meetings (approximately once a month). We'll see in the events chronology that General Assemblies and Council meetings were crucial moments.

At the time of the burst of the main conflict in 2014, the Center presents 26 permanent employees<sup>22</sup>, full time or part-time, and around one hundred paid participants (contractors) at very low part-time (sometimes only a few hours a month). A significant proportion of permanent employees has a high seniority, of ten years or more. Since its creation in the early 2000s, the number of employees has regularly and strongly increased (they were only half-ten at the beginning). The staff turnover is thus weak. The number of members (adherents) to the Center is, in 2014, of about 750, representing more than 300 families. It is a very important life center in the district.

### ***2-1-2- The history:***

The final social conflict results from a long history and particularly from difficult relationships between the director and some employees, with one in particular, Mounir. The history of the Center is then characterized by a long process of increasing effects of

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<sup>21</sup> All names have been changed to guarantee anonymity.

<sup>22</sup>- It is a community center: apart some support staff (accountant, secretary, welcome desk employee) most employees were taking in charge activities with children, teen-ages, and young adults. Activities are recreational but with pedagogical aspects, including schoolwork support, and, for the young adults, help in administrative procedures (files for Job unemployment system, for example). In French, community centers' employees are called "animateurs", impossible to translate in English. We will use below the most commonly accepted term "community leaders", even if they are not "leaders" in the most obvious sense of the term.

conflicting factors, which importance and potentially explosive consequences were not perceived by the director neither by the management team (Board).

Our reconstruction of the (increasingly conflicting) history of the Center does not claim to be objective. We draw here what seems to be the striking steps, the "milestones events", which show the conflicting escalation, and the conflict socialization at the end of the story, deduced from our observations and from the stories of the numerous protagonists whom we questioned.

In the Center history, several steps and events are important. The director is there pivotal.

#### The birth of the Center and the first operating modes:

During the first years of creation of the new structure the director leans on the local residents and on part of staff coming from another Community center, which she was previously manager. At the beginning, the director faces an informal, sometimes "family-kind" structure with numerous dysfunctions, including legal ones: recruitments by family or "clan" cooptations, employees' replacements by "friends" or family members, free access to activities given to friends or to "family", nepotism in service deliveries (in help for administrative formalities, for example), abnormal behaviors of certain volunteers (who go as far as having their car washed by children in Center activities), non-respect of rules in supervision of children and activities, non-existent or illegal employment contracts, etc. The director leads in the first years of construction of the Center a deep professional reorganization of the structure which did previously work in informal ways, with these numerous "arrangements" between employees, participants and certain inhabitants (and "young people"). Since the first years of functioning of the new center, this reorganization questions the previous ways of work.

#### Recurrent « little » conflicts as soon as 2002

Since the beginning, the director has thus to constantly intervene to enforce the normal (and legal) rules of a community center. Her interventions against abnormal, even illegal, activities, will never stop during all the existence of the Community Center. Furthermore, the director regularly has to face, and prevent, two types of phenomenon. On one hand, she has to act against demonstrations of religious type (the wearing of veil by female employees being the most visible), and she has to refocus community leaders around the theme of the secularism (*laïcité*, an important issue in France). On the other hand, she also has to thwart demonstrations of political kind, as several participants to the activities, as well as community employees, are activists of the "Palestinian cause" or other movements connected to the Middle Eastern conflicts. The director has to frequently intervene. The frictions are thus regular, but local and minor.

The relations are difficult with a Community leader in particular, employed since the very beginning, Mounir, who will have an important role during the explosion of the social conflict in 2014. The director has to refocus him several times for professional inadequacies, such as the non-preparation of activities of the summer period, of which he is in charge, before his vacation departure, or the forgetting of a child during an external activity. Mounir also quarrels several times with other community leaders. A particular mattering incident ("the coffeepot affair") opposed him to a north-African female employee, on personal motives connected to the life of this community leader. The incident is violent (physical aggression, Mounir throws a coffeepot full of hot coffee on the woman), but there is no witness (Mounir didn't deny the very violent act, but did proclaim that he did respond to the provocative talks of the north-African female employee who did justify her way of life, having left her companion to raise alone her children). The director is led to refuse a request of increasing responsibilities from the part of Mounir who considers the professional reproaches as

excessive, the facts being minor, he said, and as he generally showed high level of skills and reliance. He progressively and regularly complains that he is victim of discrimination by the director, who firmly denies. She even asks for his dismissal several times, but unsuccessfully (refusal by Council Board or by the State administration –labor legal officer in the French law). She can only send him official warnings.

#### Integration in the Center of new activities, including the ones from a district Youths association:

From 2003 till 2014, the Community Center Meunier grows, in particular by integrating new activities previously carried on by other associative structures, in particular by a district youths association. This Center activities increase is made at the request of the (administrative) founders of the Center (the CAF, the General Council and the City government), in particular by the city government. The director has to manage the integration of new employees (Community leaders) and oversee activities with difficult young people, without having a professional team hardened for this type of population. The previous problems ("amateurism" and failure to respect rules, nepotism, questioning of secularism (veil) and of political neutrality, linked to the situation in the Near East) continue and require regular reframings by the director.

#### The socialized conflict burst (2014-2015)

From January 2017 to the end of 2015 a serious socialized conflict bursts inside the Community center, and will end by its closure. The history of this conflict development is complex and presents multiple aspects that we briefly describe.

An apparent starting point is the integration in the Council of people coming from the youths association, some being local sociopolitical actors. Tensions rise. The director is exhausted, and she intends to leave the Community Center. The Board, at the initiative of the President, decides to substantially increase the salary of the director, the Council is not informed about the decision. Furthermore, the work time of the HR consultant is increased.

In the period April-July 2014, several serious incidents occur with employees. The director notices several employees' work neglects and emits written warnings. Two employees, on sick leave, send (electronics) mails of complaints to the director. Exchanges are tightened, a violent altercation takes place with one of them (Oudouma) who demands a contractual termination of his employment contract<sup>23</sup> while the director considers that because of his absences (work leaves) without proper justification and of his incompetence he must be considered as resigning. The signatory employees make their recriminations circulate to certain Center's adherents and certain employees, particularly around an informal group of some adherents and employees, emerging around an union representative, Mounir, group which includes several new Council members linked to the district youth association. These dissatisfied employees (both first ones joined by some others, among them several having been targeted by the warnings of the director) send a collective letter "to the Council". They ask for the organization of a meeting between the administrators (Council members) and the employees, to make assessment of "management problems" according to them, and the lack of equality between employees. The mail also suggests that there was misappropriation of money.

In agreement with the President, the director proposes a meeting of dissatisfied employees with the Board, but not with the Council, to avoid to involve the institutional representatives in the Council, like the City and the regional authorities who are financiers (founders). The

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<sup>23</sup> - In French labor law this process allows employees to negotiate, and often get, rather high leaving bonus.

HR consultant is associated to the meeting. The meeting is refused by these employees: employees of an animation sector organize at the meeting planned time a public demonstration (manifestation) with signature of a petition - in fact, the letter to the Council which is re-used and jointly signed by several other employees and becomes an "open letter-petition".

Events accelerate from summer 2014, following an important event, soon after the precedent demonstration: an informal meeting takes place between the director, the Boards members and the elected Council members (the HR consultant is present). The meeting is very stormy and even violent at the end, shouts and howlings punctuate the debates. Several administrators aggressively question the director, on the global functioning of the center, especially on the finances, with a focus on the director salary. He appears a clear division among administrators between some in favor, and others in opposition, to the director. The administrators the most opposed to the director are especially the representatives newly elected in the General Assembly of last April. These new administrators present a "file" against the director, with confidential documents on her wage. It seems that the accountant officer did spread the information to certain administrators and to certain employees.

From this trigger, the crisis becomes intense and socialized; events will continuously go on till the closure of the Community Center in October, 2015, regulatory authorities definitively removing their financing:

- July 2014: article (it will be followed by several others) in a regional newspaper, from the initiative of the dissatisfied employees. The conflict becomes public. Regularly, in the following months, the opponent employees are at the initiative of newspapers articles.
- August 2014 (noticed end of August): burglary of the office of the director, which is searched. Documents are stolen, computer of the director consulted. Her employment contract which indicates her wage is broadcasted in the district.
- Very early September : Public demonstration in front of the Community Center building, with local residents, on the theme (and with a name-specific banner on the director) "The shame wage" , "*Le salaire de la honte*" (direct reference to the salary of the director, increased in April). Some employees self-proclaim "the indignants" ("*les indignés*"<sup>24</sup>).
- During these weeks, the director has often contacts with regulatory authorities, financiers (founders), which worry about the situation and do not understand what happens, because the center worked very well during 17 years from their point of view. The director and the Board either do not understand the conflicting escalation which occurs.
- Early September: The Council, on proposal of the Board, agrees to ask for mediation by the North of France Federation of Community centers. The mediator, who is the president of the Federation, meets some of the employees on September 22nd, firstly the "indignants", (at the local place of the labor union CGT<sup>25</sup>, with presence of the General Secretary of the local union), then other employees.
- End of September 2014: the mediation fails. The opponents refuse it because the Federation president already knew the director and did emit in newspapers some positive comments on her.

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<sup>24</sup> -In France (as in some other European countries), in the years 2010-2015, did raise from activist initiatives, several social movements in the crisis context, opponent to establishment and "political world", self-proclaimed "indignant" –*indignés*. The Community centers "opponent" employees refer to these movements by their denomination.

<sup>25</sup> CGT is known in France as a particularly active, and "against managers", trade union. France is characterized by several national inter-professional unions, often in competition.



Two successive Councils end of September and early October fail to unblock the situation.

From October till December 2014: Campaign for the professional (shop stewards) elections which takes place in December. Several employees are candidate and are elected Union representatives on the lists of two unions, SUD and CGT. The results of elections, in December, show the break between two groups of employees, in more or less equal number. The list SUD and its elected representative seem moderate, if not in favor of the director. The future CGT delegate, Mounir, clearly calls for the firing of the director, and the newspapers echo it. The atmosphere is very violent during the election campaign. In October, the director takes a sick leave. She will never be back in the Center. Through multiple events, due to the violent climate, and to the aggression of the President, the Board collectively resigns as well as a part of the Council members. Despite an attempt of mediation and the (unsuccessful) interventions of regulatory authorities, divisions between employees lead to multiple sick leaves, the impossibility to build a new Center project, the instability in management (one of the opponent employees who becomes director, Amin, is also disputed and has to resign), the CAF removes its administrative validation to the Center which definitively closes at the end of October 2015.

This quick history relates facts - but the protagonists perceive them, and it is the perceptive interplays which establish our first level of analysis.

## ***2-2- Punctuation of sequence of events: Perception divergences represent perceptive systems***

Any chronology of events is not easy to establish because the conversations with various people as well as the newspaper articles are not coherent between each other's, even on the very facts and on their dates, and especially on the chains of events. The various actors have very divergent perceptions in their *Punctuation of sequence of events* (Watzlawick and al., 1967-1972, Watzlawick, 1978). The analyses of these differences in perceptions lead to a first stage of explicitation (more than explanation) of on-going processes in this interpersonal and organizational conflict.

The main points of perception differences that we point out are given in the list below. We emphasize that it is our own recollection. Any list of events represents a delimitation of "clusters" in the relational flows, which are continuous due to their nature (as emphasizes the Palo-Alto school). This delimitation of discontinuous separated subsets is always a choice which can be questioned or remodeled. We distinguish here thirteen "subsets" of perception differences, but we could have delimited less units or on the contrary multiply them by entering finer distinctions (as we shall see in some of our paragraphs).

The central divergence in perception appears between the director and Mounir and concerns their relationship, its history and their relative positioning. "The coffeepot affair" which we described above is obviously a particularly strong point of tension in the perceptions. Also, multitudes of events are the object of divergent perceptions by all the protagonists, sometimes totally contradictory or even symmetrical (frontally opposed): the sanctioning of several employees by the director during spring and early summer 2014; the entry in the Council in April 2014 of several people coming from the district youth association; the temptation for director to leave the Center in April-May 2014, and the Board decision to raise her wage; the fact that this director pay rise is known by the Council only lately; the very management of the director; the stormy meeting of July 2014; the relations between the president and the director; the attempt of mediation by the President of the North Federation of the Community centers; the fact that short-term employment contracts were emitted too late by a middle

manager - and finally, the City support reaction expected, and deceptive, by the director and the Board during their resignation in December 2014 (the director and the Board did expect their resignation would have led the City to actively involve, and support them by refusing their resignation; actually the City let them alone and leave and did interpret their resignation as a cause of problem and a mark of their incompetence, and neither a result of the conflicting situation, neither a call for more implication).

An in-depth analysis of these thirteen items shows that it clearly appears processes of *cognitive dissonance* in the meaning of Festinger (1957), and the great importance of phenomena of *punctuation of sequence of events* in the meaning of Watzlawick. He would be too long here to present in detail the analysis of the perceptive divergences on the thirteen items.

For each, we find that the punctuation of sequence of events by each of the protagonists is totally divergent. Much more important, for each of these items it appears that the way each of protagonists “logically” (in their own logic) reconstructs the facts enters in complementarity with how others construct the events. The very divergences in perception reinforce each other’s perception. We highlight that there is a perception system not only “inside” each person (by cognitive dissonance), but also in the structures of perceptive dynamics between two people: each individual perception scheme can be understood only in this structure, as interlinked with others’ perception scheme.

Actors built perceptions and representations, which they tend to structure in a logical way, what causes an entanglement of contradictory logics which, of course, tend to produce an incommunicability contributing to the conflict.

The differences of perception particularly in terms of punctuations of sequence of events are obviously very numerous and form a complex network of muddled perceptions, largely *self-fulfilling* because of their differences *themselves*. It is a classic schema in interpersonal communication, emphasized by the Palo-Alto school and Watzlawick in particular.

All this clearly shows that in conflict dynamics the processes of perception and construction of sense<sup>26</sup> is based on a *logical* mental construction of events by actors, by processes of cognitive dissonance –the logic being not in the events themselves, but in the individuals’ mental activities. It is not possible to build an unambiguous vision of the facts which would be "objective", neutral or still impartial. But it is actually the divergences in perceptions that establish the first axial point in analysis of conflict processes.

As showed by the points of perceptive difference indicated above, it is not so much the events in themselves which are differently built by the various protagonists. Differences mainly emerge in the ways *the elements* of these events, or these events themselves, *articulate each other’s in construction of sense by the actors*.

A symptomatic example concerns warnings and penalties sent to some employees by the director during April, May and June, 2014. For the most part of employees already in conflict with the director as well as for some other employees and adherents (spectators of the events), these penalties constitute a reaction of the director against disruptive employees who are then going to question her even more. For the protesters, it is a reaction of the director and the Board against the entrance in the Council of new members coming in particular from the youths association. For them the director begins to act against certain employees, in particular men from Maghreb, just in order to consolidate her power. In the mind of the director these

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<sup>26</sup> - We prefer to write *construction of sense* than *sense-making* to emphasize the complexity, and the duration, of the processes.

warnings and penalties are purely in a professional logic: she sanctions deficiencies and errors as (she thinks) she already does for several years. She does not make the link with the entrance in the association of new members (adherents) and the election of some of their representatives in the Council.

Several other examples of this kind occur (see the list above) – and they can be understood only by referencing to each other's. Did Oudouma resign *de facto* due to his work leaves without proper justification and his lack of competencies, or at contrary is he a victim of an excessive breach of contract which would be explained by the discriminatory politics of the director? Does this discrimination explain that the proposition the director makes to Mounir in spring 2014 to take in charge some extra-schooling children activities would be, at best a downgrading, at worst an attempt of manipulation, while the director considers she makes him this proposition in order to locate him in an professional position which will lead him to be more responsible in the structure? Also, the Constitution of a SUD Union list opposing the CGT list is obviously not perceived in the same way according to the various protagonists.

We could continue to deepen all these perceptive logics which are in confrontation<sup>27</sup>. It's now time to try to understand how, and why, they emerge.

It would be a poor analysis to “simply record” these divergences, even in details, and to deduce that they generate “communication problems” at the very origin of “the” conflict. It would be far from being relevant and sufficient: how and why are constructed these divergent perceptions? Are there only perception effect? Can the cognitive dissonance explain everything? In fact, the human perception is only *one* behavior component, which we cannot separate from others - and primarily, the relational conducts. Our theoretical frame leads us now to scrutinize the heart of the conflicting dynamics. They rely on four main domains, which the following sub-section present on this case: the interpersonal relative positionings in the “relational chains”, the dynamics of construction of actors social identities, the multiple psycho-sociological processes which occur, all this receiving new light by analyzing the protagonists' *habitus* (in the sense of Bourdieu and as developed by Lahire).

The length of this article doesn't allow us to completely present the development of our analyses in these domains. In the following section, we present first the pattern of the analysis of the interpersonal relation between the director and the other main protagonist of the structure, the community leader Mounir, and second we sum up the main results of the detailed case analysis using our other conceptual elements.

### **3- INDIVIDUAL AND INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS: THE CENTRALITY OF DENIAL OF COMPLEMENTARITY RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS**

This particularly exemplary case clearly shows how a conflict self-constructs itself through a whole relational history. Furthermore it illustrates a phenomenon of extension and socialization of conflict with multiple psycho-sociological implications which allow to understand why actors, not only do not manage to master the conflict, but furthermore how their reactions, *volens nolens*, whether they want it or not, contribute to the conflicting escalation and to its socialization.

Our above analysis of the perceptions differences leads to the conclusion that actors act by putting in coherence, on one hand their perceptive items, on the other hands their structured perceptions with their behaviors –at least, as how they perceive these behaviors. We also

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<sup>27</sup> - That we made in a more complete analysis of this case.

notice on this example that this “coherence settings” lead to conflictual self-fulfilling prophecies (and even sometimes contra-fulfilling).

We now progress in the analysis through a double process.

First, from the perceptions differences, we were able to notice that individuals build social identities. These identities result not only from outer contacts but also emerge in communication processes and in the conflict itself.

We develop this point by insisting in the first sub-section on actors’ relative *positionings* in the conflict from the analytic grid of Palo Alto school and in particular of Watzlawick and al. (1967-72) on the relative positionings in terms of *complementarity* and *symmetry*. But even if conflicts and interpersonal relationships develop their own dynamics, they are naturally never isolated from contexts. We present in the second sub-section how social identities, groups’ dynamics, and habitus are internalized by the protagonist.

### ***3-1- Relational chains: the case of the director and Mounir, or « the rejected complementarity »***

The previous analysis of perceptions differences supports an interpretation of the dynamics of the relationship between the director and Mounir in terms of a *relational symmetry* with professional base. This symmetry generates a competitive escalation between them, and leads the director to try a reframing towards a complementary relation, which is refused by Mounir. The professional symmetrical relational escalation is followed by a deep, “essential<sup>28</sup>” divergence on the relative positioning between these two people - an almost relational break which can only result in a conflict of relational nature.

At the beginning of the relation, during the very first years of the Community Center (early 2000s), it seems that there is effectively a dynamics of progressive change by symmetrical relation between the director and Mounir, accepted by both protagonists.

Indeed, in the very first years of functioning of the Community Center with relatively few employees (less than ten) the director adopted an informal style of relation which well suited to Mounir. The Community Center was similar as a kind of small company, almost of family type. The relations did appear firstly as relations between “equals” on a basis of competence (more than skill<sup>29</sup>), not to say of expertise, of occupational specific skills (“*métier*”). Thus the hierarchical relation did not clearly appear. The aspect “small company” was strong. In eyes of most of the community leaders (employees) and particularly of Mounir, there was effectively a *relational symmetry*, based on autonomy and on professional skill - certainly, they (including Mounir) recognized her (the director) a specific role of management, but they did perceive this role firstly as a professional role.

From the mid-2000’s, the director faces more and more difficulties in her symmetrical relationships with several employees, particularly Mounir. In terms of Watzlawick and al. (1967), the symmetric relationship typically turns to be more and more competitive, creating typical escalation in the relational conflict: runaway, quarrels, and fights (Ibidem).

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<sup>28</sup> - “Essential” as related to the very nature of the relation

<sup>29</sup> - Skill refers to the use in work situation of knowledge and know-how, in a technical vision, without encompassing the legitimacy of the person developing these skills. Competence integrates both the skills (practical, professional behavior) and the fact that the person is competent, i.e. recognized by colleagues (including managers) as having the authority (legitimacy) to use and develop these skills.

This runaway in a relational competition explains the development by Mounir of transgressive, uncontrolled behaviors in its professional activities, behaviors which we noticed above – behaviors which are similar to "scenes", as in "domestic scenes". We have noticed that the director perceived these behaviors as professional misconducts, more and more serious. The director then changes her relational behavior and adopts practices which constitutes an attempt to transform the relationship in a complementarity one (Watzlawick and al., 1967). A turning point of the evolution in the relation is "the coffeepot incident" (see above the chronology of the facts). The change in the relational posture of the director vis-a-vis Mounir is situated in the period of this incident. As a consequence, the relation becomes totally unstable and a spiral of confrontation engages around the never finished redefining of their relation, spiral in which the director straightens more and more her relational positioning to Mounir towards a complementarity dynamics: she assumes a clearly hierarchical role, she tries to reframe Mounir, and even goes as far as penalty (we saw that the director several times sanctions Mounir – an aggravating fact of this instability of the relation comes from the fact that the director's penalties do not effectively apply, as we did see above, as the director's action is hindered by authorities of the Community Center).

Mounir refuses this change, this passage from *symmetry* to *complementarity* (Watzlawick and al. (1967), refusal reinforced as the director cannot completely achieve complementarity, her actions being hindered. More than *refusing* the new behavior of the director, he *denies* her positioning itself and the possible new type of relationship. He refuses submission, and persists in, and deepens, behaviors which aim to be in professional symmetry to the director. He asserts his professional value, for example by asking for new responsibilities, that the director refuses - "surrealist" demand and "logical refusal" are clear symptoms of the relation instability and of its impossible redefining. This process explains that the director-Mounir relation cannot stabilize, and engenders sets of more and more conflicting and auto-maintained behaviors – self-reproducing and exhausting.

Between Mounir and the director, things turn to be the more and more conflicting as we noticed above - at the same time unstable and self-reproducing evolution in its very instability. It's a typical situation of "Always more of the same thing", a change of level 1 (Watzlawick, and al., 1975, p. 49). The only way to (try to) re-stabilize the relationship would be a new change of the system of relational rules, a change of type 2 ... What is not what happens in director-Mounir relationship, at this step.

The director gradually adopts a more and more clearly hierarchical role toward Mounir. She looks for a complementarity relation where she reaffirms her dominant role and expects from Mounir a professional "submission" behavior. Mounir refuses this change towards complementarity. In terms of interpersonal communication, he lives it as a rejection (denial) of his image of self. He self-esteems himself as a good professional and the first months of work with the director did comfort him this way. He lives the attitudinal change from the director as a denial of its image of good professional. The penalties the director attempts to apply on him strengthen the conflicting spiral. As far as in the eyes of Mounir the director is not (no more) legitimate, the penalties are only strengthening the symmetrical escalation (Wittezaele, 2003) - instead of thwarting the Mounir dysfunctional behaviors (dysfunctional in the eyes of the director), they strengthen them, in fact.

Claiming to be a good professional and refusing hierarchical submission, Mounir continues to develop behavior directly aiming to position himself as equal to the director as well from a competences (more than skills) perspective than in the perspective of authority (in the Weberian sense of legitimacy). This refusal of complementarity relationship which is manifested through multiple behaviors (we did notice some above), obviously generates in return an invalidation of image of self of the director by Mounir. We thus have the creation of

a more and more serious and "dysfunctional" conflicting relational knot. This relational instability is exhausting, in particular for the director, in terms of psychic energy and from an emotional point of view. The logical "solution" could have been the dislocation of the relationship, by departure from the structure of one of the protagonist -- in this particular case, in the years 2002-2012, the departure of Mounir. The director is prevented to make him resign, her demands of Mounir's dismissal are hindered by the Community Center authorities (then, secondly, by the work legal body). Finally, but only when the conflict will have become socialized in 2014, it is the director who will end the relation by its own departure from the Community Center.

### ***3-2- Symmetrical or complementary relations interact with other multiple phenomena: construction of social identities, psycho-sociological processes, habitus, contextual factors***

We clearly see above how relational chains between the director and Mounir explain the conflict development and the impossibility to find a "solution". We cannot here describe and develop our analysis of the relational chains between the other community leaders, respectively with the director and between all of them. We only indicate there their essence: they are also characterized by relational runaways which contribute to the spiral of conflict (Deutsch, Coleman, 2006). These runaways occur as well between Mounir and the other community leaders, than between these other community leaders and the director.

We nevertheless point out another case of dysfunctional relationship, between the director and Amin. He was a community leader in charge of the animation department, who will join the strike action of the "indignants", and of whom we indicated above that he will become later, briefly, the Center director after the burnout of the director. In the relational games, the relationship between Amin and the director is particularly important, almost as much as with Mounir. Amin also refuses the relational complementarity of the director, reaffirming his will of symmetrical relation, revisiting his habitus in this process (he actualized from his past his professional personal "culture" based on competence and autonomy at work, and his status of being in charge of a department). By a complex articulation (that we cannot describe in detail here) between assertion of his status (social identity of competent professional, will to progress in the social and professional scale), his feeling to be a victim of discrimination and to be in solidarity with the members of "his community" (intergroup behavior, in the meaning of Tajfel and Turner, 1979, see above), he contests the change in managerial modalities made by the director. In her attempt to establish complementarity positioning vis-à-vis employees, the director reaffirmed her managerial position and did stop several modalities of participative management like regular meetings which previously gather the community leaders in charge of a sector (kind of middle managers). These interruptions did increase the runaways in the relationships (Watzlawick, 1967-1972). Amin's refusal of the complementary relationship is part of this relational runaway.

Furthermore, these runaways present another characteristic: there is also a phenomenon of collective runaway, and not only interpersonal runaway, like the one between Mounir and the director. It occurs a relational runaway in the relational network globally considered as a relational system, beyond the simple dyads of interpersonal relations (Watzlawick and al., 1967-1972).

#### ***The emergence of a social identity***

In this analysis after our detailed analysis of communication between the main protagonists of the case, in terms of relative positionings in the interpersonal relations (and their crossed effects, in multi-personal relationships), we analyzed the processes of construction of the *social identities* of the actors, and also we studied the multiple psychosociological processes which allow to precise the relational phenomena and the collective constructions of identity. This behavioral and relational frame between protagonists leads us to use the notion of *habitus* in the meaning of Bourdieu and developed by Lahire to deepen our analysis - and to build a non-determinist analysis of actors' behavior while nevertheless using the *habitus* concept.

Thus we first led on this case, in a concrete way, an analysis of phenomena of construction of social identity. These phenomena lead in this case to the construction of homogeneous "restricted"<sup>30</sup> groups whose members strengthen their feeling of group belonging and their intergroup differentiation (Tajfel, Turner, 1979).

We notice the complexity of this social identity construction, but it is important. Especially, it constitutes the mental frame in which are situated the protagonists of the interpersonal relations analyzed above. There is a process of internalization of socioeconomic (and also cultural) environmental factors. These factors are thus not deterministic, but supply a frame of legitimacy and perceptive rationalization (Festinger, 1957) to the perceptive coherences.

The key point of the social identity of the employees of this Community Center is their self-representation as members of an oppressed and discriminated minority, the children of immigrants from North-Africa (Maghreb) to France. This is linked with their socio-political activist activities. But the analysis of this case shows that this social identity in term of self-representation as discriminated members of an ethnic minority is not the *cause* of their conflicting behaviors. Their social identity is a part of the relationships, more determined by their positioning "against" the director than determinant of these behaviors. There is actually a dialectical dynamic between their refusal of complementarity in the relationships with the director and their self-perception as members of a discriminated minority. This self-perception is also reinforcement (as well as a consequence) of the ways they perceive the events in their logic of perceptions (cognitive dissonance).

These factors combine with several psycho-sociological processes. All the range of phenomena which are developed in the psycho-sociological literature since decades is present in this case (see above). We were able to make an in-depth analysis showing the occurrence of many behaviors of social facilitation (Zajonc), of *desindividuation* and social polarization, group thinking (group illusion) and finally phenomena of active minorities. In particular the employees who have been sanctioned by the director and who consider the sanctions as illegitimate as they refuse the complementarity in relationships (Wittezaele, 2003) gather to form an active minority (Moscovici, 1976<sup>31</sup>). This gathering reinforced both their ways to perceive and interpret events and their social identity in terms of discriminated minority –we did indicate above that they will name themselves as the group of *the indignants* ("les indignés").

In this little group, many behaviors are similar, in particular their manners toward the population and children participating to the activities, their poor respects of regulations, their refusal to accept the requisitions of the authorities, and the related links with political

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<sup>30</sup> - By opposition to large, social groups (Shaw, 1981). In "restricted" groups, all members personally know each other. In a large, social group, people don't personally know each other, they just share a sociologic common characteristic (examples: workers, students, women)

<sup>31</sup> - We cannot present here at length these phenomena and their articulation to relational games and to social identity constructions in this case.

activities (they proclaim sometimes to be “social activists”). All of these behaviors are “normal” in their perceptions. These similar behaviors constitute them as a homogenous group in which the dominant behaviors are exacerbated –this group appears to be in a typical social facilitation process. They constitute an active minority as they progressively embark a large part of other employees in their visions and behaviors. In the moments of tensions in the socialized conflict, most of them lack self-control and enter in transgressive, aggressive and sometimes violent attitudes and behaviors. The runaways in interpersonal relationships are then exacerbated by these psycho-sociological processes, as well as they constitute a basis for these processes.

Nevertheless, it is important to also observe that these dialectics are neither automatic, neither generalized to all employees of this Community Center. First, in some moments of relationships, or with some of their colleagues, and sometimes even with members of the direction, the “indignants” manifest divergent perceptions or behaviors: They accept to collaborate with the direction at some moments; they admit to some colleagues that their positions are too extreme; they struggle between members inside the group of indignants; etc. Some alternate between very mimetic and very individualistic attitudes and behaviors, or mix them at the same moments. Then, to simplify them to their similar, dominant, apparently most frequent (and most noticed) behavior would be a simplistic stereotyping. This stereotyping will prevent to understand the precise ways by which they can take uncoherent positions in the socialized conflicts, and enter in complex relationships between each-others (mix of cooperation and strong oppositions) and with the director (see above, in our quick presentation of the case events). Second, almost half of the other employees will not adhere to the visions and positions of the indignants. These others employees are yet in the same kinds of personal and professional situations, are integrated in the same influences of social polarization or group thinking, present apparently the same habitus (see below), and nevertheless they diverge at some crucial moments. As an example, we did indicate above the grouping in two different Unions structures and the collective oppositions and struggles at the time the conflict turned to be socialized.

Of course, the similar perceptions and behaviors that the indignant employees often (but not always) manifest can be related to their personal histories. But to explain their behavior by a homology with their social origins would also be a stereotyping.

### ***Habitus are not sociological determinants but acting as embedded***

Indeed, an analysis using the concept of habitus, applied to the main protagonists of the case (the director, Mounir, Amin and some other employees<sup>32</sup>), leads us to conclude to three striking points.

First the habitus are not monolithic. The lived (real-life) experiences do not combine in a global coherence, a (*only one*, like a railway) life logic, whether it is in (and between) the childhood, adolescence or in the first adult life experiences, as well in “personal” (private life) and professional (primary, secondary, tertiary habitus). Individuals are *plural* (Lahire, 2004). Through the numerous stories<sup>33</sup> we have collected, Mounir and Amin cases, among others, depict how their familial and school experiences are full of contradictory forces. On one hand, they “belong” to an ethic and socio-professional culture of minority and integrate many dispositions from these cultures, notably a feeling of collective determination (and behaviors

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<sup>32</sup> - It would be too long to develop here our analysis of individual habitus of the director and of many employees, as it requires tens of pages for an in-depth presentation (and any summary will lead to stereotypical depiction, in contradiction with our conceptual assumptions). We are lead to present only our conclusions on this point.

<sup>33</sup> And not *narratives*, see above in our theoretical and methodological developments.



related to a collective discrimination). On the other hand, they also experienced socio-economic progression, and a very individualistic mindset leading them to very complex, ambiguous consideration toward their cultural influences. In particular, their behaviors, as well in personal life than in professional environment, demonstrate strong tensions between what could be depicted as their collectivist socio-professional and ethnic culture, and refusal of these determinations, by distinctive manners breaking many codes from their “homeworld”.

Second, it is very clear that these habitus are not determining, by themselves at least (the word determining, or determiner, being very ambiguous). People’s behavior also depends on current and local situations (and not general) in which they act. These situations are also not exempt from contradiction and thus, in the people’s “psychology”, of tensions, just like the habitus are themselves penetrated by tensions. We were able to describe for each of the protagonists how they were penetrated of “contradictory” forces and references to their individual pasts.

Third, and moreover, habitus themselves and the tensions which penetrate them are ceaselessly modified, remodeled, by the interpersonal relationships chains, the identity constructions as well as the psycho-sociological phenomena of perception and group phenomena into which individuals are inserted. The relational elements also have a feed-back effect on the recollection of the habitus by participants (*externalization of the intern*): it is from what they live *now* that each of our interlocutors reconstructed her/his identity - we can even say her/his (professional) personality - from her/his history. The situation lived *in the current moment* leads to an identity-related personal discourse, constituted of fragmented, disrupted stories (and not coherent narratives), which are directed by this current situation. In a way, the present leads to *rewrite the past*, to live it differently - our case gives us numerous examples. It allows to enlighten the notion of *habitus* of Bourdieu and to clearly shows that this concept is not a concept of a determinist sociology.

Habitus is not a *stock*, either objective or even subjective, of memories or influences. Certainly we can always find relations between experiences lived in infancy, or in the secondary and tertiary habitus, and perceptions and values in mind of people and even with elements of their behavior. But the very notion of *disposition* used by Bourdieu makes understand that if habitus produce some kinds, and we could say a certain number, of “fields of forces” (*champs de force*), other fields have effects. From the example of this community center we postulate that these *champs de force* happen firstly in the relational chains which people create in the *current* situations. Moreover, people have a relative conscientiousness to belong to groups, whether these groups are objectively defined, or, which is the most pertinent case, subjectively perceived.

#### **4- SOCIOCULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEXTS ARE NO MORE DETERMINANTS THAN HABITUS: : NOTHING IS DETERMINED (“JOUÉ D’AVANCE”), NEITHER FOR INDIVIDUALS, NEITHER FOR ORGANIZATION**

We concluded our analysis by taking into account the contexts influences, using the concept of field from Bourdieu.

In Bourdieu’s theoretical frame, there are general fields, mainly of two main types, economic field (economic capital) and cultural arena (cultural capital). But these are transverse general

fields and it is also possible to distinguish fields according to their more or less internal or external character to the present situation and in particular to the organizational structure.

We did not take them as *contexts* - that is for us of a simple presentation stance-, nor as phenomena *encircling and "determining"* people – that is a theoretical choice. We showed, as for the habitus phenomena, that we must consider them as they are *internalized* by the people in their perceptions, their values and their behaviors. Not to take into account this internalization would lead to stereotypical and determinist perceptions, and finally to a set of tautologies. To explain the behavior of the community leaders by the fact that they possess a weak economic capital and a weak cultural capital as compared to a French dominant culture would be a poor analytical contribution - stereotypes are always of weak explicative power of behaviors.

We briefly develop here our observations on local cultural context. The Community Center Meunier is inserted in a district of popular culture (and of “popular economy”, also). The Community Center is thus confronted with a *double level of culture*, embedded in each other’s. Indeed, it is possible to describe the Community Center as in tension between two cultures: a "dominant", "French" culture, with cultural "classics" benchmarks and a “district local” culture which, while being subordinated in the meaning of Bourdieu to the French dominant culture, is however dominant in term of local cultural envioning the Community Center. So the direction of the Community Center is necessarily in an awkward position. On one hand the direction (particularly the director) is culturally carrying the dominant culture, on the other hand it is surrounded with a local culture in which individuals live "under" the dominant ("French") culture –or, otherwise said, which is equivalent but at a difference of “awareness”, where individual perceive themselves in resistance to the dominant culture. Thus we could interpret the difficulties of the direction of the Community Center as resulting from the insertion of the center in a cultural arena, certainly dominated (in *bourdieusian* words), but dominating the Center itself.

So the intercultural tensions would be interiorized in the Center and the Community leaders (employees), in particular the "opponents" (indignants), would be the vectors of this popular and local cultural resistance. Some employees moreover develop this discourse and even use the word of "avant-garde"(coded word in political discourses). In a way we have already extensively described this process through our analysis of the various processes, relational but mainly of social identity and also through psycho-sociological processes, as well as by the way habitus of people can "explain" their behavior.

But we did explain in our previous analyses that these environmental factors, including cultural field factors, cannot be considered as determining factors. They are "explanatory" only if they are *internalized* by people. They act at best as *perceptive* (or *cognitive*) *benchmarks*, and at worst as mental tools to determine intergroup behaviors (in the meaning of Tajfel and Turner, see above). More than at worst, they are even sometimes simply instrumented in discourses which we noticed, which apparent simplistic stance must not contaminate the analysis itself and lead us to the same kind of oversimplification. Our previous analyses rightly lead us to situate these representations and moreover these discourses *within* interpersonal behaviors and groups relationships, and thus to take into account their effective impact (as they have impacts) without leading to the illusion that they are actually active forces *as themselves*.

The notion of field concerns not only general fields as the archetypes of economic field and the cultural field in the most popularized meaning of Bourdieu, not to speak of a “bourdieusian vulgate” - vulgate which moreover can be part of discursive stances of certain community managers, in particular those who did follow higher education programs: Mounir's

recursive discourses on discrimination, as well as numerous "analyses" developed by Amin are a good example of it.

We could also divide fields, in a simplistic way, in fields external to the organization (here the Community Center) on one hand, and fields internal to the organization on other hand. Such a vocabulary would be unfit: the external fields are effective (they do engender effects) only if they are internalized. Finally, whatever are the limits of the approach in terms of general field (economic and cultural), if we take the precaution to analyze them and especially to use them in terms of *internalization of extern*, they can allow to develop useful complements to analysis. The notion of "external fields" is thus relevant for an organizational analysis of the kind we develop here only as far as we can spot the processes by which the elements of these fields are endogenized in the relational frame, and more, spot the way by which acting people appropriate them, even in a not conscious way. It is possible to reinterpret all our above analyses using the concept of field in this way.

We applied to the case analysis several fields, from "inside organization" towards its "outer" environments: The field of economic activity; the structure-functional field (or organizational field itself, in the restricted sense); the specific field of power which is associated with the structure but which must be combined with the relational, social identity and psycho-sociological phenomena that we extensively analyzed above; the relational field (already deeply analyzed above); the managerial field (concern which emerges from the economic functioning as it is actually structured including for example in the case of the Community Center, by the lack of a human resources service, the nonexistence, at least the non-functioning, of institutional body(ies) of collective bargaining and thus of regulation of the collective conflicts, etc.); a professional field or rather occupational specific skills field (*champ de "métier"*), very specific, partially particular to the Community Center and partially particular to Community leader job; the gender field ; and finally the ethno-cultural field.

The professional field and the gender field each are both "extern" (related to the Center's environments and to the whole society) and "intern", specific to the organization<sup>34</sup>.

Applied analysis of each of these fields<sup>35</sup> leads us to several considerations.

First of all, concerning the fields of power, our analysis of the way habitus have effects within the interpersonal relational structures lead us to refuse the conceptual frame of Bourdieu the most subject to the criticism of determinism, that is the *structural homology*. As our previous developments show, we notice that it is not possible to characterize the relationships between the director (and the Center direction) and the community leaders in terms of dominant-dominated stereotype. Our analyses of internalization of the habitus, as well as the externalization of the current relational factors in the recollection of the habitus, lead us to this conceptual refusal. Particularly, the dynamics cannot be interpreted as a win-loss game. The director of the Community Center has an official managerial position but it is evident that in the relational dynamics she doesn't simply perform a unilateral power on the employees. The relationships, in terms of power, appear as a kind of constant negotiation that is understandable only by analyzing the interpersonal relationships pattern. Some employees can consider themselves as dominated, discriminated and struggling "for their rights", but they actually demonstrated a kind of power in the organizational networks of relationships, individually as well as collectively (notably by the group's dynamics). More, if we want to

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<sup>34</sup> - One again: the terms intern-extern are tricky, as even the most external fields are acting only as they are, and how they are, internalized in peoples representations and behaviors, particularly the interpersonal relationships behaviors.

<sup>35</sup> Not developed here apart some examples.

say who are the winners in the conflict, these employees clearly did win against the direction –even if finally they also loose in the socialized conflict, the Center finally being closed.

But the relevance of Bourdieu concerning the fields of power is not limited to the structural homology by which the positions of dominant and of dominated would appear at any levels of organization. This author allows us to understand why the concrete, local processes of power relations must be also taken into account. In refusing the complementary relationship that the director “proposes” them and denying the director’s positioning, several employees, particularly the indignants, exert a relational power. Certainly the structure of the power field in this Community allows them to escape some possible coercion: at some moments the director wanted to dismiss Mounir and she failed due to the fact that the board wasn’t unanimous to accept the dismissal and because of the legal constraints for such dismissing. More, the sanctions taken by the director actually decreased her power, as they were at the origin of the coalescence of employees in a collective movement of group thinking (see above). The field of organizational power is much more complex than a vision in term of domination would imply. In the temporal development of the conflict, the precise elements of this power field *are used by* the actors. The use of the concrete characteristics of the situations, in this case the power structure, is a part of the relationships developments –a certainly substantial part. But the organizational power structure is not an explanation of the conflict and doesn’t determine the protagonists’ behaviors. No more no less than their habitus or than their social identity and other psycho-sociological elements.

As a conceptual consequence, the fields’ items can be used to *describe, not explain*, one person’s behaviors. In the previous sections, we find many such items integrated in the concrete, specific framework of the protagonists’ relationships. Clearly, if they have to be taken into account, they don’t provide decisive clues to characterize what’s going on. Fundamentally, it is their character of *disembodied explanatory* which limits applicability of these fields’ item if they are not used in "incorporated" manners, situated in the concrete, particular (as opposed to stereotypical) relational situation that people experience - it is the relationships, by the *relative* each other’s positioning, the ones relatively to the others, that create meaning in people’s behaviors – which don’t present sense "in themselves".

Our case shows the same embeddedness for the ethnic, not to say national, culture. Of course, we observe that people have themselves perceptions of these contextual characteristics which preclude sometimes paradoxical discourses. As says Amin, people (among whom the community leaders of the Center) of non-French family origin would all have now a French culture. Obviously, the people’s behavior clearly show that they present differences in their dispositions, would be only by groups’ behaviors (see above) and their attachments to social emancipation (not to say ethno-social, and even political) actions which reveal that they actually have attitudes and behavior which distinguish them, voluntarily or in a forced way, from "national ones" - the discourses of the kind of the one developed by Amin ("we are French") not only reveal a fundamental ambiguity that we have already noticed, but also a *negativity* in the philosophic sense: assert a principle petition against the perceived reality, that by the way justifies his position of social activist, including in his professional activity, as we did mention it.

But if we would explain Mounir’s behavior by the fact "that he would be Algerian" we would fall in a stereotype, and finally a tautology: such behavior shows that it is of Arabic culture, and this behavior is understandable ... by the fact he is of Arabic cultural origin. We did notice above how the relational chains are the fundamental structure to understand the situation dynamics and especially its conflicting character. To say that Amin, as Algerian, presents such or such characteristic (collectivist, acceptance of uncertainty, etc., in terms of Hofstede) just helps to *characterize some* of his behavior, but doesn’t "explain" anything and doesn’t

give meaning to his attitude. In addition, we did emphasize that the dispositions inherited from habitus are not monolithic. People's personal history presents contradictions in experiences and forces, resulting in tensions in their dispositions. To use social and cultural characterization to explain the behaviors leads to evacuate the precise, specific dynamics of interpersonal behaviors. Even the cultural dimensions<sup>36</sup> are stereotypes: for example, concretely, nobody is purely, and always, individualist or collectivist (McSweeney, 2013). It's only in observing precise, concrete behaviors, and not by questionnaires' averages or looking for what is common in many people's behavior, that we can note the constant mixing cultural dimensions.

Some culturalists could argue that nobody carry a "pure" national culture. Amin says himself that the community leaders in the Center have now all a French culture, and at other moment of his stories, insists on their cultural differences and specificities. We could then speak of syncretism, but with the same epistemological problem as we underline in lines above: reconstructing actual, situated behaviors of protagonists from stereotypical sets, either dimensions either dispositions if they are considered as coherent, monolithic forces, - and all this would mislead us. The *doxa* in the meaning of Bourdieu indicates that most of the dispositions are not consciously perceived as result of personal and social history. Then, informality is not the privilege of certain cultures. As we explained in our considerations of Bourdieu's concept, the dispositions are generally not a conscious result of habitus. They constitute a set of obvious ideas and norms, the *doxa*. But this concept doesn't imply the global coherence of people's dispositions. The director of the Community Center is, in the cultural French stereotype, of low context (Hall, 1979) and high on the scale of "uncertainty control" (Hofstede, 2001) –but many of her behavior shows implicit assumptions, risk taking and indirect communication.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRES “LOCATED”, SITUATED ANALYSES**

This case study of a Community Center in France shows how a socialized conflict is the result of a long historical process. The study fully validates our conceptual frame based on a complex interplay between dynamics of interpersonal communication and personal histories of the protagonists. Indeed, in the case of this organization, long time before the burst of the conflict at the organizational level, many interpersonal relationships dynamics generate escalation of interpersonal conflicts. We did observe that the symmetrical relationships (Watzlawick et al., 1967) between the director of the Community Center Meunier and several employees, in the first years of the Center, progressively lead to more and more intense runaways (racings of interlinked and more and more conflictual behaviors). On the examples of relationships between the director and two employees, Mounir and Amin<sup>37</sup>, we described how the refusal by these employees of the director's change in the kind of positioning in the relationships (inappropriate second-order change, Watzlawick et al., 1974) have exacerbated the interpersonal conflicts.

The perceptions of the situation by the protagonists were structured by cognitive dissonance, gradually creating globalizing, coherent perceptions of each-others and self-fulfilling

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<sup>36</sup> The five dimensions of Hofstede (2001), or the seven of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997, 2008), for example.

<sup>37</sup> - In the full depiction and analysis of this case, many other protagonists' relationships are analyzed and lead to the same conclusion.

prophecies –of oppositions, struggles and denials. We examine how the runaways themselves lead the protagonists to re-interpret and re-actualize their personal history. We use the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1980), but we did observe that the dispositions of the protagonists were neither coherent nor univocal. The habitus themselves did appear full of tensions. But the positioning of these persons in the relationships, their cognitive dissonance in self-perception and logic in the punctuation of sequences of events (Watzlawick et al., 1967) resulted in the construction of univocal social identities, embedded in the relationships themselves, and in intergroup behaviors (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986). These behaviors progressively presented many characteristics of group's behavior. The employees in denial of the relationship with the director coalesce by steps to enter in group thinking and a social facilitation process. This was characterized by their regrouping in a self-named group, 'the indignants', which socializes the conflict and deeply divides the employees of the Center. The socialization of the conflict did also encompass the characteristics of the organizational and power field as well as ethno-cultural aspects<sup>38</sup>. We did show that many such aspects, *specific* to the persons and to the situation, had some importance in the conflictual dynamics, but that they didn't act in a monolithic, neither determinant way. Actually we describe how these social elements were embedded *inside* the persons, and also how in the situation, as in a feedback loops, these elements were reinterpreted and re-embodied.

What does this case learn us about the determinants of conflicting behavior? What is the cause of the conflict?

Actually this question is tricky and misleading. The conflict is a whole process that cannot be broken down in factors to be reassembled for the analysis. Even if we began our study by the close examination of the protagonists' positioning in the relationships, and even by considering the positioning as dynamic, evolving forces in the histories of relationships, and not by characterizing, in a static of globalizing way, each interpersonal dyad, we don't assume that this explain the origins of the conflict. The question is not there. It does not either consist in estimating some factors as primary (or the main ones) and others as secondary - whether they are habitus, various kinds of fields or cultures. The central axis of the approach is to understand how individuals *internalize* these phenomena which only appear in calculations of "cross-sectional average statistics", *without being determined by them*, whatever they are more or less aware of them or not. We aim at understanding, more than finally at explaining, people's behaviors as these people are situated in given relations. They are individuals inserted into specific interpersonal relations and groups phenomena.

We insist here on the central point of our approach. Either sociological (including cultural) factors, either habitus, and even psycho-sociological phenomena, are not determinants of behaviors. The latter depend also of current, local (and not general) situations where they act. The situations are not exempt of contradictions, and then, of tensions in the people's "psychology", like habitus are penetrated by tensions of divergent "forces".

Individuals do sometimes not lack a certain degree consciousness of these phenomena. It is not to say that they can "completely" master them or that they are "completely" aware of them, far from it. But we cannot consider people as totally determined neither by their former life trajectories, nor by elements of present situations. In other words, individuals *can take decisions on their behavior* but *not to decide their (global) behavior*. We do not totally decide

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<sup>38</sup> - In our above presentation of the case analysis, we didn't mention or develop some of the fields embedded in the conflict, particularly the professional (occupational) and gender fields. Also, comparison with cases we conducted in other countries would have supported more efficiently our dismissal of the national cultural stereotypes.

our reactions, there is far from the conscious decision to the total effectiveness of this decision.

But we do not either lack a capacity to influence our acts. It is a complex intricacy between deliberate, conscious strategy, influences of our past (*habitus*), and effects of relational chains and of psycho-sociological phenomena. Moreover, a strategy of action to modify our behavior often consists in positioning ourselves in relations and groups participations which lead us to change behavior (then, for example, the successes of group therapies). It can be a more-or-less deliberate, conscious strategy –to frequent people having some specific behaviors is a way for us to change our habits (a simple example of how to quit smoking or, to take a typical example related to the works of Bateson, to struggle against alcoholism, by participating to speech groups). In the case of this Community Center Meunier, it is clear that some actors consciously deepen their relationships with some other protagonists for a clear purpose (the reinforcement of their social identity, or the socialization of the conflict). But this Community Center case also shows that employees, as well as the director, don't completely direct their relationships in a deliberated, focused way. Unconscious influences in relationships are also present. More, this case exemplifies that confrontation to others in symmetrical ways, or in refusing complementarity, can create reinforcements of divergent behaviors (and perceptions) –with, in the same time, a certain consciousness of the researched opposition and an unconscious “diverging influence”. The interpersonal relationship dynamics between the director and Mounir is a striking example of this entangling.

This is deeply coherent with the modelling proposed by Laflamme (2012, pp. 141-142 particularly, see also 1995 and 2010) in development of Girard (2007, 2009). This modelling is based on three dyads in interrelations: the dyad rationality <-> non-rationality, the dyad interest <-> non-interest and finally the dyad consciousness <-> non-consciousness (dyad which integrates the dyads intention <-> non-intention and strategy <-> non-strategy). Laflamme assumes that people's perceptions and behaviors cannot be characterized on extremities of the dyads: they are always both, or at some moments more or less, rational and non-rational, lead or not by research of interest, self-conscious or unconscious. Actually, the behaviors of protagonists of the conflict in the Center Meunier clearly show these sets of tensions. They act with, at the same time, research of their interest but also with paradoxical decisions for this matter. Consider, for an example, how Mounir looks for his interest at work by refuting a complementary relationship, and at the same time, refuses offers from the director, and then losses a good opportunity of job enhancement; in a simple research of interest, he should have taken this opportunity, which after all was a professional victory. The director, Mounir, Samir, and the other ones, sometimes seem to be very rational, calculator of the consequences of their acts, even in some cases trying to manipulate others, and sometimes seem to be conducted by their emotions and totally lack of rational purpose. We cannot deny they have intentions, and at other moments, and even sometimes *at the same time*, seem to act without clear vision of any goals, without any self-consciousness of what they do –like purely mechanically determined.

Our analyses of these elements in the case of certain protagonists of this Community Center provide a striking overview. We can thus conclude first that it is impossible to evacuate the fact that individuals possibly act in a strategic way, thus, in a sense, they actually are actors. But they are also subjects, in a double way - that is, at the same time *subject of* and *subject for*.

At first they appear *objects* (subjection in a way) of forces they do not control, even though they have a certain consciousness of them (but it also happens that they are not conscious at all); Second they really are *subjects* (agents at first, but this agency (*actance*) sometimes lead to awareness, we illustrated this on examples), aware of these forces that they try, *or do not*

*try*, to manage and to use. Moreover, at the most fundamental level, any thought as any act is always stuck in tension, in the fact that an act is always significant by difference to other possible acts which would have been chosen. Our analysis is then in total coherence with the dialogical principal (Morin, 1990), the hologrammie (Ibid., and Minor-Corriveau, 2013) as well as Derrida's concept of *différance*.

The concept of *différance* of Derrida (1968, 1972) that he developed for concepts, can be extended to thoughts and acts. This *différance* is moreover a profoundly convergent notion with the idea that any perception at the same time results from balancing with difference (to perceive is to compare and distinguish) and is situated in a dynamics (change), such as extensively developed by Watzlawick and al. (1967-1972, particularly pp. 17-22).

Perception is always affair of placing in difference, by/and of/ movement. In several cases we saw that people of the Community Center let them carried on by what they think of being their determiners or elements of relations. Some are even not far from consider themselves in terms of fate or destiny- just like the Scorpio of the fable, pricking the frog in the middle of the stream to drown itself with her, "it is my nature" he says. But most protagonists of the Center re-present themselves as (human) beings who, whatever their history, assume it in full consciousness and try to define their own life trajectory and their own identity.

Of course it is always possible to deny people this conscious capacity in pretending they are determined in their consciousness itself. But however, their *use*, in particular in the phenomena of *personal* social identity, of socioeconomic and cultural environmental factors is striking. These factors are sorts of mental tools which allow them to elaborate bases for their decisions, that is to make their behavior legitimated, and moreover *rationaly explicable, logical*. The contextual factors are thus not insignificant.

Even if we can consider, by taking the exactly opposed position against determinism, that these contextual factors exist at first (even *only* in some epistemologies) in the subjective perceptions of individuals, they nevertheless have a powerful strength - and it is not possible to deny legitimacy to wordings of individuals on their social determiners.

But as shows our analysis of the Community Center Meunier case, in no way can we consider people, social factors and habitus in descriptive and static terms. It is about fields of forces which individuals "suffer of" (which they say that they suffer of) but also use (which they say - and show how- they use them), in more or less conscious and strategic ways. The question of consciousness in conflict (Jehn, 1997, Jehn and Mannix, 2001, Deutsch, Coleman, 2006) is then much more complex than the conscious perception of the conflict itself as postulate most of the technical authors on conflicts (Weeks, 1992).

The vocabulary proposed by the fields sociologists and the culturalists can help to describe, to characterize, not to give meaning and even less to explain the why of such or such behavior. To say it differently, our case analysis illustrates that the cultural factors, as we explained it for the habitus, are not predictive of behaviors.

If the sociological and cultural factors are not predictive of individual behaviors, on the other hand the analysis of a real situation of interpersonal communication, by taking into account personal dynamics (*habitus*) and other psycho-sociological processes, does not intent to be predictive, but allows to give all its meaning to what takes place in the relationships that people construct, and will give much more tools to improve the relational quality and the organizational functioning that any general considerations from cultural characteristics. To lead an analysis of people's acts of an organization based on these sociological globalizing categories would lead to a stereotypical picture.



Finally, what can we deduce from this analysis for this precise case? Can we suggest how things and events could have been differently managed?

The implication of psycho-sociology, as well as psychology itself, is that the identification of a problem does not necessarily allow to bring solutions - and more, not simply and easily to apply solutions. After all, the famous Freud's case of "the man with wolves" was never cured. However we can propose some elements for a better management of the conflicts. Naturally our deductions and recommendations especially concern the director<sup>39</sup>. What could have been the director's behavior to avoid the burst of the conflict?

In the Community Center *Meunier* the director faces a complex situation and we can understand that her modalities of reaction finally lead to a socialized conflict, so explosive that she eventually leaved, and that the Center did close. How would she have been able to differently manage? We could naturally make "policy fiction" by thinking that if she had been able to laid-off Mounir at the first serious incident everything may have been different. But this is unrealistic as the reactions of the Council and of the Board and of course the legal requirements are parts of the situation.

Nevertheless, at the time of the crystallization of the conflict at the very beginning of the spring 2014 we can consider that the director made a kind of error of management by persisting in her relational mode with employees. She should have been able to put in question her attempt to build complementary relationships with these employees, by proposing a new second-order change. She should have been able to immediately set up structures of dialogue and participative management to get out of the conflicting runaways in the relations. For example, she should have restated the frequent coordination meetings with the community leaders in charge of sectors.

We can point out some other mistakes. The point is that these mistakes are mistakes not in themselves, or in purely managerial sense, but as they are all related to relationships with employees and even with Council and Board.

First, whatever the managerial legitimacy of her warnings on deficient behaviors of certain employees, these warnings were really out-of-place at this moment. Certainly, from her point of view, these penalties were normal and must be made. But for the concerned employees and their companions, they were not at all acceptable neither legitimate, because they were refusing the relational complementarity. It would have been very preferable that she had direct personalized conversations, without any official character of penalty. To enter a dynamics of penalty proved completely counterproductive. To react by penalties in a situation of conflict is only strengthening the conflicting runaway (Wittezaele, 2003).

Whatever the legitimacy and the motives of these penalties, to avoid using the symbol of official warnings to employees would maybe have allowed defusing the situation, at least to decrease the rising tensions and particularly their socialization. But these would have required for the director to be able to establish an efficient modality of dialogue with the employees - it is easy to afterward point errors, but was it possible in the heat of action?

The director also committed the error not to see the homogeneity of the group of the future indignant. This explains her self-questioning of participative management, by her (unconscious) fear of the homogeneity of the group of employees. Her error also comes from her isolation. She concentrated on individual cases without seeing that these interpersonal conflicts became a social conflict by the constitution of an active minority which was driving a whole part of the Center. Furthermore, she left the conflicts going on during a very long

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<sup>39</sup> - Of course, we may present analysis of alternative behaviors of Mounir, Amin or other protagonists. We limit ourselves here on the case of the director as an example.

time (several years) with several employees, in particular with Mounir. If we leave conflicts active a too long time without any real changes, it becomes uncontrollable by creating conflicting spirals which become almost impossible to manage –it’s a process of more and more intensification of conflict (Deutsch, 1973, 1985, Deutsch and al., 2006).

It would have been useful that she makes a new second-order (level 2) change by a managerial revolution, to increase the employees’ involvement and to find at the same time a way to break the behavioral homogeneity at work. For example, she could have implemented vocational trainings. Certainly, training is always risk-taking. Individualized trainings create danger of separatism (Sainsaulieu, 1977), the employees entering into individualistic dynamics - and it can thus aggravate bad relationships between employees. On the other hand, collective trainings could have led to a strengthening of the homogeneity between employees, thus to aggravate their collective opposition. The most important were to change the working modalities, thus to accept to take risks. But the final conflict shows that if we refuse the risk, it can lead to a catastrophe –the death of the Center itself.

We must end with a self-critic of our approach –the classical limitations of the study.

First, such a work is clearly interpretivist. We don’t postulate to *discover* anything. We don’t pretend to reach any “reality out there”. Our conceptual canvas is clearly a lens which we consider will enlighten possible hidden dimensions in conflict dynamics. As such, and as show our suggestions of what the director could have done to avoid the socialization of the conflict, we don’t pretend to give any “managerial implications”. This kind of approach would be useful only if the protagonists were member of the research in progress itself. Our main limitation is then that we did reconstruct the case from many talks with many members of this organization, but we were not part of the situation.

This points out also the second limitation of this work. We used talks of people, and then stories, but we didn’t use any concepts of storytelling. Or, more appropriately said, we are not in the realm of storying. After all, almost all our “data” are recollection of events and of feelings, as well as ex-post feelings and interpretation, as told by several protagonists of the case. We are aware of this possible limitation, and we tried to avoid to fall in the “narrative stance” (Boje, 2008). We above explain in our methodology that we carefully set up our talks with “interviewed” persons in order to free their speeches (then the fact that we had at least two “interviews” separated in time with each person) and not to lead their wordings to construct closed, coherent stories –on the model of BME narratives. Nevertheless, we used mainly these wordings, and cannot say that we completely escape the cognitive dissonance in the recollection of remembering by our interlocutors (even if we had the talks very soon after the events). It’s a particular limitation as our conceptual canvas integrates the perception processes in the on-going case history. We give a great importance to the fact that people tend to recollect events memory in logical, structured ways. More, we induced, at least triggered, this recollection, which was not “natural”. We didn’t make direct observation neither any involvement in the situation itself (Boje, 1991). We then cannot say that we did collect living, on-going storying processes. This case study is based on recollection, and then submitted to the reflective effect: “How can I know what I think until I see what I say” (Weick, 1979, 1995).

A third limitation, in a sense, is that we did focus on individual, not collective, stories. But it’s a choice, coherent with our epistemological position and theoretical choices. We place at the center of our theoretical frame the interpersonal relationships. It is then consistent to base our material on individual speeches. It was anyway impossible to gather some protagonists after the events to make collective exchanges.

Nevertheless, this leads to our fourth limit. Using recollections by the protagonists, it has been impossible to reconstruct the prospective dimension of their stories and storying (Boje, 2001). In other terms, we completely missed the antenarratives at work and then most of the dialogisms at work in this case (Boje, 2008). This will be the purpose of our future cases studies.

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