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Toward Critical Reflexivity

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Conceptions of Conflict in Organizational Conflict Research: Toward Critical Reflexivity

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Introduction

Many researchers have suggested that conflict is a stubborn fact of organizational life (e.g. Jaffe, 2008; Roche, Teague & Colvin, 2014; Kolb & Putnam, 1992) with important implications at both organizational and individual levels (e.g. Amason, 1996; De Dreu, van Dierendonck & Dijkstra, 2004). Yet, despite its recognized importance and pervasiveness, we find that little has been done to examine the meanings and assumptions that underlie the theorization of conflict. This void in the literature makes us wonder what counts as a conflict. What does conflict look like? How should it be identified in the workplace? And how we can capture the dynamics of conflict in our theorization? Although conflict is well established in both ordinary and academic language, it has different meanings and may be used differently depending on subjective experiences.

In this paper we therefore examine how conflict is defined and used in the work of organization and management scholars and we question the hallmark of contemporary organizational conflict research – namely, that conflict and conflict management are matters of types and styles, respectively – to argue in favor of future theory developments engaging more with the complex and dynamic nature of conflict.

A number of scholarly analyses of the organizational conflict literature have been published over the years to frame and provide an overview of the field of organizational conflict: Putnam and Poole (1987) offered a three-level demarcation of analysis: interpersonal, intergroup and inter-organizational. Lewicki, Weiss and Lewin (1992) identified and categorized approaches to conflict in terms of micro-level models of conflict as well as negotiation and third-party processes.

Wall and Callister (1995) reviewed literature about the causes and effects of conflict and about disputants and third parties' roles in conflict management. Van de Vliert (1998) reviewed literature focusing on the escalation and de-escalation of conflict. And De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) synthesized literature on the sources and effects of conflict across different levels of analysis: individual, group, organization, and national culture.

Despite these thorough accounts of the state of the art within the field of organizational conflict and the field's longevity as a research topic, we rarely encounter discussions about the meaning of conflict and its epistemology. The many different definitions of conflict have propelled scholars in management and organization science (e.g. Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Fink, 1968; O'Connell, 1971; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972; Spector and Bruk-Lee, 2008; Tjosvold, 2008a) to call for consensus on a widely agreed upon definition of conflict. They see the failure to do so as a major obstacle to progress within the field because research results cannot be generalized from one study to another. Rather than calling for consensus through deliberative democracy where there is evidently little sign of it being achievable, we suggest that conflict may be one of those 'essentially contested concepts' that Gallie (1956) noted, along with power (Lukes 2005). To say a concept is essentially contested is to propose, with Garver (1978) that neither dogmatism, nor skepticism, nor eclecticism, is an appropriate response to the contest concerning the nature of conflict. Conflict, as a term, displays an essentially contested nature.

When we approach the study of conflict from a genealogical perspective, we see that the many different definitions of conflict arise from diverse epistemological, methodological and theoretical positions and are an inevitable consequence of diverse social science practices. These different positions involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users and cannot be settled by "appeals to empirical evidence, linguistic usage, or the canons of logic alone" (Gray 1977, p.344). Essentially, contested concepts are evaluative, creating inherently indexical and

complex concepts depicted in mutually incommensurable terms by positions that index different assumptions and traditions of theorizing. Because of this, there is no one best instance of an essentially contested concept although, in terms of their interpretative breadth and depth, some will be better, more useful, than others (Swanton 1985).

Thus, as we see it, the larger problem is not the many different definitions of the term conflict but instead the lack of reflexivity in the ways scholars conceptualize the term. This lack of reflexivity generates the tacit assumption that we all know – and all agree on – what conflict is. In other words, it is the failure to be specific about which epistemological and ontological meaning of 'conflict' is being indexed, which creates conceptual ambiguity and obscures conceptual advancements in conflict research, rather than the absence of agreement on a common definition of conflict. Current debates about conflict in the organizational conflict literature replay the divisions of 1950s functionalist sociology (Coser 1956), asking whether conflict is a negative phenomenon that is destructive and disruptive or a constructive process with positive consequences (for such a debate, see De Dreu, 2008; Tjosvold, 2008b; and recent meta-analytic reviews by DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus, & Doty, 2013; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; O'Neill, Allen, & Hastings, 2013). Unfortunately, scholars contributing to these debates have not reflected openly on the ontological foundation of their view of conflict, essentially providing a weak foundation for making determinations between constructive and destructive conflict.

Given this lack of openness about how to conceptualize conflict, an opportunity arises to clarify and raise awareness of the different theoretical assumptions embedded within different conceptions of conflict with the aim of setting a new critical agenda for reflexivity in conflict research. We address the questions: how has organizational conflict been constructed genealogically, and with what consequences? And, how can R(econstructive)-reflexivity extend our understanding of conflict as a complex and dynamic phenomenon?

To address these questions, we first apply a genealogical approach to study conceptions of conflict in the modern history of conflict research. We are greatly inspired by Foucault (2003), who deploys genealogy to question dominant values of current conceptions in the history of knowledge. 'Conflict', however it is theoretically indexed in the literature, can be analyzed using a genealogical approach to record *movements* (Burrell, 1996). For Burrell, movements record changing attention and meanings within a theoretical domain. Inquiry into movements and shifts in the genealogy of conflict research reveals distinct changes in conceptualization. Genealogy thus allows us to uncover the taken-for-granted assumptions about conflict, struggling for dominance in theorizing.

Second, we show how conflict research can benefit from a more reflexive approach to studying organizational conflict in line with R(econstructive)-reflexive practices (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008). We argue that R-reflexivity develops and adds to current research by bringing in alternative perspectives, paradigms, vocabularies, and theories to open up new avenues and lines of interpretation that produce 'better' research empirically, theoretically, politically and ethically. Rarely do we see this form of reflexivity in conflict research as, in line with its essentially contested character, it tends to remain within the divisions of existing theoretical frameworks. Employment of reflexivity opens new ways of thinking about a phenomenon by using the tensions among different perspectives (Clegg & Hardy, 1996).

A brief note on our own view of conflict: we see conflict as presenting different faces in organizational conflict research, where it is conceptualized as either detrimental or beneficial to organizations. We, however, view conflict as neutral but suggest that the focus should be on how we understand the complexities and dynamics involved in conflict. Our main argument in this article is therefore that a more reflexive understanding and study of organizational conflict will advance our insights into the complexity of conflict. To build this argument, we organize the essay as follows: in the first half of the paper, we investigate three major shifts that have occurred over

the past six decades of organizational conflict research. These shifts have established diverse traditions of theorizing, creating specific grounds for contestation. We describe each shift in detail, affording analysis of three distinct and competing theoretical positions on the meaning of conflict framing studies of conflict at work. In the second half of the essay, we use an ethnographic study of conflict in a nonprofit organization to show how the theorizing of conflict can benefit from R(econstructive)-reflexive practices of combining different theoretical perspectives and paradigms, thereby acknowledging the complex nature of conflict. We end the essay by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our analysis.

Conflict as an Essentially Contested Concept: Functional Essence

We identify that a major shift from a dysfunctional view of interpersonal conflict to a functional view occurred over several decades from the 1950s to late 1970s. During this period, conflict slowly came to be seen as a constructive force that was potentially beneficial for organizations in terms of performance, innovation and decision-making, as long as the right kind of conflict occurred and was handled correctly. Although our main focus in this essay is on modern conflict research from the 1950s to the present day, we first briefly examine the logical notions of conflict present in the classical historical literature on conflict.

Conflict in Classical Social Theory

The historical literature on conflict has mainly dealt with controlling, avoiding, and eliminating social conflict (Rahim, 2000). Classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle assigned conflict a pathological status: viewing it as a threat to order and the success of the state, whose responsibility was keep conflict to a minimum. Seventeenth-century social contract theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke similarly argued that the central role of governments was to control conflict and establish order in social relations. By the nineteenth century, however, major philosophical

contributions from the dialectical perspective inspired by George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1975) and continued by Karl Marx (1976) identified conflict as the necessary engine of social change.

Organizational Conflict as Dysfunctional

In the early modern works on organizational conflict, conflict was largely regarded as a dysfunctional phenomenon that represented deviance from organizational harmony and equilibrium. Conflict represented situations of ambiguity, "basically different from 'co-operation'" (Mack & Snyder, 1957, p. 212) and it was often depicted as part of a conflict-cooperation dichotomy, where one is defined in terms of the absence of the other. This view was aligned with then assumptions of organizations as rational, linear and predictable systems, in which stability is achieved through planning and control (Perrow, 1967). Conceptually, conflict was associated with self-interested actions that deliberately undermined collectively defined goals (Boulding, 1957; Fink, 1968), limiting the concept of conflict to overt behavioral processes.

Conflict as a distinct behavioral phenomenon. We see assumptions that conflict involved an "overt behavioral outcome (…), that is, (…) actual interference or blocking" (Schmidt & Kochan, 1972, p. 363). Perception of goal or value incompatibility was a necessary precondition for conflict. Katz and Kahn (1978) saw conflict as "the collision of actors" (p. 613) and Schmidt and Kochan (1972) termed their view a "behavioral conceptualization of the process of conflict" (p. 359). The roots in classical behaviorism and its dependence on Newtonian accounts of mechanics could not be clearer. Regarded as a breakdown in relationships between individuals, conflict was largely regarded as a matter of observable behavior, giving rise to experimental studies as the preferred methodology to directly study behavioral components in conflict (Druckman, 2005). Critics (e.g. Barley, 1991) however, made the case that experimental settings were contrived, posing problems for generalizing results to real-world situations. Conflict researchers therefore moved their methodological gaze onto settings in which research participants actually worked.

Organizational Conflict as Functional

Moving beyond the one-dimensional view of conflict as the disruptor of order, researchers began focusing on its positive dynamics and consequences. We note that this trend started with Coser (1956), who contended that conflict is not always socially destructive but rather an essential mechanism in the positive evolution of society. Others endorsed and contributed to this changing view of conflict in organizations: in 1967, Pondy, for example, saw conflict as disturbing the 'equilibrium' in organizations but by 1992, he had radically revised his ideas and now he saw conflict as "not only functional for the organization, it is essential to its very existence" (1992, p. 260). We observe that the change in Pondy's conception of conflict epitomized an emerging shift within the field of conflict research from viewing conflict as dysfunctional to viewing it as potentially functional if the right kind of conflict occurred. This research led to the conflict type framework, identifying the categories of task and relationship conflict, and later also process conflict and status conflict.

Task conflict concerns disagreement about the content of the work that is being performed; relationship conflict exists when there are interpersonal incompatibilities arising from differences in personality or opposing values (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005). Process conflict is closely related to task conflict: whereas task conflict has to do with the actual task, process conflict concerns how the task is done (Jehn, 1997). While the concepts of task and relationship conflict are widely used in conflict research, the application of process conflict is still limited. More recently, the concept of status conflict (Bendersky & Hays, 2012) has emerged and it concerns disputes over members' status positions in social hierarchy. Despite disagreements, task conflict is commonly considered constructive and relationship conflict dysfunctional. Relationship conflict is seen to interfere with performance by lowering effectiveness, creativity, and the quality of decision-making (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit, Jehn, & Scheepers, 2013). By contrast, task conflict is by many (e.g.

Amason, 1996; De Dreu, Harinck, and Van Vianen, 1999; Jehn, 1995; O'Neill et al., 2013) seen as healthy and necessary because it stimulates discussions and prevents premature consensus, leading to enhanced decision-making quality, work-team effectiveness and performance. Since the 1980s, we observe that a major strand in organizational conflict research has concentrated on refining the conflict-type framework to distinguish between negative and productive conflict, by mapping out how "these two types of conflict differentially affect work group outcomes" (Jehn, 1997, p. 531).

Conflict as an instrumental means. We identify assumptions of conflict as an instrumental means to achieve authoritatively sanctioned ends in many of the works on functional conflict cited above. These assumptions can be summed up by Tjosvold's (2006) statement that "it is through conflict that teams can be productive and enhancing and leaders effective" (p. 92). Depending on the situation and the kind of outcome desired by management, we observe a widespread interest within the literature on how attain the 'right' kind of conflict for the achievement of goals. By having a primary focus on what makes one type of organizational conflict better than another, interests have developed into discovering how to manipulate the system to reduce those conflicts perceived as 'bad' for the organization and stimulate other types of conflict deemed constructive, or productive, for increasing performance. Only recently have we begun to se objections to whether the instrumental relationship between conflict types and performance should be so simple. Fresh contributions by Lê and Jarzabkowski (2015) and Weingart, Behfar, Bendersky, Todorova, and Jehn (2015) have emphasized the importance of correctly diagnosing task and process conflict before the generative effects of conflict may be harnessed and that the manner and intensity of conflict expression influence conflict outcomes. The preferred methodology is survey instruments designed to measure conflict types and intensity (see Behfar et al., 2011; Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) and their relationship to other variables on the presumption that if it is measured, it can be managed. This methodology ontologically presupposes an objective reality that can be

encapsulated in distinctive and universal concepts (Hatch & Yanow, 2008), where the concepts of task and relationship conflict represent essential features defining organizational conflict.

Summarizing, whereas early modern organizational conflict research regarded conflict as dysfunctional and focused on ways to remove it, this first shift embraced a normative and functionalist view emphasizing organizational conflict as a constructive, productive force benefiting organizations if the 'right kind' of conflict occurred, conceptually distinguishing between dysfunctional and constructive conflict. This instrumental orientation created contestation over the *functional* essence of conflict.

Conflict as an Essentially Contested Concept: Normative or Descriptive Practice?

Between the 1970s and 1990s, a second shift occurred within the strand of conflict research that focused on interpersonal conflict management and resolution. During this period, scholars moved away from focusing on normative prescriptions of what disputants *should* do in conflict to focusing on what disputants actually *do*. The shift reflects the notion that moral prescription never defeats empirical analysis.

Normative Practice

Deutsch's (1949) theory of cooperation and competition and his definition of conflict as incompatible activities (1973) presumed a blend of cooperative and competitive motives, and inspired much normative research. The normative school emphasized prescriptive approaches to conflict resolution, often identifying practical steps that disputants should take to deal with conflict, its causes, and consequences (Bordone & Moffitt, 2006; Gray, 1985; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Runde, 2014). Disputants should acknowledge the conflict, distinguish between interests and positions, think about the conflict not only from their own view but also from the opponent's position, listen attentively and speak to be understood by each other. Most of these steps are

founded on the belief that it is through changed *behavior* that conflict may be dealt with or resolved. In these prescriptive approaches, we can therefore identify assumptions that the purpose of conflict management is to get the strategy for personal conflict management right so that conflict will lead to productive outcomes. The normative school of conflict management research therefore views conflict as a distinct behavioral phenomenon and as an instrumental means of achieving something else.

Descriptive Practice

Blake and Mouton's (1964) development of the dual concern model greatly advanced descriptive research in conflict management. Kilmann and Thomas (1977) refined the model into the conflict MODE instrument, focusing specifically on styles for personal conflict management. Two dimensions shape the model: concern for self and concern for others (Rahim, 1983). Variations of the dual concern model shaped the development of different survey instruments for examining conflict management, by measuring the self-reported use of five core conflict management styles: forcing/dominating, avoiding, accommodation/obliging, problem solving and compromising. Although the instruments have been criticized for failing to capture the full range of approaches to conflict management and for positioning the five styles of conflict management as all-inclusive (Nicotera, 1992; Wall & Callister, 1995), we observe that they still provide the preferred way of examining how disputants manage their conflicts and how their doing so affects various aspects of organizational life, for example job satisfaction (Choi, 2013) and leadership styles (Saeed, Almas, Anis-ul-Haq, & Niazi, 2014). We find the continued popularity of these instruments to be rather peculiar because, as we argue below, their premising on a simplistic two-dimensional theorization of conflict management may blind scholars and practitioners to the ubiquitousness of situational interaction and contextual factors in processes of conflict management. Their widespread use, Wall and Callister (1995) however argue, stems not only from their ability to consolidate a great number

of techniques into five styles but also from their ability to predict how strategies used in conflict affect conflict outcomes. Thus, the main focus in descriptive conflict management research is on strategies for managing conflict to achieve productive outcomes. The underpinnings of the functionalist view that conflict must be doing 'good' somewhere are evident and descriptive practices thus view conflict as an instrumental means to achieve something else.

Summarizing, as researchers began to measure individuals' conflict management styles in real life conflicts, a second shift broke away from normative ideas about how conflict should be managed to describing what disputants do in conflict. This shift generated discussion about the *practice* essence of conflict.

Conflict as an Essentially Contested Concept: Dyadic or Organizational Phenomena?

Morrill (1989) and Barley (1991) alerted the field to a third shift emerging from the late 1980s and onwards. These scholars challenged the traditional psychological functional analyses that assumed conflict and conflict management to be dyadic phenomena and moved attention towards an understanding of conflict as an organizational phenomenon. This shift may be thought of as a realization that it is social structures – as well as people's psychologies – that matter.

Dyadic Conflict

Scholars (e.g. Knapp, Putnam & Davis, 1988; Olekalns et al., 2008) began to criticize the instruments used to measure conflict management styles for emphasizing the individual as the sole benchmark for determining how conflict will develop. Conflict should not be seen as unidirectional, these scholars argued, individuals act in dyads or groups, suggesting that research should focus on patterns of behavior in interactions between disputants. Psychological and functionalist analyses (e.g. De Dreu, 1997; Jehn, 1995) began to approach conflict and conflict management as dyadic phenomena, when, through the use of experiments and survey instruments, they investigated

conflict and negotiation in conflict. While generating important knowledge for understanding specific aspects of conflict and conflict management, this literature nevertheless implicitly assumes that all conflict, whether individual, group, or inter-organizational, follow the same principles of interaction dynamics premised on person-to-person dyads (Barley, 1991; Clegg, Mikkelsen, & Sewell, 2015). We note that the dyadic level of analysis, often conglomerated into the term 'interpersonal conflict' (Barki & Hartwick, 2004), is assumed to represent *all* organizational conflict. Moreover, as critics have observed (Barley, 1991; King & Miles, 1990; Knapp et al., 1988; Somech, Desivilya, & Lidogoster, 2009), within the dominant psychological theorizations of conflict and conflict management, conflict is often separated from the organizational context in which it occur, thereby neglecting its expression as situated action. The use of survey instruments and experimental methodologies has been criticized for generating asocial and compartmentalized conceptions of conflict, which fail to include a variety of organizational sources. A consequence of this is that conflict is defined as private problems that must be resolved and managed individually, the organization is not responsible. This prompted a shift towards seeing conflict as a social and cultural phenomenon.

Organizational Conflict

Scholars (e.g. Gray, Coleman, & Putnam, 2007; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Morrill, 1989) began to recognize the importance of the structural and cultural context in which conflict occurs, meaning that different sources of conflict like the allocation of work, power and resource distribution, rules, norms and values existing in the organizational systems were examined. The conception of "conflict [as] part of the social fabric of organizations" (Bartunek, Kolb & Lewicki, 1992, p. 217) implies that instead of seeing it as a special case to be treated in special ways, conflict occurred in the routines of work and the norms embedded in everyday social interaction as organizational members go about their daily activities. With these developments, we begin to see scholars (e.g.

Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Lewicki & Gray, 2003; Mikkelsen, 2013) giving special attention to the social processes of how conflict is framed and made sense of as important for understanding local strategies used in handling conflict.

Communication scholars (e.g. Brummans, Putnam, Gray, Hanke, Lewicki, & Wiethoff, 2008; Nicotera & Mahon, 2013), especially, have advanced the approach to conflict as an organizational phenomenon by applying an interpretive approach to the study of conflict and fleshing out the constitutive relationship between communication and conflict. Influenced by Weick (1979), who was among the first to posit that communication is the means by which organizing occurs, these scholars see conflict as comprised by inherently dynamic processes of communicating. Some communication scholars (e.g. Kusztal, 2002; Putnam, 2010; Sheppard & Aquino, 2013) take particular interest in the hegemonic and performative role of language and symbols in shaping and co-developing conflict, inspiring research into the discourses of conflict. Others (e.g. DeWulf, Gray, Putnam, Lewicki, Aarts, Bouwen, & van Woerkum, 2009; Mikkelsen & Gray, 2016) focus on framing and issue development in conflict, while yet others (e.g. Nicotera & Mahon, 2013; Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009) focus on language's constitutive effects on social interaction in conflict. From this interpretive approach to conflict we have learned that conflict is seen as a performance, in Goffmanian terms (Goffman, 1959), to which involved parties and observers attach different meanings that may change over time and which can be talked about in any number of different ways.

Conflict as a social construction. It was an article by Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980) on 'Naming, blaming, and claiming' that laid the foundation for conceptualizing conflict as a socially constructed phenomenon by arguing that conflict, as a thing in itself, is meaningless: "[D]isputes are not things: they are social constructs. Their shapes reflect whatever definition the observer gives to the concept" (pp. 631-632). Further endorsed by the interpretive turn in organization and

management theory, communication scholars, in particular, began to study how disputants enact, interpret and talk about conflict. Working from a conception of conflict as a social construction means to emphasize the role that social context plays in interpretation and conceptualization of conflict and study the ways that conflict is handled in organizations in terms of culturally and locally governed choice. Although assuming conflict as omnipresent, scholars (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Morrill, 1995) acknowledge that conflict can be expressed in subtle ways that may not always be visible, acknowledged, or verbalized. People in organizations can be in conflict without labeling their relationship as such. Thus we learn that the concept of conflict may be applied as an analytical category rather than a descriptive one. The conception of conflict as a social construction is underpinned by an interpretive epistemology and qualitative research methodologies, where the aim is to gain insight into context-specific experience and processes through which meaning is generated, rather than prescribing specific steps for how to deal with conflict.

Summing up, the third shift broadened the traditional psychological view of conflict as a dyadic phenomenon by generating a constructivist perspective on conflict and argued for approaching conflict as an organizational phenomenon. This shift generated contestation over the *phenomenal* meaning of term conflict.

So far, we have examined the diverse and often unacknowledged assumptions about conflict that underlie organizational conflict research. We have showed that the theoretical domain of organizational conflict has undergone three major shifts and our genealogical approach has revealed that with each shift came distinct changes in notions and ways of conceptualizing conflict. Specifically, we have found three distinct and competing positions on how to conceptualize conflict: as a distinct behavioral phenomenon, as an instrumental means, and as a social construction. In table 1, we present an overview of each of these significant theoretical conceptions of conflict, their taken-for-granted assumptions, objectives, main concepts, and illustrative sources.

Insert table 1 about here

As depicted by the table, we identify a wealth of taken-for-granted assumptions and concepts within each of these different conceptions of conflict showing evidence of an extensive research field with an essentially contested character.

Critical Reflexivity in Organizational Conflict Research

Having made the multiplicity of conflict research visible and the taken-for-granted assumptions about conflict, which struggle for dominance in its theorizing, we present two empirical examples of conflict to discuss how the theorizing of conflict can benefit from R(econstructive)-reflexive practices (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008), which combine different theoretical perspectives, paradigms, and vocabularies to open up new avenues and lines of interpretation to produce 'better' research. Our purpose for setting a new critical agenda for reflexivity in conflict research has the aim of addressing conflict's essentially contested status by connecting different perspectives to develop the field towards more complex theorizing capable of capturing the complex and dynamic nature of conflict. To promote R(econstructive)-reflexivity, we draw on an organizational ethnography of conflict conducted by the first author in a non-profit organization. Over a two-year period, the data material was gathered in three periods of fieldwork, amounting to seven months of full time fieldwork. The data consist of 56 qualitative interviews with staff and management and extensive field notes from observations during the many weeks and months where the first author was on site every day of the working week, which emphasized the everyday character of many conflicts at the non-profit organization. The two examples of conflict in the non-profit organization are situations that both staff and management perceive as 'posing problems' by being conflictual. In both examples, we show that combining different theoretical approaches when analyzing conflict

will yield valuable insights that essentially advance our insights into the complex and dynamic nature of conflict.

Conflict as Instrumental

An ongoing conflict between members of a fundraising team often surfaced during team meetings. Ruth, Lisa, and George worked on the team with Sarah, who they thought was taking up too much time at team meetings. She always presented a lot of ideas and talked extensively about her opinions, experiences, and contacts. During one particular team meeting, Ruth presented her idea for how the team should carry out a particular joint task. As she was presenting her idea, George and Lisa agreed that it was a good idea and just the solution they were looking for. Sarah, thinking that the team could move to idea brainstorming, nevertheless began to present her idea about how she thinks that the task should be done. Ruth, defending her own idea, asks Sarah, "Why are you presenting this now? Is it because you don't think that my idea is good enough?" "No", Sarah answers, "I also have ideas, which are different than yours."

Working from a conception of conflict as an instrumental means, the situation looks like a typical task conflict where team members have opposing views of the content of the work. Had Sarah's inputs stimulated discussion, their disagreements could have led to productive outcomes. But as the situation is unfolding, it becomes clear that the problem is not just about opposing views of this particular task; it is also about how Sarah is perceived by the other team members to interfere with team consensus. As a consequence, they see her as having a personality problem because she, in more radical terms, often deviates from the theoretically assumed hegemony defining team situations. By beginning to brainstorm for ideas, when the others have agreed that Ruth's idea is a good solution, Sarah clashes with their norms for presenting and processing ideas. This indicates relationship conflict because it involves opposing values about how team members can relate to each other in meetings and it reveals a clash in interpersonal style. George, who is

really annoyed by the whole situation, sums up the problem by stating that Sarah is "too much", because of her ways of relating to the others. To Lisa, the situation displays how the professional and the personal often become very entangled at work. She says, "Often when we disagree about things, we enter each other's personal space and take professional criticism very personally and then there's conflict. It's when the boundaries for professionalism get blurred".

The example shows a typical team conflict, which, as with most conflict at work, can not be defined as either task or relationship conflict. Conflict is often about a lot of different elements, some of which can be categorized as task or relationship issues in conflict. But when we try to categorize conflict by its content and its sources, we end up regarding conflict as being 'something' in itself, independent of how it is perceived, enacted and managed by team members. The different elements in conflict are often interconnected and entangled in different ways and therefore it can be difficult to observe the neat theoretical distinctions, extensively described in the literature, between task and relationship conflict. Moreover, analysts have mainly approached the conflict type framework as the *shared perception* among team members in its effort to define whether conflict is task or relationship conflict (Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008; DeChurch et al., 2013). In the example above, however, we observe that team members' perceptions of conflict are not shared. While Sarah thinks of the problem as a disagreement of task content, Ruth and George see it as Sarah's annoying interpersonal behavior. Lisa however, sees the conflict as an inevitable outcome of professional and personal entanglement at work. Since conflict, more often than not, is defined by disputants' enactments of opposing, competing perceptual and verbal representations of what is going on rather than manifest clashes and arguments, it can indeed be difficult to encounter shared perceptions of what conflict is about among those who are involved.

This example shows that the normative research objective within this conception of conflict about getting productive conflicts creates considerable confusion: if most conflicts are

conglomerates of different team members' different perceptions of different issues, then how should we approach such conflicts to gain our desired (positive) outcomes? Recent developments (DeChurch et al., 2013; Weingart et al., 2015) in the theorization of conflict argue that to understand conflict, we should focus more on the conflict processes; that is, on conflict expression and behavior, and not focus solely on the content of conflict as has been the dominant focus in much of conflict research applying the conflict-type framework. These recent contributions to the theorization of conflict have begun to acknowledge the performative and complex nature of conflict by going beyond the simplifying assumptions which categorize conflict by its content and its sources into different types. The integration of conflict theories with communication theories, as proposed by Weingart et al., (2015), clearly extends our understanding of conflict by considering the processual aspects of communication, entrenchment and subversion of actions in conflict interaction as critical aspects influencing any relationship between conflict and performance. We welcome these developments because they broaden the scope of attention in conflict research to not only focus on how a given conflict can be characterized as a distinct type but also how it is expressed, perceived, reacted to and managed. We see clear potentials for opening up new methodological avenues for studying conflict.

While these recent developments make a considerable contribution towards more complex theorizing of conflict, their declared objective is however to understand the effects of conflict on work outcomes, with an overriding concern for maximizing the potential benefits of conflict. The vast majority of studies are primarily (or only) interested in understanding how conflict affects work outcomes in terms of productivity and performance. We find this dominant interest somewhat peculiar. Due to the dynamic nature of conflict, outcomes of conflict will always be relative in relationship to time. Outcomes can never be static measures but are processes that can change. This means that what may account for a positive outcome at one point in time may have negative

associations at later points and vice versa. Notions of change and process therefore seem particularly crucial for extending our understanding of conflict. As argued by Kolb & Putnam (1992): "the outcomes of most conflicts are other conflicts with only temporary respites in between" (p. 13). If we want to acknowledge the dynamic nature of conflict, our theorization must allow for time and not ignore it.

In terms of these overriding interests in conflict outcomes, we additionally suggest that instead of focusing narrowly on outcomes of productivity and performance, which appear to have gained a dominant foothold in contemporary conflict research, focus might be expanded to include those aspects of organizations that redirect future studies to investigate how conflict and its management can help make workplaces better places in which to work. We do find studies in the literature (e.g., Gamero, Gonzalez-Roma & Peiro, 2008; Bayazit & Mannix, 2003), which extend this focus on outcomes to also encompass more people-oriented measures. Still, applying a R(econstructive)-reflexive practice to the conflict research will undoubtedly bring alternative voices into account when designing studies of conflict and not only those interested in productivity measures.

In this first example, we analyzed a team conflict to illustrate that combining theories from both the conflict-type framework with those from the field of communication can extend our understanding of conflict by considering not only what conflict is about but also how it is expressed, perceived, reacted to and managed. This combination of theories opens up new understandings of conflict that produce better research both theoretically and empirically since it comes closer to capturing the complexity of conflict. We also suggested that the theorization of conflict and its effects on outcomes like productivity and performance should allow for time in future developments, acknowledging the dynamic nature of conflict. In the next section, we

introduce another example of how the employment of R(econstructive)-reflexivity can encourage the development of more advanced theorizing in conflict research.

Conflict as Socially Constructed

In the nonprofit organization, the administrative workers often experienced conflict with the fundraisers. Conflict happened, they said, when fundraisers showed up in the clerical department and expected to be served instantaneously. Jane, an administrative worker explained, ”Some always come in and expect to be served right this minute”. The administrative workers interpreted such clashes as originating with certain high conflict personalities in the fundraising group; individuals whose rude communication styles brought them into conflict with coworkers. Clashes were also interpreted as arising because the different units in the organization develop different, oftentimes divergent subcultures. Whereas the fundraisers' impulsive behavior springs from their creative ethos, the administrative workers value standards, fixed procedures and punctuality. David summed it up neatly: “We are the bores of this organization and they are the creative staff”, emphasizing the administrative workers' indulgence towards the fundraisers in conflict situations. A third way that the administrative workers interpret clashes with the fundraisers is by seeing them as originating in status inequality. They explained conflict as arising from the fundraisers' lack of respect for them and their work.

Working from a conception of conflict as a social construction, the example shows how one party to an inter-group conflict, the administrative workers, interpret and enact different meanings of workplace conflict by using frameworks to organize experience and guide actions in conflict. They interpret conflict with the fundraisers as variously rooted in rude personalities, workplace diversity and status inequalities. They use the personality framework to explain that conflict with the fundraisers happens because some of them are rude and behave in ways that spark conflicts with coworkers. The workplace diversity framework, however, points towards the belief

that differences are valued in this organization. This framework evokes the organization's core ideology of egalitarianism guiding its outward mission of a more equal world. Within the organization, this core ideology asserts that everyone and everyone's contribution is equal, illustrated by the common organizational mantra that "we have a flat organizational structure". Finally, the administrative workers use the status inequality framework to interpret conflict interactions as evidence that their work is not as important as other types of work carried out in the organization. Because of the presiding ideology of egalitarianism, status inequality interpretations are only covertly expressed among the administrative workers.

Analyzing conflict through an interpretive framework offers a nuanced explanation for why the administrative workers experience conflict with other groups in the organization. As we gained access to the conceptual world of staff and management at the non-profit organization, we used the interpretive framework to capture the multiplicity of conceptual structures in their interpretations of conflict. This interpretive framework allowed the inclusion of disputants' interpretations and the uniqueness of context in the theorization of the conflict. Given that incommensurable ways of making sense coexist in the organization, we ask the following questions: To what extent are these frameworks compatible or in tension? What makes the administrative workers use one or the other interpretation in a given situation? Since we observe obvious tensions between personality- and systemic explanations of conflict and also between the frameworks of inequality and egalitarianism, exploration of how the administrative workers manage these tensions in their handling of conflict should provide further insight into conflict management. Such explorations should allow us to see conflict management as complex and dynamic processes that go beyond what is usually captured by the five styles theory of conflict management. For this purpose, a dialectical framework could be useful for analyzing conflict experiences and understanding conflict and tensions at work.

A dialectical approach seeks to understand a distinct phenomenon, for example conflict, in

relation to its opposite (for example, harmony), thereby exploring bipolar opposites that work as dualities inherent in all social relationships (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Putnam, 2013). From this theoretical perspective, how disputants manage tensions and possibly overcome them would be our focus. Recent contributions from Driskill, Meyer, & Mirive (2012), Erbert (2014), and Jameson (2004) apply a dialectical framework to study conflict and extend conflict research by studying conflict as arising from the dynamic interplay of oppositional forces and contradictions that are not resolved but represent organizational members' basic needs in various degrees and intensities. Although in stark contrast to the compartmentalized conception of conflict found in traditional conflict research about conflict types and conflict management styles, we welcome these recent developments in dialectical conflict research, as they broaden the scope of attention in conflict research to not only examine the positive or negative conflict outcomes but to consider what these conflicts look like as they unfold in practice and how people experience and manage conflict as opposition and tensions, oftentimes exhibiting a variety of conflict behaviors.

In this example, we analyzed an inter-group conflict to illustrate that by combining the interpretive framework with a dialectical approach, we extend our understanding of conflict and conflict management by considering not only the disputants' experience and framing of conflict but also how they manage and navigate between contradictory forces, giving special attention to the performative nature of conflict and conflict management. This example of R(econstructive)-reflexive practice thereby emphasizes conflict as a dynamic phenomenon, unfolding in practices of conflict handling, making for a more advanced understanding of conflict and its management.

Discussion and Implications

Although ontological and epistemological commitments are rarely openly displayed within the organizational conflict research literature and may often even be unrecognized by the individual researcher, we nevertheless set out to investigate how organizational conflict has been constructed

genealogically, and with what consequences. We found that the study of organizational conflict has undergone three major shifts that have established diverse traditions of theorizing, creating specific grounds for contestation: the first theoretical shift, from viewing conflict as dysfunctional to the pursuit of order, to viewing it as constructive, created contestation over the *functional* essence of the term; the second theoretical shift, from normative prescriptions to descriptions of what disputants actually do in conflict, generated contestation over the *practice* essence of the term; the third theoretical shift, from psychologically oriented analyses to studying conflict as an organizational phenomenon, generated contestation over the *phenomenal* essence of the term. While these shifts have occurred separately over periods of several decades, each of them has broadened and generated new strands of conflict research.

The diversity of ontological and epistemological commitments leads to different ways of conceptualizing and engaging with conflict and is a key feature of the theoretical assumptions that influence how researchers make things intelligible and the production of knowledge within the field. It is these commitments that make the term *conflict* an essentially contested concept. Accordingly, we were able to identify three distinct and competing theoretical positions on the meaning of conflict that frame studies of conflict at work: conflict as a distinct behavioral phenomenon, conflict as an instrumental means, and conflict as a social construction. Each of these incommensurable theoretical positions is rooted in significant philosophical presuppositions about what conflict is and what it means for the organization. Moreover, each theoretical position embraces distinct methodological orientations for researching conflict and holds distinct objectives for yielding scientific knowledge about conflict. In the end, methodologies rest upon assumptions about the real status of the phenomenon under study, constituted by an applied ontology and epistemology (Hatch & Yanow, 2008; Johnson & Duberley, 2000). While much conflict research has been somewhat unreflexive about its ontological grounds, our contribution encourages an

awareness of and interest in not only theory generation as an output of the research process but also "the process of theorizing" (Weick, 1995, p. 387). As an important part of generating theory, we expect there is much to learn by first becoming more explicit about our philosophical presuppositions because they condition the type of organizational knowledge we acquire; thus we have placed the different strands of conflict theory within more fundamental debates of ontology and epistemology. However, we do not argue that these are merely the preserve of professional academic discourse: we see their contours expressed in the lay theorizing of everyday life.

Having established that different conceptual positions concerning the nature of conflict are constituted by contestable differences, a big question remains: why are these differences not explicitly discussed in conflict research literature? We believe that this relates to the fact that organizational conflict research is embedded within existing theoretical frameworks which they reinforce, many of which have been developed from positivist or objectivist research paradigms – the two dominant frameworks of conflict types and conflict management styles have both been developed within positivist research paradigms (see e.g. Jehn, 1995; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Rahim, 1983) – and the field's dominant preoccupation with instrumental outcomes of conflict. In support of the former, we find Tjosvold (2008a), who argues that current conflict definitions and research reinforce "popular misconceptions rather than challenging them" (p. 448). As evidence for this observation, we see in the past there has been a total separation between the two major research strands that work with conflict types and conflict management approaches or styles, respectively. Although these two main research strands both take a particular interest in conflict and its management at the interpersonal level of analysis, they are largely independent research areas. We have only recently begun to see studies that combine these research areas by examining the relationship between conflict management styles and conflict types (see DeChurch et al., 2013; Leon-Perez, Medina, Arenas and Munduate, 2015). As evidence of the latter, we note that the

literature on the positive versus negative effects of conflict has been meta-analyzed no less than four times (DeChurch et al., 2013; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013) since the turn of the millennium due to contradictory findings on the direct effects of task conflict on team outcomes like productivity and performance. From our perspective, this dominant interest in the instrumental outcomes of conflict diverts attention from reflexive conceptual debates and more sophisticated theoretical developments that capture the complex and dynamic nature of conflict.

Unfortunately, the richness of the organizational conflict research literature has not been accompanied by a reflexive approach to the conceptualization of conflict. Rather, we observe that there is little discussion of multiple interpretations of conflict within the different research strands. We have drawn on the framework of essentially contested concepts to organize our discussion of both professional and lay theorizing. In this article, we have therefore tried to turn scholarly attention away from the much studied fruits of conflict; that is, how conflict affects work processes and outcomes. Instead we have tried to encourage a focus on the roots of conflict to make the multiplicity of conflict research visible and to set a new critical agenda for how R(econstructive)-reflexivity can extend our understanding of conflict as a complex and dynamic phenomenon.

Greatly inspired by the latest call within the organization and management sciences to engage in complex theorizing rather than simplifying the logics of practice (Tsoukas, 2017), our attempt to show how theorizing of conflict can benefit from R(econstructive)-reflexive practices relates to the profound question of what theory should aim at in a practically-oriented field like organizational conflict research. Should theory seek to simplify the world because reality is too ambiguous, or should we try to make our theorizing more complex so that it can better cope with organizational complexity? In support of the latter, we have provided two empirical examples of conflict to show that interpretation does not have to stay within the frame of any one contested

framework. Instead we expose ways in which R-reflexivity can be achieved, and we argue that to acknowledge the complex nature of conflict means to combine theoretical perspectives, paradigms, vocabularies, and theories in order to open up new avenues and lines of interpretation that will extend our understanding of conflict as a complex and dynamic phenomenon. We have thereby tried to demonstrate how R-reflexivity has the potential to develop and add to current research by producing 'better' research empirically, theoretically, and also ethically by extending the overriding interest in instrumental outcomes of conflict to also include more people-oriented interests, which are often left out of research designs. Tsoukas (2017) calls this way of connecting theories and concepts for a more integrated understanding of a phenomenon, conjunctive thinking.

In a similar vein, we explicitly encourage a more reflexive approach to studying organizational conflict through the combining of different theoretical perspectives in line with R(econstructive)-reflexive practices (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008) to set a new critical agenda for reflexivity in conflict research. With our way of practicing conjunctive theorizing, which can be achieved through R-reflexivity, we have showed that by connecting multiple insights from different strands of conflict research to point to blind spots in our theorizing of conflict, such R-reflective practices offer a space for developing alternative readings and new perspectives. Rarely do we see this form of reflexivity in conflict research because, in line with its essentially contested character, it tends to remain within existing theoretical frameworks.

The special feature of our way of examining the conflict research literature has provided insight into the context and dynamics of conflict research. Our examination of conflict research literature clearly reveals that much of modern conflict research views conflict and conflict management as a matter of types and styles, simplifying conflict rather than understanding it as the complex and dynamics phenomenon it is. Employment of reflexivity, however, opens new ways of thinking about and using the tensions among different perspectives (Clegg & Hardy, 1996), which

is crucial in a practical discipline like organizational conflict, given than conflict practitioners must deal with conflict manifested in particular situations and involving particular agents, whilst dealing with changing structures and multiple configurations of conflict. For practitioners to feel that their experience of conflict is reflected in the theorization of conflict, such theorization must incorporate complex types of understanding. As Weick (2007, p. 16) argues: "it takes richness to grasp richness. Building on our two examples, we have tried to encourage notions of conflict that focus more on disputants' interpretive and communicative processes and agency in conflict, and on notions that situate conflict contextually as a social, dynamic phenomenon, rather than on generalized frameworks of conflict types and conflict management styles, which tend to oversimplify and over-individualize conflict. Our essay is intended to stimulate scholars' participation in what is at present a somewhat rare discussion about how conflict is conceptualized; by doing so we may engage collectively in reflexive inquiry into conflict, and more profoundly extend our understanding of organizational conflict as phenomenon. In practical terms, conflict may not always be manageable where in everyday practice participants are using lay theories of conflict that represent, however implicitly, deep-seated frameworks that constitute differently contested theories of the world. As we have showed, understanding may come not from within the essentially contested conceptions but from grasping the space between them.

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