Making Sense of Organisational Conflict
An Empirical Study of Enacted Sensemaking in Everyday Conflict at Work

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Copenhagen
Business School
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

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Ph.d. Serie 43.2012

Doctoral School of Organisation
and Management Studies

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1st edition 2012
PhD Series 43.2012

The Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies (OMS) is an interdisciplinary research environment at Copenhagen Business School for PhD students working on theoretical and empirical themes related to the organisation and management of private, public and voluntary organizations.

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Preface

This PhD is structured as an article-based thesis. This means that it consists of a 'frame' and three separate articles that are written for publication in three separate journals. Additionally I have presented elements from the articles in different forums.

Chapter 6 'Conflict and Sensemaking Frameworks in Nonprofit Organisations: An Analysis of the Social Meanings of Conflict' has been accepted for publication by *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

Chapter 7 'Exploring how Conflict Management Training Changes Workplace Conflict: A Qualitative Case Study, has been published in *Journal of Conflictology*, *Vol. 3* (1), pp. 7-17. An abbreviated version of the chapter's focus on effects of the training intervention entitled 'Exploring how Conflict Management Training Works' has been presented at the International Conference on Communication and Conflict, Prague, Czech Republic, November 2011 and has been published in a conference e-book.

Chapter 8 'A Researcher's Tale: How doing Conflict Research Shapes Research about Conflict' has been accepted for publication by *Qualitative research in Organisations and Management – An International Journal*. An abbreviated version of the chapter's focus on ethics and researcher reflexivity entitled 'How Come we Never Discuss Ambiguities in Organisational Conflict Research?' has been presented by invitation in the symposium on Reflexivity and Crafting Research Narratives at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Boston, Massachusetts, 2-7 August 2012.

To integrate the different parts of the thesis into a meaningful whole, the thesis comprise a common frame that sets the scene for the study and ends with a shared conclusion that outline its contribution.

Acknowledgements

This PhD thesis was made possible through the generous support of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors: Associate Professor Per Darmer for taking on the role of primary supervisor halfway through the PhD period when the study was set on moving in one particular direction, and for always engaging with my texts in ways that made them better. Associate Professor Pia Bramming for always pushing me toward greater reflexivity in my research, and for staying on board from beginning to end. Professor Stewart Clegg for his advice particularly concerning the articles during the last year of the PhD, for his always incredibly speedy readings, and for his encouragement. All gave generously of their time to read and re-read my writings and for that I am forever grateful. I also want to thank Claus Nygaard for his supervisory role during the first half of the PhD period.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all of the participants at NGO Plus for their time and their honesty. I feel privileged that you let me into your world.

I would also like to thank the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution who provided the training in conflict management, and the Danish Working Environment Research Fund (Arbejdsmiljøforskningsfonden) for giving me the funding to do the PhD.

At the National Research Centre for the Working Environment (NFA) I would like to thank everyone in the group formerly known as LOA, of which I was a member during the first year of the PhD. I particularly want to thank Pernille Hohnen, Anders Bojesen, and Ole H. Sørensen for willingly setting aside time to discuss my research with me. At NFA I also wish to thank my two superiors Lars Andrup and Elsa Bach for always finding the time to help me resolve issues of more practical matter.

A particularly heartfelt thank you goes to Associate Professor Sally Maitlis for allowing me to spend a short term research stay with her at Sauder Business School in Vancouver in January 2012. I am very grateful to Sally for her help with the theoretical application in my analyses.

The last year of the PhD I worked from the Department of Organisation (IOA) at CBS. Here I want to thank Peter Kjær and Lene Lillebro for giving me an office space as long as I needed, and Ann Westenholz, former PhD coordinator at IOA, for taking an interest in my personal

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Introduction

This study is about everyday conflicts that occur at work; how meaning and action interact in processes of handling those organisational conflicts that arise naturally in daily life when people meet in social interactions. I approach the phenomenon of conflict by exploring those social processes of organisational *sensemaking* that arise when conflicts occur in a nonprofit organisation, my own processes of *sensemaking* of the research process about conflict, and conflict research literature's *sensemaking* of the concept of conflict. In this study, I basically aim to understand conflict at work and understand research about conflict at work. Below I introduce this study's topic of conflict and sensemaking more thoroughly and I situate the study within the field of conflict research. I then pose the study's research questions and outline the contribution of the study. I end this chapter by outlining the rest of the thesis.

Conflict and sensemaking

Weick argues that "[t]*he basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs*" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). This process often becomes obvious in organisations when staff and management confront issues, events, and actions that are surprising or confusing (Weick, 1995a). Accordingly, sensemaking is conceptualised as a process of social construction where individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues, or signals from their environments (Maitlis, 2005). However, the term can also be applied to the craft of research as sensemaking, in which researchers as sensemakers actively analyse the empirical material and generate representations of how reality is (Czarniawska, 1998; Weick, 1995b). From this perspective, the research process is regarded as the researcher's sensemaking of an object of study and scientific knowledge is regarded as a body of literature's sensemaking of a phenomenon.

My attempt to apply a sensemaking perspective to conflict highlights two under-studied dimensions of conflict at work: First, few studies have explained how sensemaking plays a critical role in the way staff and management experience and act out conflicts at work. Second, only a few scholars have formally engaged in conceptualising conflict; an examination of the dominant assumptions of the theoretical domain of organisational conflict from a sensemaking perspective reveals that the concept of conflict in the majority of conflict research is taken for granted.

As with any research project, the story of this study begins with the decision to investigate a particular topic. My decision sprang from an interest in how interventions made through conflict management training affected conflict in organisations. Could staff and management's participation in conflict management training change the ways that they dealt with conflict – and if so, how would these changes affect conflict at work? My decision to investigate how training in conflict management works was also an attempt to fill what I thought was an interesting void in conflict research literature: Very few studies of conflict management training interventions exist and virtually no studies concentrate on the effect that conflict management training may have on the workplace *itself*, although a slew of this kind of training is readily available from a variety of sources. With this as the starting point, the study employed a before-and-after research design. I structured the study to obtain longitudinal empirical material in order to compare effects before and after the training intervention. However, as my empiricist's perspective on conflict unfolded throughout the longitudinal fieldwork, my attention was drawn to understanding the dynamics of conflict and conflict handling in their complexities and was thereby not entirely fixated on answering the question of how conflict management training works.

My desire to understand the dynamics of conflict as they unfold at work was set off by how conflicts were addressed in the empirical setting itself - a nonprofit organisation, which I will refer to by the pseudonym of NGO Plus:

Initially I was told, that conflict at NGO Plus was absent, which I later came to recognise as a taboo in the sense that the existence of conflict was routinely denied in the organisation. Rather, people would praise the sense of community in the organisation and emphasise their co-workers' support of each other. Many saw their job as a privilege and talked about collaboration as being virtually conflict-free. It was not that steps were taken to avoid conflict in this organisation – conflict, I was told, just did not happen. Many staff members would deny any knowledge of conflict occurring between individuals and would emphasise their surprise at how

few conflicts they actually experienced in this job. Members of management described the management group as "*a space free from conflict*" and it was repeatedly highlighted that working relationships among staff were comfortable and harmonious. When staff and management *did* talk about 'issues' or 'situations' at work, they often said, "*we've got this, well not conflict, but problem because ...*" And when asked directly about experiences with conflict, people would often say that they did not always perceive less successful collaboration as conflict. The taboo surrounding conflict meant that there was not an outspoken need at NGO Plus to receive training in conflict management. Since conflict was not a way to conceptualise social problems in the organisation, why would they be interested in learning conflict management? Nevertheless, that was exactly what they signed up for.

The way that conflicts were addressed at NGO Plus struck me as rather peculiar. I was puzzled by how to make sense of this, because, although the opportunity to research this particular organisation was serendipitous, it proved to be a very contradictory place in which to undertake a study about conflict at work since conflict played an important, albeit implicit role in the organisation's mission. NGO Plus' core purpose is to create social change for marginalised groups in developing countries. The organisation works in a number of ways to promote respect for citizens' rights and to support civil society´s participation in reforming government and developing democracy. Its exclusive deployment of bottom-up approaches reflects the organisation's belief in social change being attained from below. However, history has repeatedly shown that the process of enabling marginalised groups to challenge those in power is rarely accomplished without conflict. Hence, the role of 'breathing the fire' constitutes an important implication of the organisation's doings. Given that conflict profoundly constitutes NGO Plus' reason for being in the world, one would expect that an organisation like this would deal with internal conflicts in exemplary and role modelling ways. However, surprisingly, for me at least, conflicts within the organisation were a taboo in the sense that their existence was feared and denied.

If an organisation, which fundamentally relies on creating and fuelling conflict in order to attain social change nonetheless denies that conflicts occur internally, how can one expect other organisations to properly address and deal with conflict? Kolb and Bartunek (1992) and De Dreu and van Vianen (2001), reviewing qualitative and quantitative analyses of conflict at work, conclude that avoidance appears to be the most frequent response to conflict situations. NGO Plus, like other organisations, also used an avoidance strategy in response, which makes this empirical study interesting beyond its immediate context. However, before digging into the

full story of conflict at NGO Plus, I need to situate this study within the field of conflict research literature. I therefore begin by walking through what we know so far about conflict in organisations.

What do we know about conflict in organisations?

The conflict research literature is mountainous and very diverse. The literature's extensiveness has been explained by the fact that conflict always has been with us and that people have been writing about it since early literate times (Wall & Callister, 1995). Traditionally, most academic contributions to conflict theory have come from philosophy, political theory, and sociology, but today conflict researchers come from various disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, communication studies, organisation studies, as well as political theory, sociology and philosophy. The field of organisational conflict has a long tradition with crossovers to decision-making, organisational culture, organisational development, and leadership studies.

The abundance of historical literature on conflict has mainly dealt with controlling, avoiding, and eliminating social conflict. Classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle shared an interest in conflict based on the need to maintain order in a society. Both Plato and Aristotle assigned conflict a pathological status: viewing it as a threat to the success of the state and argued that the state should be responsible for keeping conflict to an absolute minimum (Shipka, 1969, cited in Rahim, 2000). More recently, seventeenth-century social contract theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, were to suggest that government should control conflict so as to establish order in social relations (Rahim, 2000). It was not until the nineteenth century that major philosophical contributions by particularly Hegel and Karl Marx inspired considerable attention towards a more functional view of conflict.

Below, I review modern conflict research; that is, research from the 1950s and onwards. To introduce this very large and dynamic field adequately, I focus on three main shifts in conflict research literature that have characterized our knowledge about conflict in organisations over the past six decades. Barley (1991), Morrill (1989), and Wall and Callister (1995) have independently identified some of the main movements within the field. While the first shift embraced a functional view of organisational conflict, which emphasised how conflict could be a productive force rather than a breakdown in organisational harmony, the second shift was a

break from normative ideas about how conflict should be managed because researchers began studying de facto management of conflict. The third shift called attention to the continual existence of conflict in organisational life and moved beyond the traditional view of conflict as dyadic interactions. The current study is situated within the stream of research spurred by the third shift in conflict research, specifically, studies that have an interpretative approach to conflict. With its focus on conflict and sensemaking, the current study attempts to make an empirical contribution to interpretative research in conflict.

The three shifts have occurred separately and they do not follow each other in three consecutive time periods. Each of them can be identified over periods of several decades. Although there is no direct coupling between the three shifts, they carry considerable overlap. Essentially they must be viewed as different but concurrent streams within the field of conflict research. For each of the three shifts, I present the status quo in mainstream conflict research from which the critique emerged. I then unfold the critique that provoked each of the three shifts, and finally I describe how the three shifts broadened the nature and scope of conflict research.

From a view of conflict as dysfunctional to a view of conflict as constructive

A general consensus in conflict literature identifies the first shift in conflict research, which moved away from viewing conflict as dysfunctions – that is, as breaches of harmony in organisational life – to viewing conflict as being potentially constructive or even productive if the right kind of conflict occurred and was handled correctly.

Early works on conflict largely regarded conflict as a dysfunctional phenomenon. There was a tendency to regard conflict as "*altogether bad*" (Fink, 1968, p. 445), as "*a breakdown in standard mechanisms of decision-making*" (March & Simon, 1958, p. 112), and "*as basically different from 'co-operation'*" (Mack & Snyder, 1957, p. 212). In fact, because conflict was often depicted as part of a conflict-cooperation dichotomy, where one is defined in terms of the absence of the other, conflict situations were best kept under control through elimination (Mack & Snyder, 1957).

In spite of this early tendency to view conflict as dysfunctions, more and more researchers began pointing to the positive dynamics and consequences of conflict. Starting with Coser, who in 1956 published his now classic book on the *Functions of Social Conflict* (1956) in which he contended that conflict is not always socially destructive but rather an essential mechanism in the positive evolution of society, theorists such as Pondy (1967) and Thomas

(1976) contributed to a changing view of conflict in organisations. For example, Pondy (1967) argued that conflict is neither good nor bad; it must be assessed in terms of its individual and organisational functions and dysfunctions. And Thomas (1976) contended that conflict can contribute to the stimulation and production of ideas in an organisation and foster internal cohesiveness among groups, thereby viewing conflict as being potentially constructive or even productive. Inspired by Thomas, much research began to distinguish between dysfunctional conflict and constructive conflict. This has led to the establishment of a conflict typology framework, which identifies task and relationship conflict. While task-related conflict concerns work procedures and the allocation of resources, relationship conflict involves values and interpersonal style (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005).

Generally task conflict is considered less threatening to one's personal identity and involves fewer negative emotions. More importantly, task conflict is agreed to motivate team members to search for optimal decisions and solutions (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999; Jehn, 1997) and research, particularly by Jehn (1995; 2001) suggests that moderate levels of task conflict can be constructive because they stimulate discussions that may help groups perform better. Task conflict is therefore more likely to be constructive (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) due to its ability to enhance decision-making quality, individual creativity, and work-team effectiveness (Jehn, 1994; Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold, 1991). Relationship conflict on the other hand, is seen to interfere with performing tasks (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995; 1997; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991) and especially poorly managed relationship conflict is regarded to have worse negative long-term consequences for individual health and well-being than task conflict (De Dreu, van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004).

Thus task conflict is commonly viewed as constructive conflict, while relationship conflict is viewed as dysfunctional conflict. The development of the conflict typology framework has led to further research on how to reduce those conflicts that hurt the organisation and how to stimulate those conflicts considered productive and beneficial for the organisation, including increased performance, creativity, and innovation.

This first shift occurred when conflict researchers no longer regarded conflict to be only a dysfunctional breakdown in organisational harmony. Instead they embraced a constructive, functional view of organisational conflict that emphasised that conflict could be a productive force in organisations. The second shift was a break from normative ideas about conflict management because conflict researchers began to study real life management of conflict.

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From what should be done in conflict to what is done in conflict

Morrill (1989) and Wall and Callister (1995) identify the second shift in conflict research, which moved away from an interest in normative prescriptions of what disputants *should* do in conflict situations to research into how conflict *is* handled. By far the majority of the normative school is inspired by Deutsch's theory of Cooperation and Competition (1949; 1973), the premises of which is that conflict include a blend of cooperative and competitive motives and that takes a prescriptive approach to conflict, stressing cooperation and collaboration. Normative prescriptions of what *should* be done in conflict include, for example, that disputants should become aware of the causes and the effects of conflict (Deutsch, 1990; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991), they should face the conflict by focusing on interpersonal dynamics (Deutsch, 1990), they should avoid blaming each other (Kottler, 1994), and each should think about the conflict from his own and the opponent's position (Eiseman, 1978)and openly discuss opposing views (Tjosvold, Dann, & Wong, 1992).

Wall and Callister (1995) point out that research into how conflict *is* handled initially took off from the normative school and often confirmed that many disputants engage in the prescriptions offered by the normative school. Additionally, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) noted that disputants may approach conflict in a trial and error fashion, and Pinkley and Northcraft (1994) observed that disputants may interpret conflict in a variety of ways. Murnighan and Conlon (1991) also found that interpretations, together with many other factors such as experiences, culture, and goals, influence and underpin the disputants' approaches to conflict management. Coser (1967) and Kriesberg (1992), - moreover, observed that disputants sometimes resorted to violence.

As pointed out by Van de Vliert and Prein (1989), early research into how conflict *is* handled relied upon Deutsch's (1949) one-dimensional measure of conflict management, with cooperation and competition designating the opposite poles. But in 1964, Blake and Mouton developed their theory of leadership effectiveness, which proposed a graphic portrayal of leadership styles through a managerial grid (Wall & Callister, 1995). The grid depicted two dimensions of leader behaviour, "concern for production" and "concern for people" and became a fundamental inspiration for researchers working with organisational issues. Within the field of conflict management, the basic ideas of the grid theory were adopted and spurred the developments of a two-dimensional measure of conflict management. Rahim (1986) later redefined the two dimensions from the grid theory into "concern for self" versus "concern for others". These two orthogonal dimensions framing the five styles of personal conflict

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management have dominated research on conflict management (Wall & Callister, 1995). Consequently, research into how conflict *is* handled is commonly characterized by numerous descriptions of the disputants' management options, almost exclusively psychologically assessing their use of five specific conflict management styles: forcing/dominating, avoiding, accommodation/obliging, problem solving and compromising.

Put briefly, the conflict management style of *forcing*, or dominating, occurs when one party acts to achieve her/her own goals, which may be at the expense of the other party. Without seeking to cooperate with the other party, this is the 'win-lose' approach. The conflict management style of *avoiding* is when one simply avoids the issue, and the style of *accommodating*, or obliging, is when one accommodates the other party's interests often at one's own expense and actually works against one's own desired outcomes. A *problem solving* style is used when both parties pair up with each other to achieve each party's goals. This style is about breaking free from the 'win-lose' paradigm and focuses on 'win-win' solutions. By contrast, a *compromising* conflict management style often creates a scenario where neither party really achieves what he/she wants.

Wall and Callister (1995) count no less than eight instruments that have been developed to measure these five conflict management styles, the considerable quantity of which shows that many universities, business schools, and research institutes worldwide have adopted the conflict management style typology framework. Conflict management instruments include those of Lawrence and Lorsch (1967, cited in Wall & Callister, 1995), the CMS (Conflict Management Survey) by Hall (1969, cited in Wall & Callister, 1995), the Conflict MODE Instrument by Kilman and Thomas (1977), the OCCI (Organisational Communication Conflict Instrument) by Putnam and Wilson (1982), ROCI-II (Rahim Organisational Conflict Instrument II) by Rahim (1983), the ECI (Employee Conflict Inventory) by Renwick (1975), the CMMS (Conflict Management Message Style) by Ross and DeWine (1982, cited in Wall & Callister, 1995), and the inductively derived Conflict Instrument by Riggs (1983, cited in Wall & Callister, 1995).

Although the developments of these instruments took place several decades ago, many research communities still consider these instruments to be the best way to examine how disputants actually manage their conflicts. Wall and Callister (1995) argue that these devices' popularity stems from their ability to consolidate a great number of techniques into approximately five styles. But the authors also criticize the two-dimensional scope of these instruments:

"The use of a two-dimensional instrument has generated two-dimensional thinking, and the discussion or investigation of five styles has conduced many researchers into thinking these five are all-inclusive" (p. 539).

In attempts to move beyond the two-dimensional conceptualisation of disputants' conflict management styles, some conflict researchers began to view disputants' conflict management within the organisational context in which it occurred, which signalled the third shift in conflict research.

The second shift broke away from normative ideas about how conflict should be managed, as conflict researchers began to study the management of real life conflicts. For this purpose, they developed instruments to measure styles of conflict management. The third shift moved beyond the traditional view of conflict as dyadic interactions and embraced an understanding of conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon.

From interpersonal conflict to intra-organisational conflict

Morrill (1989) and Barley (1991), in particular, call attention to a third shift in conflict research by emphasising how the focus of mainstream conflict research has now broadened. It no longer focuses only on psychological functional analyses of the different types of conflict and different styles of conflict management, which were emphasised by the first two shifts, but now also includes studies that emphasise how social relations, organisational culture and structure shape the forms that conflict and conflict management assume.

The majority of conflict research uses laboratory studies and survey instruments as the main methodologies for researching conflict that occur between individuals or groups in organisations, sometimes also defined as interpersonal conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). In particular, psychological studies of conflict have applied these methodologies to investigate negotiation as a means for resolving conflict. While these approaches have clearly been important for understanding specific aspects of conflict and conflict management, they explore conflict primarily in dyadic interactions because they assume that all conflicts tend to follow principles of interaction dynamics that are premised on the person-to-person dyad (Barley, 1991; Clegg, Mikkelsen, & Sewell, 2012). Accordingly, the dyadic level of analysis represents all organisational conflict.

Broadening of the scope of conflict research has stemmed from criticisms within the field. Much of the criticism pertains to issues about how research that uses survey instruments for measuring conflict management styles treat the individual as the sole benchmark for

conceptualising conflict and for determining how the conflict will develop thereby excluding the organisational context in which the conflicts occur (Knapp, Putnam, & Davis, 1988; Kuhn & Poole, 2000; Somech, Desivilya, & Lidogoster, 2009; Womack, 1988). The criticism further argues that when conflict is conceptualised as separate from the organisational context, the conflict encountered by staff and management are defined as private problems that must be resolved and managed individually; the organisation is not responsible (Bartunek, Kolb, & Lewicki, 1992; Martin, 1992). Knapp et al. (1988) particularly contend that if we wish to understand what happens during conflict interaction, then we must conceptualise and develop methodologies for understanding person-situation interaction.

Barley (1991) further argues that since laboratory experiments have long been the dominant method of studying conflict, conflict research has largely focussed on the behaviour and cognitive processes of disputants, which has tended to reinforce an asocial and compartmentalized conception of conflict, because the participating disputants have no history or future outside the confines of the experiments. Besides, real life conflicts rarely have clear temporal boundaries. Rather, they tend to unfold as an ongoing series of skirmishes that continually ebb and flow. Moreover, rational economic models in which the disputants are expected to behave as a utility-maximizer, with little or no leeway to behave in ways that are more representative of how they handle conflict in real life, inform the designs that are used in experimental settings. Finally, much of the experimental literature is predominantly concerned with individual cognition, in which the outcomes of conflict are assumed to arise from the way the disputants' process information. Accordingly, individual cognition is presumed to be socially unconstrained not taking into account that people are members of groups whose beliefs and values shape their behaviour and cognition (Barley, 1991).

Within the critique of the dominant psychological discipline of conflict studies, Barley (1991) and Knapp et al. (1988) view conflict as more than an individual or interpersonal event. Instead, they view conflict as a social and cultural phenomenon, where conflict behaviours are shaped by context. Other scholars within the field of organisational conflict have similarly argued that the context of a conflict is a critical variable in assessing conflict in organisations and requires the examination of a variety of sources for conflict, for example, the allocation of work between entities, power and resource distribution, rules, norms and values existing in the organisational systems (King & Miles, 1990; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Morrill, 1989; Sheppard, 1992).

In Wall and Callister's (1995) review of the literature on the topic of organisational conflict, the authors look at previous studies of conflict in organisations that include the role of context and divide these studies into four groups. Each group has a distinct approach to the role that context plays. The first group describes context as a setting of the conflict. Some researchers describe this setting without mentioning how elements in that setting affect the conflict. The second group looks at the independent variables in relation to the conflict, such as complexity of the organisation's tasks, interdependence of units, culture, and group norms. The third group considers the field or environment in which the conflict is embedded. The fourth group treats the context of the conflict on the structural level. The third and the fourth groups indicate that conflicts take place at different levels and that impact factors reside at external levels as well as within the primary level. Within these studies, the context is viewed as the field in which conflicts are embedded, and environmental factors are considered to contribute to conflict and influence conflict management strategies.

Within the domain of conflict research that critically assesses conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon, some researchers additionally emphasise that a focus on the social processes of how conflict is recognized and made sense of, and handled within the organisational system is equally important to our understanding of the strategies used in conflict management (Barley, 1991; Kolb, 2008; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Kusztal, 2002; Putnam, 2004; Van Maanen, 1992). This stream of conflict research views conflict as part of the social fabric of organisations, thereby emphasising conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon. Although as early as 1976, Thomas stresses the role of cognition in shaping conflict behaviour, an interpretative stream of conflict research was not developed until the late 1980s.

The interpretative stream in conflict research constitutes by no means a homogeneous, unified field. In fact, a variety of interpretative frameworks are used to study conflict and conflict management in organisations: analyses of discourses, for example, have been used to demonstrate how intercommunity group identities are negotiated in conflict (Collier, 2009), how discourse influences the enactment of tacit norms in conflict negotiations (Putnam, 2004), and how discourse in use determines what conflicts arise in organisations and how they are understood and managed (Kusztal, 2002). Analyses of interpretation processes in conflict have, for example, shown that sensemaking is an important factor in determining which impact disputes will have (Cloven & Roloff, 1991) and that social sensemaking with third parties is an important dynamic in the process of managing conflict (Volkema, Farquhar, & Bergmann, 1996). Analyses of interpretation processes in conflict have moreover showed that people

actively interpret conflict meanings through pre-existing cognitive structures whilst considering the context of the conflict (Gray, Coleman, & Putnam, 2007), a process that has also been termed as "*conflict framing*" (Brummans et al., 2008). Other studies with an interpretative approach to conflict have shown that the meaning that individuals and groups make of a conflict situation is influenced by the structural and culturally negotiated contexts within which an action occurs (Bartunek et al., 1992; Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Kolb & McGinn, 2009).

The third shift emerged as researchers from other areas of organisational research studied conflict in organisations and, based on their research experience, criticized the predominant use of survey instruments and laboratory experiments in conflict research because these methods maintained a view of conflict as a dyadic, asocial, and compartmentalized phenomenon. The critics of mainstream conflict research have facilitated an understanding of conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon, which essentially means that conflict and the forms it may take are shaped by the context in which it occurs.

I have now described how the field of conflict research has undergone the three major shifts of (1) embracing a functional view of organisational conflict, which emphasised how conflict can be a productive force rather than a organisational breakdown; (2) breaking from normative ideas about conflict management as researchers began studying de facto management of conflict; and, (3) moving beyond the traditional view of conflict as dyadic interactions and conceptualising conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon. The current study's focus on conflict and sensemaking situates it within a stream of research that has been inspired by the third shift. Given this study's display of how conflict is conceptualised in conflict research literature and how staff and management experience and act out conflicts in a nonprofit organisation, the current study constitutes an empirical contribution to the interpretative stream of conflict research. Below I describe the study's contribution in more detail and present the three research questions that have guided the study.

From conflict typologies to conflict topography: the current study

As shown above, conflict research has become well established in the literature. Although the three shifts have broadened the nature and scope of conflict research, the majority of this research has remained thoroughly embedded in positivism with laboratory studies and

survey instruments as the main methodologies for researching conflict. My review shows that a main contribution of these methodologies to the field of organisational conflict has been the developments of typologies to explain various aspects of conflict as phenomenon. From a simple consultation of oxforddictionaries.com, we learn that 'typology' means "*a classification according to general type*". The main features of the predominant typologies of conflict are (1) a conflict typology framework that categorizes conflict as to its content by distinguishing between the generalized types of task conflict and relationship conflict, and (2) a conflict management typology framework that categorizes conflict management as ways of responding to conflict by distinguishing between five generalized styles of handling interpersonal conflict.

Much of conflict research has been designed to confirm the existence of these conflict typologies using data that has been pre-categorized to fit the existing models. However, critics have argued that the existing conflict typology frameworks reduce our understanding of conflict in organisations. Kolb and Putnam (1992), for example, argue that conflict "*has its roots in the individual, social, organisational, and cultural relationships that overflow the existing descriptive and normative topologies*" (p. 315). The authors subsequently contend that what is needed are different methods and theoretical frameworks to capture conflict dynamics in organisations. In a similar vein, Barley (1991) calls attention to a common misconception about the nature of conflict in organisations, shown by the tendency to separate conflict and conflict resolution from the flow of daily organisational life and treat them as decontextualized events. This 'bracketing' of conflict does not mean that scholars view conflict as rare or unfortunate; rather, it means that conflicts are viewed as special cases to be treated in special ways. He considers this bracketing of conflict to stem indirectly from developments within the discipline itself, where social psychology has gained a dominant foothold in conflict research and where the study of dyadic negotiations in laboratory settings has dominated developments in conflict theory and practice.

Both Barley (1991) and Kolb and Putnam (1992) argue that we need to conduct studies of conflict at the centre of everyday experience of organisations if we want to further develop our understanding of conflict and from this deal with and potentially resolve conflict. The authors point toward ethnography as a method that has much to offer in moving the field of organisational conflict into new directions; they call attention for an 'ethnography of disputing'.

Developing a topography of conflict from the everyday experience at work

Inspired greatly by Barley (1991) and Kolb and Putnam (1992), I develop a topography of conflict from my research into everyday conflict at work at NGO Plus. While the term 'topography' means "*a detailed description or representation on a map of the physical features of an area*" (oxforddictionaries.com), my topography of conflict, inspired by a reading of Geertz' "*thick description*" (1973) of cultures, describes conflicts as they play out in the context of everyday life in this particular organisation. I develop the topography of conflict in chapter 6-8. Below I describe my foci for its development.

A topography of conflict displays conflict processes as they occur in the social relationships of this particular organisational setting, rather than working with the generalized classifications of conflict types and styles of conflict management, depicted by the conflict typology frameworks, to establish causal relationships. Through detailed recordings of people's experiences in conflict at NGO Plus, including their motives and meanings and the situations and contexts in which conflict occurs, the topography of conflict represents the processes of how meaning and actions interact in conflict handling. By gaining access to the conceptual world of NGO Plus in which these people work I capture the multiplicity of conceptual structures in people's interpretations of conflict and develop a topography of what these conflicts look like as they unfold in practice.

Rather than working with pre-categorized data that fit the typology frameworks, I welcome responses from the empirical field. Rather than decontextualizing conflict and conflict handling from the ongoing flow of daily organisational life and fitting them into the typology frameworks, I immerse myself in the empirical field to consider the local meaning-making in conflict and relationship structures and their relation to actions taken in conflict. Thus, whereas conflict typologies emphasise general categorisations of conflict and conflict management, a topography of conflict contains narratives that show how conflict is given shape and definition by specific everyday occurrences and becomes meaningful because of the social context in which it occurs.

My development of a topography of conflict has been inspired by the idea in past conflict research, that context is crucial when assessing conflict in organisations (see e.g. Gray et al., 2007; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Sheppard, 1992). Context-based conflict research focuses on the social relations, rules and values in the organisational systems as well as the organisational culture and structure from which the conflict may arise. A topography of conflict stresses the embeddedness of conflict developments in such contextual elements by displaying

that how conflict is recognised and interpreted within the organisational system shapes how they unfold in practices of conflict handling.

Moreover, in undertaking this study, I have been greatly inspired by what Barley (1991) suggests as an ethnography of conflict processes. I therefore use interview and observational methods to investigate conflicts and their ongoing management as they occurred in the routines and mundane activities that made up daily life in the organisation. Over the course of a two-year field study in a nonprofit organisation, I observed in-the-moment-conflicts and listened to participants' own accounts of their experiences with conflict. While traditional ethnography tends to portray conflict as part of something else, this study applies the methodology of ethnography to present a topography of organisational conflict that recognizes the central role of the organisation in conflict activity. This means that I aim to capture the context-embedded dynamics of conflict at work – that is, how conflict meanings play a role in the way conflicts are experienced and acted out and how these dynamics are shaped by the context in which the conflict occurs.

To capture these dynamics of conflict, I have adopted the theoretical framework of 'sensemaking' (Weick, 1995a; 2001) in this study. With a sensemaking perspective on organisational conflict, I focus on how conflict, as a social phenomenon, plays out in organisational cultures and group dynamics. Sensemaking theory belongs within the interpretative sciences of organisation studies. As argued above, an interpretative approach to studying organisational conflict is not new. Still, the application of Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking to the empirical phenomenon of conflict in organisations is only seen in Kutzal (2002), where sensemaking theory, together with discourse theory, is applied to a study of discourses in use in organisational conflict, and Brummans et al. (2008), who explicitly used sensemaking theory as their main theoretical framework to capture how multiple parties in intractable environmental disputes framed conflict situations. None of these studies, -however, examined how participants acted out framings, or sensemaking of conflict, in actual conflict situations, nor how the social and cultural context influenced the way the conflicts were framed, played out, and were dealt with. Nor has repeated searches through the literature provided me with conflict research that explicitly approach epistemological issues in defining and capturing conflict.

The current study aims to address these limitations by inquiring into the sensemaking activities in organisational conflict and how such sensemaking motivates engagements, actions, and practices and by critically reflecting upon conceptions of conflict in conflict research

literature and upon the enterprise of doing conflict research. Thus, with an aim to understand conflict at work and understand research about conflict at work, I examine the following research questions from a sensemaking perspective:

1) How is conflict conceptualised in conflict research literature?

2) How do staff and management experience and act out conflicts in the nonprofit organisation of NGO Plus and how does changing conflict sensemaking affect conflict at work?

3) What is my process of theorizing in conflict research?

The first research question is theoretical and contains my interpretation of conflict research literature and my critiques. I answer this research question in chapter 1 and in particular in chapter 2. The second research question is strictly empirical as it concerns showing how conflicts are constructed and enacted in the organisational field. I deal with this research question primarily in chapter 6 and chapter 7. The third research question is methodological and contains the story of how I tried to make sense myself of the research experience and the empirical material about conflicts that I gathered in the field. I answer this research question in chapter 3 and chapter 8. In chapter 4, I elicit my theoretical perspective of sensemaking that makes it possible to investigate the research questions stated above, and in chapter 5, I present the empirical context of NGO Plus to provide the reader with a useful platform from which to engage with the empirical analyses in chapter 6-8. In chapter 9, I summarise the contribution of this study and draw out its implications.

The main contribution of this thesis to conflict research lies in its effort to understand and portray conflicts as they play out in everyday organisational life and are given shape and definition that are meaningful in the social context in which they occur. Thus, my primary contribution is to show how conflicts are embedded in the structure of social relationships and to show how this embeddedness shapes interpretations of and actions taken in conflict. This portrayal of conflict leans towards Barley's (1991) conception of conflict as a social or cultural phenomenon.

As mentioned above, I apply Weick's theoretical framework of organisational sensemaking to develop this contribution. While Weick himself does not apply the framework

of sensemaking to the study of conflict, approaching conflict from a sensemaking perspective creates important insights into how conflicts are socially constructed and acted out in ways that make sense in the actual setting where the conflicts occur. From a sensemaking perspective on conflict at work, the focus is less on understanding how to reduce the level of conflict in the workplace than it is on understanding the processes through which individuals and organisations enact and make sense of conflict. Nevertheless, in terms of wanting to change, or resolve conflict, I grant that there is much to learn from work concerned with understanding it. Although I do not provide specific steps for how to change and possibly resolve conflict, I lean towards Bartunek et al. (1992), who argue that the broadening of our understanding of conflict and conflict handling in organisations may help practitioners to act from a more knowledgeable base.

Another contribution of this thesis lies in its effort to display the different ways in which different factions of conflict research conceptualise conflict. This contribution is primarily theoretical because it aims to add to current thinking in conflict research by emphasising how theoretical assumptions about what conflict is shape the knowledge production within the field. Thus the aim of this contribution is to move the practice of conflict research towards a direction that makes it more reflective in terms of what we talk about when we talk about conflict. This leads to the final contribution of this thesis, which emphasises its reflective stand to the research undertaking of studying organisational conflict. By displaying the methodological and ethical dilemmas related to the process of doing conflict research, the methodological contribution, together with the theoretical contribution, emphasises the construction of knowledge as an activity of sensemaking aimed at developing scientific knowledge within an area of research.

Outline of thesis

This PhD thesis is structured in an article-based format. This means that the thesis consists of two main parts – a frame (chapter 1-5 + 9) containing chapters that each focus on particular aspects of the study as is usually the case in the monograph format and three analytical chapters (chapter 6-8) comprising journal articles in various stages of the publication process. Given this format I grant that that some repetition appears in the thesis; this is a by-product of the chosen form.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study and presents an overview of conflict research literature. In this chapter I also situate the current study within the existing research field of organisational conflict. Chapter 2 contains an additional examination of the theoretical domain of organisational conflict, but in this chapter I review the theoretical positions on conflict found in the literature and juxtapose those positions with how different areas of conflict research have approached and made conflict at work the subject of study. Although some overlap between these two chapters cannot be avoided as both chapters contain reviews of conflict research literature, I intend to show very distinct aspects of the research literature in chapter 1 and chapter 2 respectively. In the former I provide an overview of what conflict research is about by describing the different streams of research existing within the field. In the latter I go deeper into the literature and focus narrowly on the concept of conflict by showing distinct and competing theoretical positions of what we talk about when we talk about conflict.

Following in chapter 3, I present the methods of data collection and analysis and describe the process through which the study's theoretical development emerged. In chapter 4, I provide the theoretical framework for the study and present the main theoretical concepts of sensemaking framework and enactment, which form the base for the analysis. Chapter 5 contains a presentation of the empirical context for the study. I include this empirical description due to space limitations in the article format and because I wish thoroughly to embed the study's observations and derivations about conflicts within NGO Plus' organisational culture and the organisation's embeddedness in society.

In chapter 6, 7, and 8, I present the three main analytical chapters in the form of journal articles. As mentioned in the Preface to this thesis, the articles are in different stages of preparation for publication. More importantly, the articles are presented as independent contributions to organisational conflict research as each of them raises distinct questions, connects to different bodies of literature, and employs distinct analytical concepts. Each article contains an empirical contribution to the field of conflict research and with the addition of chapter 2 each contains the main contribution of this thesis.

In chapter 6, I present the article 'Conflict And Sensemaking Frameworks In Nonprofit Organisations: An Analysis Of The Social Meanings Of Conflict'. The article shows significant processes concerning how staff and management make sense of conflict and how institutionalised meanings shape such sensemaking. More importantly, it shows how different perceptual frameworks may interact and compete in shaping social reality. The article reveals a weakness in Weick's sensemaking theory because there appears to be an implicit assumption

that sensemaking processes are targeted towards consensual understanding. By showing that conflict sensemaking may evolve from conflicting perceptual frameworks, this study refutes the assumption that describes sensemaking as consensual in nature.

In chapter 7, I present the article 'Exploring How Conflict Management Training Changes Workplace Conflict: A Qualitative Case Study'. The article shows how conflict sensemaking changed as it was enacted from the perspective of staff and management in a non-profit organisation that participated in conflict management training. Some conflicts did not change through training, when the conflicts' perpetual structural bases remained intact. Insights from the study call attention to the embeddedness of conflict in the organisation's social fabric.

In chapter 8, I present the article 'A Researcher's Tale: How Doing Conflict Research Shapes Research About Conflict. The article displays empirical narratives that explore how I used research experiences of getting access to information about conflicts in the field, making sense of – or deciding – which stories from the field are conflict stories, and dealing with ethical dilemmas in the process of doing research about conflict to reflect critically upon some common factors that influenced my construction of knowledge about conflict. The paper shows how field experiences in the research process act as conditions that shape the actual production of knowledge in a research field.

The analyses presented in this thesis connect to its title: 'Making Sense Of Organisational Conflict: An Empirical Study Of Enacted Sensemaking In Everyday Conflict At Work'. The title reflects that the scholarly enterprise in this thesis concerns deriving the meaning and understanding of conflicts as they appear in everyday organisational life; in the ongoing process of doing research, as well as in conflict research literature. Moreover, with this title I wish to point out that this thesis deals with the ways in which meaning and action interacts in processes of conflict handling in everyday conflict that arises naturally in daily organisational life when people meet in social interactions.

2

What is Conflict?

In the introductory chapter, I gave an overall presentation of the theoretical domain of organisational conflict and I situated this study within the stream of interpretative studies existing in the field of conflict research. Given that the review in the introductory chapter aimed at introducing a very large and dynamic field, I focused on the three main shifts in conflict research literature that have characterized our knowledge about conflict in organisations; that is, the shift from viewing conflict as dysfunctional to viewing it as constructive, from focusing on what should be done in conflict to focusing on what is done in conflict, and from viewing conflict as dyadic interactions to viewing it as an intra-organisational phenomenon. This chapter complements the review presented in the introductory chapter by going further into the literature. In this chapter, I present theoretical assumptions underpinning conceptions of conflict in organisational conflict research to investigate how conflict is conceptualised in conflict research literature.

Despite the voluminous work on how conflict is handled and its longevity as a research topic, discussions about what constitute the concept of conflict and its epistemology are rare (Some of the few who do discuss the concept of conflict are Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Pondy, 1967; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972; Thomas, 1992; Tjosvold, 2006; 2008). Consequently, the literature on organisational conflict offers many conceptualisations of conflict. However, the lack of discussion about what constitutes the concept of conflict and the many different definitions of conflict is a problem not because it creates conceptual ambiguity, but because a lack of awareness of the different theoretical assumptions embedded within these different conceptions of conflict obscures conceptual advancements in conflict research. The current debates in the field that do engage with what conflict is deal primarily with whether conflict is a negative phenomenon – that is, destructive and disruptive – or if conflict can be a constructive process that has positive consequences (for such a debate about conflict, see particularly De

Dreu, 2008; Tjosvold, 2008). Unfortunately, the scholars behind these debates do not openly reflect on the theoretical constituents on which they base their view of conflict.

In this chapter, I attempt to break new ground in conflict research literature by investigating the constructs underlying the meaning of conflict. More specifically, I analyse the literature to extract underlying theoretical assumptions of what conflict is. I find three distinct, and competing positions, each comprised by a group of theoretical assumptions, research objectives and main concepts that have dominated the literature on conflict at work. These positions centre on conceptualising conflict either as overt behaviour, as an outcome, or as a social construction. Given that each position depends on distinct assumptions about what conflict is, they each embrace distinct methods for researching conflict and hold distinct objectives for yielding scientific knowledge about conflict. In my examination of the literature, I recognise that not all conflict studies are of the same bent; my objective is to identify the dominant theoretical positions that have framed studies of conflict at work.

Conflict as overt behaviour

Early conceptions of conflict focused on its associations with competitive intentions manifested as deliberate interference with the goals of others (see e.g. Boulding, 1957; Fink, 1968). Here conflict was treated as a subset of competition since it was perceived that all cases of conflict would involve some level of competition. By contrast, some conflict researchers (see e.g. Deutsch, 1973; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972) criticised the ambiguous distinction between concepts of conflict and competition and limited the concept of conflict by narrowly conceptualising it as "*the overt behavioral outcome* (…)*, that is, the actual interference or blocking*" (Schmidt & Kochan, 1972, p. 363) that follows perception of goal incompatibility. The interference must be deliberate and goal directed by at least one of the parties involved, and it may be passive or active. In this view of conflict, perception of goal incompatibility is central and even seen as a necessary precondition for conflict. The concept of a goal is defined as future 'positions' that a unit wishes to occupy (Boulding, 1957).

In other iterations of what it is that essentially distinguishes conflict from competition, Katz and Kahn (1978) defined conflict as "*the collision of actors*" (p. 613) and thereby supported a position of *overt behaviour*. In doing this, they argued that certain questions, like whether a conflict is characterised by great anger or lack of it, by real or imagined differences of

interest, or by hostile act or a misunderstood gesture are all appropriate questions to understanding the conflict but not for defining it. Accordingly, Katz and Kahn (1978) defined conflict to always involve some kind of antagonistic behaviour, thereby regarding this as a basic constituent of the phenomenon. Being visible in overt behaviour, conflict was essentially viewed as a breakdown in a relationship.

Another contrasting view to conflict as competition was put forward by Thomas (1976) who highlighted the role of cognition in shaping conflict behaviour, emphasising the parties' cognitive interpretations of events. In the 1960s and 1970s, this cognitive perspective contrasted very strongly with the dominant behaviourist perspective present in the conflict literature at the time that viewed conflict behaviour as a direct 'black box' response to the other party's behaviour or to the situation. The idea of cognition, however, further emphasised that whether a certain behaviour or pattern is conflictual must be interpreted in the context in which it takes place.

While a main aim of the conflict research debates in the 1960s and 1970s was to distinguish conflict from competition, most studies were based on a position on conflict that emphasised the parties' behaviours in conflict situations. Conflict literature of this era focused on a party's deliberate interference with the goal of another following goal incompatibility or on an overt struggle visible by the collision of actors. While some of these elements in conflict do involve the role of cognition in shaping conflict behaviour, they all position conflict to be a matter, essentially, of observable behaviour, emphasising conflict as something (negative) that happens to the relationship between people. For this faction of conflict research, since, conflict is viewed as a dysfunctional breakdown within the organisation, the purpose of their research is normative: to reduce or resolve the conflict.

The preferred methodology of inquiry within this position on conflict is conducting laboratory studies that focus on the conflict behaviour of individuals and the processes that shape such behaviour. The advantages of this experimental methodology include its increased confidence in the direction of relationship between variables and not least its ability to observe the details of conflict behavioural processes largely inaccessible in field settings (Druckman, 2005). The experimental literature has been criticised for framing conflict behaviour as being primarily about individual cognition (Barley, 1991) and for experimental settings that are contrived, which poses a problem for generalizing results to real-world situations (Druckman, 2005). Conflict research methodologies therefore moved into the settings in which those studied

actually worked. This change in research methodologies was accompanied by changes in how conflict was conceptualised.

To sum up, the position on conflict *as overt behaviour* is visible in the breakdown of relationship and in deliberate interference with the goals of the other party. Main concepts that can be extracted from this position of conflict research are behaviour, interference, goal incompatibility, and cognition as cognition is viewed to shape conflict behaviour. Research within this position clearly aims to reduce the level of conflict and therefore has a normative purpose.

Conflict as an outcome

Underlying Pondy's analysis of conflict from 1967 was the notion that conflict disturbs the 'equilibrium' of the organisation, which at the time was implicit in nearly all studies of organisational conflict. Conflict was widely regarded as detrimental to organisational functioning. In 1992 however, Pondy revised the idea that conflict creates disequilibrium by arguing that "*conflict is not only functional for the organisation, it is essential to its very existence*" (1992, p. 260). This change in Pondy's conception of conflict in organisations epitomises a paradigm shift within the conflict research field – a shift from viewing conflict as dysfunctional to viewing it as a constructive event in the organisational life, which I described in the previous chapter. In this section however, I examine the theoretical assumptions of conflict that emerged from this paradigm shift. While Pondy was among the first to offer a new perspective on organisational conflict by positing them as inevitable processes needing management through particular forms of intervention and that conflict may be instrumental in the achievement of goals, many others (for example De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Tjosvold, 2006; Tjosvold, 2008; Van de Vliert, Nauta, Giebels, & Janssen, 1999) followed and have built on this notion of conflict being beneficial for organisations, thereby making the case for productive conflicts: "*Indeed, it is through conflict that teams can be productive and enhancing and leaders effective*" (Tjosvold, 2006, p. 92).

From the 1980s onwards, research in organisational conflict was either concentrating on task-related conflict or relationship-related conflict, categorizing conflict on the basis of its content and its sources and essentially regarding conflict as 'something' in itself. While task-related conflict concerns "*disputes about the distribution and allocation of resources, opposed*

views with regard to the procedures and policies that should be used or adhered to, or disagreeing judgements and interpretations of facts" (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005, p. 106), relationship conflict involves "*irritation about personal taste and interpersonal style, disagreements about political preferences, or opposing values*" (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005, p. 106). In a literature review of the concept of interpersonal conflict from 2004, Barki and Hartwick identified three properties that are generally associated with conflict situations: disagreements that relates to cognition, negative emotions which relate to affect, and interferences which relate to behaviour. Regarding the task-relationship distinction in conflict studies, Barki and Hartwick (2004) found the notion of disagreement to be central in task conflict and identified emotions as a key conflict dimension associated with relationship conflict.

Much of current conflict research has adopted the conflict typology framework that distinguishes between task conflict and relationship conflict. Although the main contribution of the conflict typology framework has been to distinguish between negative and positive, or productive, conflicts in organisations, these developments have spurred a lot of conflict research to map out how "*these two types of conflict differentially affect work group outcomes*" (Jehn, 1997, p. 531). That is, what makes one type of conflict better than another in organisations. The research objective within this position of conflict research is thus normative. Jehn (2001) argues, "*Moderate levels of task conflict have been shown to be beneficial to group performance on certain types of tasks*" (p. 239). In other words, task conflict is viewed as a way of enhancing decision-making quality, individual creativity, and work-team effectiveness in general by preventing a premature consensus (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Jehn, 1994; 1995; 1997; Tjosvold, 1991). On the other hand, relationship conflict is thought to interfere with performing tasks and thereby to lower effectiveness and innovativeness (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995; 1997; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991).

Those who do research using the conflict typology framework see conflict as *an outcome* because the focus is on how to manipulate the system – that is, how to reduce those conflicts that are bad for the workplace and stimulate, or cultivate, other types of conflicts which are deemed constructive for increasing performance, effectiveness, creativity, and innovation. Consequently, research within this position of conflict research prescribes that relationship conflicts is bad for the organisation while task conflict is more likely to be constructive.

This analysis primarily applies to the interpersonal level of analysis, which means that conflicts are viewed as limited to those which occur between individuals or groups in

organisations (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Given that conflict within this position is assumed to be acknowledged and verbalized by those who are involved, it is viewed as measurable. Thus the preferred methodology for investigating conflict relies on using survey instruments designed to measure conflict intensity and conflict levels (see e.g. Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Shah & Jehn, 1993) between individuals and groups, and staff and management's conflict management styles (see e.g. Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Rahim, 1983; Rahim, 2000; Rahim, 2002).

The advantages of measurement methodologies are that the results are reliable due to the large number of cases included in a typical survey and that causality is easier to determine (Druckman, 2005). Nevertheless, instruments for measuring conflict have been criticized for holding the individual as the unit of analysis in the study of conflict in organisations. Treating the individual as the sole benchmark for conceptualising conflict and for determining how the conflict will develop often treat the organisational context in which the conflict occurs in the distant background (King & Miles, 1990; Knapp et al., 1988; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Kuhn & Poole, 2000; Somech et al., 2009; Womack, 1988). To capture how conflict is not only an interpersonal event but also a social and cultural phenomenon, conflict researchers are urged to embrace anthropological methods, which highlight the social and cultural embeddedness of conflict (Barley, 1991; Kolb & Putnam, 1992).

To sum up, within the position on conflict *as an outcome*, researchers distinguish between conflicts that are detrimental to organisational functioning and conflicts that are functional and productive for the organisation. In essence, conflict is regarded as 'something' in itself – either task or relationship conflict, and is productive if the right kind of conflict can be attained. Conflict can therefore be reduced or stimulated depending on the situations and the kind of outcome desired by management. Research conducted by this faction has a normative purpose because it aims to reduce the conflicts that are bad for the organisation and stimulate productive conflicts.

Conflict as a social construction

The social construction approach to conflict emphasises attention to how the disputants interpret the conflict, how they talk about the conflict, and how the conflict is acted out at different times and in different places (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). In a now-classic article by

Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat from 1981 on 'Naming, blaming, and claiming', the foundation was laid for the view that conflict by 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). In a comment on his study of conflict management among the British Police Force, Van Maanen (1992) successfully articulated the importance of meaning in conflict: "*Meaning is so critical because there is absolutely nothing inherent in the notion of conflict that is strictly independent of human observation and the making of meaning*" (p. 55).

According to this view, conflict is seen as a performance to which the involved parties and observers attach different meanings that may change over time, and which can be talked about in any number of different ways (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). This also means that people in organisations can have a conflict without giving that label to their relationship and as observers of that relationship, we may use the concept of conflict mainly as an analytic category (Barley, 1991).

Researchers whose work constitutes this position on conflict view conflicts and their ongoing management as embedded in organisational members' interaction as they go about their daily activities (Kolb & Putnam, 1992). Researchers who emphasise the disputants' interpretive processes during a conflict have therefore criticized a lot of conflict research for treating conflict as being outside the usual day-to-day business of organisational life (Barley, 1991). Rather than assuming that conflict is a special case to be treated in special ways, this position on the meaning of conflict assumes it to be part of the social fabric in the organisations and therefore investigates its occurrences as part of the routines of work and its norm for handling as embedded in everyday organisational activities (Bartunek et al., 1992; Dubinskas, 1992; Friedman, 1992; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Morrill, 1989; Van Maanen, 1992). The conception of "*conflict* [as] *part of the social fabric of organisations*" (Bartunek et al., 1992, p. 217) implies that interpretations of issues and problems that make up a conflict must be understood within the context in which the conflict occurs. In essence this view of conflict highlights the role that social context and social process play in shaping the form and trajectory of a conflict (Barley, 1991).

Given that it is difficult to demarcate conflict from other form of social interaction, conflict researchers working from this conceptualisation of conflict welcome stage models that distinguish between phases in conflict development. Examples of such models are the grievance-conflict-dispute model by Nader and Todd (1978) and the naming-blaming-claiming model mentioned above by Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980). Both models recognise how

conflicts are dynamic processes with changing scopes, manifestations, and enactments by demarcating different stages in conflict development. The stage models furthermore aim to illustrate that the evolvement of conflict from subjective grievances to actual disputing evolves in the structure of social relationships.

The assumptions that underlie this position of conflict research constitute conflict as a *social construction* because the focus is on how conflict is given definition and shape within an organisational setting as disputants take action. Conflict seen as a social construction emphasises the role that the social context plays in the interpretation and conceptualisation of the conflict. This view has implications for the unfolding and trajectory of the conflict (Barley, 1991). Moreover, the varieties of ways conflict is handled in organisations – that is, the choice of methods available – are culturally and locally governed in an organisation (Van Maanen, 1992). By assuming conflict as omnipresent, scholars working within this position on conflict do not see conflict as always taking overt forms of expression but acknowledges that conflict can be expressed through more private or hidden forms of expression (Bartunek et al., 1992; Martin, 1992). Conflict is therefore not always assumed to be visible nor is it always acknowledged.

The preferred methodologies for investigating conflict within this group of conflict definitions are therefore qualitative methodologies such as interviews, documents, discourse analysis, and ethnography, which are designed for the researcher to gain insight into the lived experience of those who are studied. Scholars such as Kolb and Putnam (1992) and Barley (1991) have suggested that the sensitivity inherent in the methodologies of ethnography and anthropology has the potential to uncover the structural and cultural contexts of conflict. This can be done by treating the conflict as a dynamic, evolving relationship that is under the strong influence of contextual factors such as social identities, distributions of power, cultural knowledge, and unanticipated turns of events (Barley, 1991, p. 186).

Research which views conflict as a social construction aims to broaden the understanding of conflict and conflict handling in organisations and is not about prescribing specific applied steps to deal with conflict. That said, implications of providing practitioners with diverse explanations of conflict are that these explanations may help them act from a stronger knowledge base (Bartunek et al., 1992). Researchers adhering to this school of thought characterize conflict research as descriptive.

To sum up, within the position on conflict *as a social construction*, conflict is viewed as omnipresent and part of the social fabric of organisations. A conflict's shape reflects the definition that observers give to it, and it is embedded in human interaction as organisational

members go about their daily activities. This position on conflict includes theoretical concepts of meaning and experience, and emphasises conflict as embedded in the cultural and structural context. The purpose of such research is descriptive because within this faction of conflict research the core aim is to understand conflict. Implications of this are that practitioners may act from a more knowledgeable base when dealing with conflict to create social change.

Theoretical assumptions about what conflict is

I have examined conflict research literature to investigate how conflict researchers have conceptualised conflict in developing their models. From this, I have extracted underlying theoretical assumptions about conflict and I have found three distinct and competing approaches that have framed studies of conflict at work. As depicted in table 1, each of the three significant theoretical approaches that have governed studies of organisational conflict are rooted in significant epistemological presuppositions about what conflict is and what it means for the organisation. Table 1 also include the sources to which these particular three conceptions of conflict can be traced.

POSITIONS OF CONFLICT	THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS	OBJECTIVES	MAIN CONCEPTS	SOURCES
CONFLICT AS OVERT BEHAVIOUR	Conflict is a breakdown in relationship. Conflict is manifested in behaviour as deliberate interference. Conflict happens to the relationship. Conflict behaviour is shaped by cognition.	Normative: To reduce the level of conflict	Behaviour, Interference, Goal incompatibility, Cognition,	Boulding, 1957; Coser, 1956; Deutsch 1973; 1990; Fink, 1968; Katz & Kahn, 1978; March & Simon, 1958; Pondy, 1967; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972; Thomas, 1976.
CONFLICT AS AN OUTCOME	Conflict is 'something' in itself. One must distinguish between conflict that is detrimental to organisational functioning and conflict that is functional and productive for the organisation. Conflict is interpersonal. Conflict is acknowledged and verbalized. Conflict can be reduced or stimulated.	Normative: To get productive conflicts	Task conflict, Relationship conflict	Barki & Hartwick, 2004; De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1994; 1995; 1997; 2001; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991; Pondy, 1992; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Rahim, 1983; Rahim, 2000; Rahim, 2002; Renwick, 1975; Shah & Jehn, 1993; Tjosvold, 1991; Tjosvold, 2006; Tjosvold, 2008; Van de Vliert et al., 1999.
CONFLICT AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION	Conflict is omnipresent. Conflict is shaped by the definition that observers give to it. Conflict is embedded in human interaction. Conflict is part of the social fabric in organisations. Conflicts are processes that are not necessarily visible, acknowledged and verbalized.	Descriptive: To understand the dynamics of conflict. Implications of this are that practitioners may act from a more knowledgeable base to create social change	Meaning, Cultural context, Structural context, Embeddedness, Experience	Barley, 1991; Bartunek et al., 1992; Brummans et al., 2008; Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Dubinskas, 1992; Felstiner et al., 1980; Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Gray et al., 2007; Knapp et al., 1988; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Kolb, 2008; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Kusztal, 2002; Martin, 1992; Mather & Yngvesson, 1980; Morrill, 1989; Nader & Todd, 1978; Putnam, 2004; Sheppard, 1992; Van Maanen, 1992; Volkema et al., 1996.

Table 1: Positions on conflict

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My own position on conflict resembles the position on conflict as a social construction in the sense that I also give attention to disputants' interpretive processes in conflict and to the ways that the conflict is experienced, talked about and acted out at work. Moreover, similar to research within the position on conflict as a social construction, my analysis of conflict also emphasises the role that social context plays in how the conflict is interpreted within the organisation as this has implications for how the conflict unfolds. I situate my own position on conflict tentatively within conflict as a social construction because, as we move through the thesis, I present how the study's methodology, empirical material, theoretical framework, and analyses, iteratively, have challenged my thinking about conflict and have sharpened my position of what conflict is. My final position on conflict will appear in the last chapter of the thesis.

This chapter has presented an overview of the dominant theoretical assumptions underpinning the positions of conflict in conflict research literature. The thesis of this chapter is that conflict research is never isolated from epistemological commitments, whose diversity leads to different ways of positioning and engaging with conflict. Although epistemological commitments are rarely openly displayed within conflict research literature and may often even remain unrecognized by the individual researcher, they are a key feature of the theoretical assumptions that influence how researchers make things intelligible. With that in mind, I therefore use some pages of the next chapter to describe the change in my own epistemological position since this has shaped my position on conflict and the methodological choices I have made in order to capture conflict as empirical phenomenon.

3

To Study Conflict

In the previous chapter, I argued that research is never isolated from epistemological commitments and that such commitments always shape how we conceptualise and decide to engage with objects of study. The current study is no exception. In this chapter I therefore present my own epistemological position. However, throughout the study my epistemological position changed from reflecting positivist assumptions about conflict to committing to a more interpretative view of conflict. In this chapter, I confront the consequences that the change in epistemological position has had for my choice of methodology, my scientific perspective on the object of study, and my own role as a researcher.

Changing my epistemological position

In this section I describe how my thinking behind the study – that is, how my epistemological commitments, changed. This is important because by explicitly recognizing the change in my epistemological commitments I guide the reader to a better understanding of how I came to make conflict at work intelligible.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge. Epistemological commitments are a key feature of our pre-understandings and shape how we make things intelligible (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). Epistemological commitments create a coherent path for our thinking, which shape how we acquire knowledge, how we rely upon our senses, and how we develop concepts in our minds. In any profession, discipline, occupation or everyday activity where knowledge claims are made, epistemology contributes by clarifying the limits and conditions of what is construed as justified knowledge, whether or not those involved recognize this as so

(Johnson & Duberley, 2000). Concerning scientific research, our underlying epistemological commitments influence the particular questions we ask, how we value different research methodologies for investigating those questions, and how we evaluate the output of our research. Thus, epistemology is the study of the criteria by which we can know what does and does not constitute scientific knowledge (Johnson & Duberley, 2000).

Epistemology is important because it is fundamental to how we think. The term 'epistemology' is an ancient Greek word, which may be what gives it its esoteric character, often obfuscating more that it reveals. The word derives from two words: the noun 'episteme' which means 'knowledge'; and the suffix 'ology' which means ' knowledge', 'theory, or 'the study of'. Thus, according to this etymology, the word 'epistemology' is usually understood to mean a concern with knowledge about knowledge, or the investigation of knowledge itself. As argued by Johnson and Duberley (2000):

> "[E]*pistemology is the study of the criteria by which we can know what does and does not constitute warranted, or scientific, knowledge*" (p. 3).

Clearly referring to theories of knowledge – *how* one can know the world – it seems that epistemology is one step removed from the practice of science itself. Nevertheless, epistemology is pivotal to science because it aims to provide foundations for what we consider to be true knowledge – that is, how we arrive at our beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Accordingly, 'proper' scientific theorizing can only happen after the development of epistemological theory.

Everyone adheres to some theory about what constitutes reliable knowledge, and these epistemological commitments provide us with criteria for distinguishing between reliable and unreliable knowledge. Such criteria rest upon ontological assumptions about whether (a) there is an objective reality 'out there' to be known and (b) it is possible to remove all subjective bias in the assessment of that reality (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). A fundamental question of epistemological concern is thus whether or not science can produce objective knowledge that shows that there are no incontestable foundations from which we consider our knowledge of knowledge. Instead we have competing philosophical assumptions about knowledge that lead us to engage with our object of study in particular ways.

While it is not possible to detach ourselves from our epistemological commitments; indeed we depend upon them in order to undertake the task of doing research, we can become

more consciously reflexive when considering our epistemological position. This involves becoming aware of our pre-understandings and trying to assess their impact upon how we engage with the world. Thus, studying epistemology involves critical interrogation of the often-unnoticed taken-for-granted assumptions and values that influence our social construction of reality and then influence action. Below I describe the change in my epistemological commitments, as this is a key feature of how my theoretical assumptions about conflict changed. Moreover, the change in my epistemological commitments influenced my methodological choices.

Epistemological take-off

Because of the study's original research objective, which was about measuring possible changes in conflict management behaviour stemming from conflict management training intervention, the study employed a before-and-after research design and was structured to obtain longitudinal data in order to compare effects before and after the training intervention. With data collection taking place over a two-year period, I aimed to measure potential long-term changes occurring one year after the completion of the conflict management training. The study was inspired by positivist assumptions about causality and I had applied standardized tools for data collection and aimed at minimizing my own biases.

The study employed both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (single and focus group interviews) approaches in the collection and analysis of data. The quantitative approach consisted of a questionnaire that comprised a number of validated scales used to measure conflict levels and conflict management behaviours at NGO Plus.[1] The qualitative approach was intended to complement survey findings with interviews in a mixed methods research design.

However, when I selected NGO Plus to be the empirical case organisation in the study, senior researchers and statisticians at the National Research Centre for the Working Environment advised me to drop the survey element of the research design because the population size of NGO Plus was too small. Survey instruments simply would not be sensitive enough to capture changes in a population of only thirty individuals. A couple of months into the study, I therefore dropped the survey element of the research design and instead I decided to

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[1] I planned to use the following validated scales: the Intragroup Conflict Scale (Jehn, 1995; Shah & Jehn, 1993), which measures the level of task and relationship conflicts in organisational units; Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II (Rahim, 1983; 2000; 2002), which measures conflict management styles; and the scales for Conflict Norms and Conflict Resolution (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), which measures norms for conflict management in organisational units.

spend a significant amount of time in the organisation myself and, from my own presence, learn about conflict and conflict management at NGO Plus. Although experienced in gathering and working with different types of qualitative data, I engaged myself in this study as a first time ethnographer. Having changed the research design, I let the empirical material that I gathered via participant observations and via interviews complement each other.

I chose to do an ethnographic study because I anticipated that this method would enable me to explore the results of the conflict management training and advance our understanding of the effects of such training. Thus, I maintained the longitudinal research design and gathered the empirical material before and after the conflict management training.

I gathered the empirical material in three periods of fieldwork, which ran over a two-year period from June 2008 to September 2010, amounting to six months of full time fieldwork (see fig. 1 for the research process timeline). The fieldwork included repeated open-ended qualitative interviews with staff and management (Kvale, 1996; Steyart & Bouwen, 2004), focus group interviews (Halkier, 2002; Schensul, 1999), on-site observations and participant observations (Bernard, 1994; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Hastrup, 2003; Waddington, 2004) and direct observations of the training.[2] The six months of fieldwork included one month in 2008 (August 2008), three months in 2009 (January-April 2009) and two months in 2010 (June and August 2010). In total, I conducted 56 interviews – that is, 52 individual interviews and four focus group interviews. I conducted the individual interviews yearly in four rounds – that is, once in 2008 (August 2008), twice 2009 (February/March 2009 and April 2009), and once in 2010 (June/August 2010).

All members of staff and management were interviewed at least once. Six individuals, a mix of staff and managers, participated in individual interviews in all four rounds. Additional interviews were conducted with managers, union representatives and other staff members over

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[2] Besides the Kvale book (1996) about conducting and analyzing interviews, I originally consulted a body of clinical literature when writing about interviews and used references in the texts such as Malterud's (2001) piece entitled 'The art and science of clinical knowledge: evidence beyond measures and numbers' which had been published in The Lancet, and Goldenhar's et al., (2001) article entitled 'The intervention research process in occupational safety and health' which had been published in the Journal of Occupational Medicine. Both these articles presented and described qualitative methods to an audience of readers working from positivist assumptions in their work and research. While these articles very clearly communicate that the value of qualitative methods is that they enable a focus on social interaction and relationships in context, this is still communicated within a paradigm where causality, objectivity and verification of truth are the main pillars of scientific knowledge generation.

the course of the study. I conducted the focus group interviews in two rounds – that is, once in 2009 and once in 2010, with the same seven staff members, who were divided into two focus groups. The appendix displays the entire list of interviews and the interviewing patterns (see Appendix B). Individual interviews lasted from 20 to 75 minutes, and focus group interviews lasted from 90 to 120 minutes.

Half the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, while for the other half, I took notes during the interview and wrote them up later that same day. This difference stemmed from my wish to experiment with different ways of documenting the interviews; in the former the interview produced a sound file, which was transcribed at some later point, in the latter my written notes formed the basis for the finished interview transcript. In both ways of conducting the interview I found that I was able to be attentive to what the interviewees said and to structure the interview as a conversation between us. A main consequence was, -however, that interviews that were recorded often ended up being longer than when I was writing down what the interviewee said because sometimes, by not having to write down all that they said, allowed me more space to explore more or less relevant tangent themes that arose in the interviews.

Before I describe the interview topics and my observations, I discuss how certain experiences during the first period of fieldwork brought about an epistemological turning point in the study. It was this turning point that changed my use of the research methods to having a more cumulative approach rather than being fixated on training effects.

Fig. 1. Research process timeline

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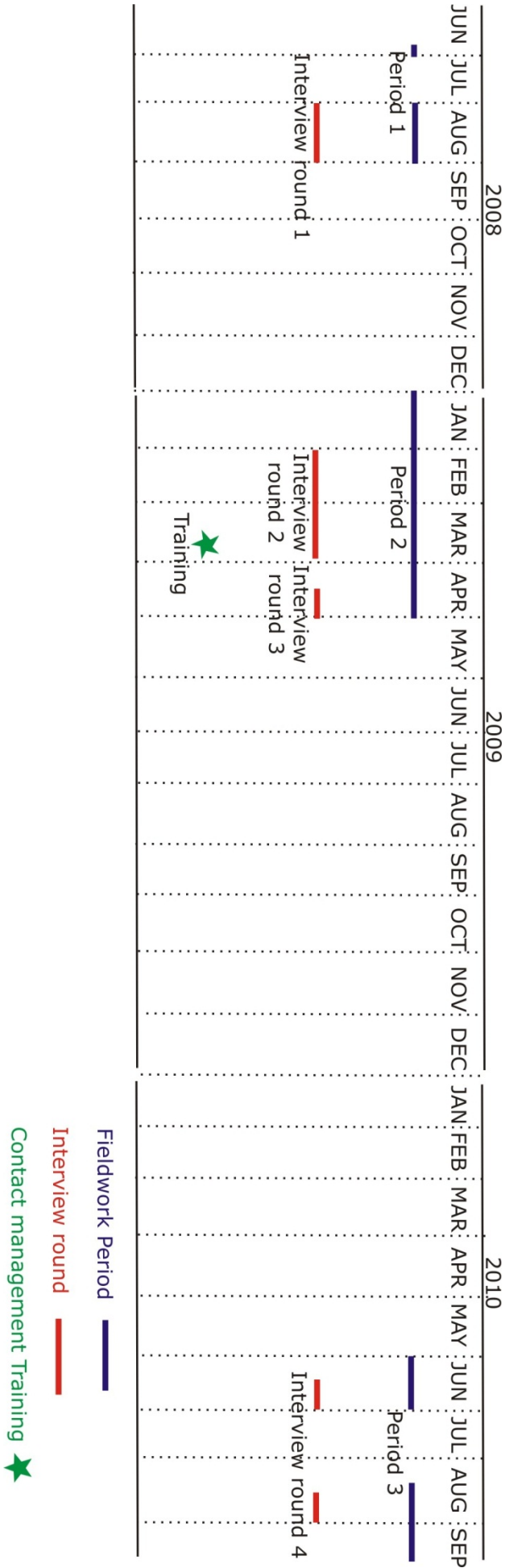
As I began the fieldwork in 2008, the theoretical assumptions of the study were still infused by positivism because although I no longer planned to collect survey data, I was still working with the same conflict typology frameworks of task and relationship conflicts and conflict management styles, which I had planned to use in the surveys. Thus, I still had a pre-categorized approach to gathering the empirical material and was investigating conflict as being 'something' in itself. Moreover, I still intended to use the three periods of fieldwork and the four rounds of interviewing to detect if any changes had occurred in conflict levels and conflict management behaviours at NGO Plus. Finally, despite my decision to use ethnography, I anticipated my presence at NGO Plus to have a 'neutral fly on the wall'-character.

Below I describe how my experience of investigating conflict as 'something' in itself during the first period of fieldwork in 2008 brought about the epistemological turning point of this study. The experience led me to be more explicit about my epistemological commitments and from that to develop a focus on everyday conflict to understand how meaning and action interact in processes of conflict handling.

Investigating conflict as 'something' in itself: An epistemological turning point

In the beginning of the research process I needed to define my object of study clearly. To do this, I conducted a review of conflict research literature, and from that review I decided to lean on well-established conceptions of conflict developed in the literature. In the literature on organisational conflict, I found a myriad of definitions of the term 'organisational conflict'. Many conflict scholars define conflict as perceived differences and opposition between individuals or groups about interests, beliefs, or values that matter to them (De Dreu et al., 1999; Jehn, 1997; Wall & Callister, 1995). More importantly, organisational conflict researchers appeared to agree that such perceived differences and opposition "*evolve around work- and task-related issues, or around socioemotional and relationship issues*" (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005, p. 106). To recap from the previous chapter, conflict can be categorized into two groups: Task-related conflict which involves work procedures and the allocation of resources, and relationship conflict which concerns values and interpersonal style (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005). At this point in the study, this way of categorizing conflict by its content appeared convincing, not least due to the enormous support that this typology framework has gained in the conflict research community.

Consequently, I began the first fieldwork period in 2008 looking specifically for task conflict about work procedures and the allocation of resources, and relationship conflict about

clashing values and interpersonal style. However, quickly into the fieldwork, I began to experience problems when trying to distinguish between different types of conflict. Below I describe how my initial investigation of conflict at NGO Plus took off from the typology framework that distinguished between task and relationship conflict. I discovered that in real life situations of conflict the neat theoretical distinction between task and relationship conflict did not work. Demarcations between different types of conflict were blurred simply because conflict was not either task or relationship conflict. These conflicts contained elements that were both task-related as well as relationship-related and more importantly, it was difficult to distinguish task from relationship issues. As I describe below, my study took off from investigating conflict at NGO Plus as 'something' in itself as it is prescribed by the conflict typology framework, but I ended up inquiring into how conflicts played out in practice and why they took the form they did.

An example of this difficulty occurred while I was observing a conflict between team members. Ruth, Lisa, and George were working in a team with Sarah, who they thought was taking up too much space in team meetings because she always presented a lot of ideas and talked extensively about her opinions, experiences, and contacts. In a team meeting, the team was discussing one of their joint tasks and for today's meeting, Ruth had prepared to present a new way that they could process this one particular joint task. As she presented her idea, everyone in the meeting agreed that it was a good idea and just the solution they were looking for. Sarah nevertheless decided to present her idea about how she thought the joint task should be processed. She interpreted the situation as a brainstorming session where everyone could share ideas. But the situation was not a brainstorming and Ruth therefore began to defend her idea and asked, "*Why are you presenting this now? Is it because you don't think that my idea is good enough?*" "*No*", Sarah immediately answered, "*I just have an idea as well, which is different to yours.*"

While on the surface it looks like a task conflict, the situation unfolding in the meeting is not just about "*opposing views with regard to the procedures … that should be used*" (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005, p. 106). It is also about how Sarah breaks the norms the others in the team have decided for how ideas should be presented and discussed in meetings, which indicates that what is going on is a relationship conflict because it involves "*opposing values*" (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005, p. 106) about how team members can relate to each other. Moreover, the others in the team perceive that the problem occurs when Sarah interferes with their work (task conflict about the allocation of resources), which they all say is something she does quite often. It really

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annoys them and George sums up the team-shared opinion that Sarah is "*too much*" (relationship conflict about interpersonal style). After the team meeting, George reflects on Sarah's interpersonal behaviour, "*She's all over the place*", he says, and continues, "*In the team meetings … she doesn't stay with what her role or responsibility is, she extensively expounds on subjects that belong to someone else. It really wears on our relationship*". With her interpersonal behavioural style at meetings, Sarah clashes with the others' way of relating to each other professionally. This creates some kind of socioemotional distance between her and the other team members and strains their relationship. Lisa, one of the team members explicitly says, "*Sometimes we enter each other's personal space and we take professional criticism very personally and then there's conflict. It's when the boundaries for professionalism get blurred*".

The example shows how a team conflict is both a task conflict and a relationship conflict, and that the different task and relationship elements are interrelated in different ways. This has implications for the mantra about reducing those conflicts that hurt the organisation and stimulating conflicts that are considered to benefit the organisation on which the conflict typology framework is founded. If most conflicts are a blend of both task and relationship conflict, then how should we approach such conflicts to gain our desired outcomes.

Additionally, conflicts in the team which are about the task at hand arise easily because of clashing ways of relating to each other professionally, which again are fostered by opposing personal values and differing preferences for how team members should behave in team meetings. Moreover, the very visible conflict about how the team should or should not do its work becomes evidence for team members who perceive that within the team they have substantial collaborative problems, which keep them firmly in their opposite positions of interpersonal behavioural style, dogmatic preferences, and values. Thereby the different elements in the conflict feed each other in ongoing cycles of disagreement and conflict. Due to this entanglement, it is very difficult to clearly distinguish between task and relationship elements in conflict, which has further implications for how we approach conflict. If it is difficult to clearly distinguish between task and relationship elements in conflict, then how can approaches aimed at reducing the 'bad' conflicts and stimulating the 'good' conflicts succeed?

I could not see that the neat theoretical distinctions that were described by the literature between task and relationship elements in conflict existed in real life. I grant that most conflicts consist of a lot of different elements that potentially could be categorized as task or relationship issues, but the empirical demarcation between task and relationship elements in conflict was blurred and the different elements were interconnected and appeared to feed each other: the

disagreements about how to do the task, the difference in norms for how the team meetings should run, the interference with work, the clashing interpersonal behavioural style, the socioemotional distance between team members, they pushed each other forward in ongoing cycles.

Moreover, I realised that as I categorized conflict by its content and its sources, I was essentially regarding conflict as being 'something' in itself, which cut me off from exploring how conflicts were interpreted by those people who were experiencing them and how such interpretations shaped, and were shaped by, practices of conflict handling. More importantly, I could not see that the position on conflict as being 'something' in itself, as manifested by a differentiation between task- and relationship elements in conflict, would lead me to discover anything interesting about conflict at work. I wanted to go beyond reporting events and details of experience related to conflict and instead try to understand and show how events and experiences of conflict represented systems of meaning (Geertz, 1973) at NGO Plus. More importantly, whenever I tried to fit conflict events from the field into the categories of task and relationship conflict, I felt that the conflict typology constrained me from looking at the larger picture of conflict at NGO Plus. I was simply missing out on the particular ways that conflict was interpreted and talked about in the organisation and how the ways conflict was addressed were shaped by the structure and culture within which they occurred. Moreover, I could see that conflict unfolding at one level in the organisation (for example in teams) was interconnected to conflict at a different level in the organisation (for example between staff and management), and I wanted to explore these interconnections.

It became clear to me that the conflict research literature that I initially had reviewed primarily used laboratory and survey measurement methods – methods that were different from the ethnographic methodology that I had decided to use. I therefore began to look towards other streams of literature to learn about how other scholars had conceptualised and studied conflict at work. Inspired by Barley's (1991) conception of conflict as a social and cultural phenomenon and Kolb and Bartunek's (1992) focus on conflict as part of the social fabric of organisations, I decided prior to the second period of fieldwork that I would no longer use the conflict typology framework for analysing conflict in the field. Instead, I fell back on the epistemological paradigm of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Schutz, 1970), which had formed my training as a graduate student. With phenomenology forming my basic scientific awareness, I decided to move towards an explicit focus on everyday social practice of conflict handling, and for this purpose I found Garfinkel's (1967) tenets of ethnomethodological research useful.

Ethnomethodology has proven advantageous in documenting the mechanisms by which the construction of social reality is accomplished in everyday life. Below I describe my epistemological commitments in detail and explain the relationship between phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

To conclude, the epistemological turning point occurred when I consciously ceased the deductive approach of trying to fit conflict events from the field into the conflict typology framework, and instead I began gathering empirical material on conflict that explored patterns and themes to understand the phenomena of conflict. My approach to conflict changed to one of understanding *how* the social reality of conflict is constructed, managed, and sustained. In essence, this focus of inquiry fostered a process perspective on conflict, emphasising how conflict was understood locally and managed accordingly (which in turn influences local understandings of conflict). Thus, it was this change in the study's epistemology – that is, my theoretical beliefs about how I could discover knowledge about conflict at NGO Plus, and methodology – that is, how I decided to use these research methods for acquiring knowledge about conflict at NGO Plus, and not only the change in the use of research methods, which changed the study's approach to conflict.

The pivotal epistemological commitment

The epistemological idea that ended up shaping this study is ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). In an article on the diversity of ethnomethodological research, Maynard and Clayman (1991) write:

> "[W]*hereas numerous commentators have equated ethnomethodology with phenomenology…, it is more accurate to say that a phenomenological <u>sensibility</u> is expressed in ethnomethodology than the latter is or should be a phenomenological sociology*" (p. 388, my emphasis).

Thus, for the purpose of tracing this sensibility, I briefly describe the main tenets of phenomenology.

The logic of a phenomenological approach to a study is learning about the meaning of a naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world (Van Maanen, 1979b). Schutz (1970) argues that researchers should focus on how *the life world* is experienced by ordinary members of society. The life world is conceptualised as what every individual takes for granted. Schutz argues that "*safeguarding of* [this] *subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee*

that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer" (1970, p. 271). Therein lies the imperative that the researcher must deal with how the social world is made meaningful with an emphasis on the configuration of meaning. This orientation to the subjectivity of *the life world* points researchers to the constructs and categories of knowledge, the beliefs, values, images, folk theories, and attitudes, that people apply to aspects of experience to make them meaningful and give them a semblance of everyday familiarity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). Moustakas (1994) writes:

> "*The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience*" (p. 13).

This approach seeks to elucidate the phenomenon of behaviour in the context of a particular situation to determine what an experience means for the individuals who have had the experience. From these descriptions, general meanings may be derived.

At the very basic level, Garfinkel (1967) was influenced by phenomenology in his inquiries into the world of everyday life of how the social world is made meaningful. Thus, ethnomethodology takes its point of departure from phenomenology by focussing on both the *hows* and the *whats* of social reality. Ethnomethodology accomplishes this by focusing on how people construct their experiences and their worlds and also the configuration of meaning and the broader cultural and institutional contexts shaping the meaning-making (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). Particularly the *hows* involved – individuals' use of instructions, moral principles, values, and other accounts to construct a sense of coherence in social action is under scrutiny in ethnomethodological research. Garfinkel (1967) therefore argues that given that human actions are infused by social and cultural meanings, the social worlds should be studied by means of approaches that give us access to the meanings that guide people's behaviour. Hence, it is by combining a phenomenological sensibility with a paramount concern for everyday social practice that Garfinkel (1967) turned the main purpose of ethnomethodology into addressing the problem of social order.

The concept of social order refers to a relatively persistent system of linked social structures, social institutions and everyday social practices which enforce and maintain 'normal' ways of relating and behaving (Garfinkel, 1967). Garfinkel (1967) particularly emphasises a focus on how people actually 'do' social life, which aims at documenting the mechanisms by which they construct and maintain social entities. Such an empirical investigation of people's

methods for accomplishing everyday reality demands that the researcher focuses on *how* people in a setting accomplish a sense of social order. This approach thereby deeply implicates people in the production of social order. Holstein and Gubrium (2005) write about ethnomethodology:

> "*Whereas conventional sociology orients to rules, norms, and shared meanings as exogenous explanations for members' actions, ethnomethodology turns this around to consider how members themselves orient to and use rule, norms, and shared meanings to account for the regularity of their actions*" (p. 487).

Ethnomethodologists do not see social order as externally imposed by familiar social forces; instead, they view it as locally produced by way of the practice of everyday reasoning.

This rests upon two central properties of ordinary social action (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). First, all actions and objects depend upon context, which means that they have indeterminate or equivocal meanings without a discernible context. Practical meaning is derived through contextualization. Thus, as declared by Garfinkel (1967), the issue of how practical actions are tied to their context lies at the heart of ethnomethodological inquiry. Second, circumstances that provide meaningful contexts are themselves self-generating because accounts of a setting constitute that setting, while they are being shaped by the contexts they constitute. In short, social order and its practical realities are 'reflexive' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005).

Accordingly, Garfinkel (1967) is keenly attuned to naturally occurring social interactions and talk because he views these as constitutive elements of the setting that is studied. Ethnographic studies tend to focus on locally crafted meanings and the settings within which social interactions constitute a social order. With an ethnographic approach, one is therefore able to consider the situated content of talk in relation to local meaning-making.

To sum up, the main analytical difference between phenomenology and ethnomethodology is, according to Holstein and Gubrium (2005), that whereas researchers taking a phenomenological stance are interested in documenting the processes by which social reality is constructed, managed, and sustained, while ethnomethodologists have been more analytical radical and empirically productive in specifying the actual procedures and mechanisms by which social order is accomplished in everyday life. That is, how ordinary members actually 'do' social life and how this constitutive work produces the locally unchallenged appearances of stable realities. In the next section, I describe what the epistemological commitment to ethnomethodology meant for my scientific perspective on conflict at work.

My scientific perspective on the object of study

Instead of using the conflict typology framework, I conducted my inquiry of conflict from the point of view of the staff and management at NGO Plus. For this purpose, I used Blumer's (1969) idea of 'sensitizing concepts' to guide the analysis and my understanding of what was going on in the field. Blumer (1969) writes about sensitizing concepts:

> "*A sensitizing concept … gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look*" (p. 148).

I wanted to make the practices of conflict handling – that is, how people at NGO Plus actually 'do' conflict in everyday life, the focus of my inquiry. With sensitizing concepts as a reference point, I explored how the meanings that people ascribe to conflicts are related to their ways of acting out these conflicts, and how the social and cultural context in which the conflicts occur shape and are shaped by the forms that conflicts take. Both of these sensitizing concepts are central tenets integral to an ethnomethodologist's notion of social action.

I therefore began to systematically record and document how conflicts at NGO Plus emerged and unfolded and how they were framed and handled by individuals and groups within the organisation. In essence, this fostered a process perspective on conflict, emphasising how conflicts were understood locally and managed accordingly. The epistemological position of ethnomethodology acted as a meta-theory that guided me in choosing what paths to avoid (conflict typologies), and what paths to pursue (emic[3] categories of conflict).

Specifically, the change in my epistemological commitments meant that instead of focusing only on comparing effects before and after the conflict management training, which involved positivist assumptions about causal links between the training and changed conflict behaviour and required that I minimized my own biases, I began to focus on processes of how conflicts at NGO Plus were framed and handled at the collective level of the organisation. My change in epistemological commitments moreover meant that I became interested in how such framing and handling of conflict were in accordance with and constituted social regularities for ways of relating and behaving at NGO Plus. Moreover, I became interested in how my own

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[3] An emic perspective (Harris, 1976) represent the 'insider's point of view' in the generation of understandings of a phenomenon.

organisation and sensemaking of fieldwork experiences and the empirical material acted as conditions that shaped my actual production of knowledge about conflict.

As a result of this change in epistemology, the study was turning into a conflict topography that emphasised processes of how meaning and action interact in processes of conflict handling. Below I describe how I used the different research methods for acquiring knowledge about conflict.

How I used the research methods to study conflict

As shown in the research process timeline in figure 1, the first period of fieldwork comprised the first round of interviewing, the second period of fieldwork comprised the second round of interviewing, observations of the training, and the third round of interviewing, and the third period of fieldwork comprised the fourth round of interviewing. As explained above, I carried out observations and participant observations of everyday organisational life at NGO Plus in all three periods of fieldwork.

The observations, participant observations and interviews conducted during the first period of fieldwork had an introductory feel to them. Here I focused on learning about the kind of work that NGO Plus does, alongside its mission and modus operandi. I conducted active participant observations in one of the organisation's fundraising teams as well as at department meetings in that particular team's department. I also had several informal conversations with different people at NGO Plus while I was hanging out on the departmental floors. Finally, I observed a full-day event of an organisational seminar about work related stress followed by a picnic in a nearby park. Interview questions in the first round of interviewing asked about educational backgrounds and length of employment, tasks and responsibilities, how they felt about working at NGO Plus, community and collaboration at work, and opinions about management (see Appendix A for interview questions used in all four rounds of interviewing). During this fieldwork period, I structured the days so that I usually did the participant observations or the 'hanging out and around' in the morning and interviewed people in the afternoon.

Due to the sensitive nature of conflict (Jehn, 1995; Kolb & Putnam, 1992), I directed questions about the conflicts at work only at the management and union representatives, not at the other employees. However, given that everyone knew that I was related to the conflict management training course and that I was there to study how such a training intervention might affect the organisation, including how conflict was approached and dealt with, I was, of course,

strongly associated with conflict. People therefore often brought up the subject of conflict during interviews, often saying that conflict was not something that happened in their organisation. Others appeared to be nervous when I talked to them, afraid of what I would ask them about (see chapter 8 for a full account of how I was positioned in the field). It was these field experiences of either denial of conflict or uneasiness in interviews, together with my difficulties of applying the conflict typology framework when people *did* acknowledge that there were 'problems' in their working relationships that brought about the epistemological turning point. Needless to say, the turning point changed how I approached the observations and interviewing in the second and third periods of fieldwork.

Before commencing the second period of fieldwork, I had become well aware that I needed to build trust with the staff and management at NGO Plus before I would be able to gain access to knowledge and experiences with conflicts at NGO Plus. I therefore put more emphasis on doing the participant observations – that is, doing them the full day and over a longer period of time in one department at a time. I conducted participant observations in two of the three departments at NGO Plus – the clerical unit and the fundraising department. I divided my time equally between doing participant observations in the two departments. In the clerical unit I took part in daily work activities, such as distributing mail, updating the membership database, and keeping accounts, and in the fundraising department I translated documents for the organisation's membership magazine and for its annual report. In both departments, I observed staff and management's informal interactions and participated in staff meetings. In the third department, the programme department, I did not conduct formal participant observations. I did, however, participate in a full day staff meeting. I interviewed staff and management from all three departments.

The method of participant observations helped me conduct unobtrusive research by focusing on the work processes going on at NGO Plus. Given that such research activities were not threatening, the participant observation helped me to gain participants' trust before conducting the interviews; therefore, I always conducted the interviews at the end of a fieldwork period. Here I often used the interviews to get 'inside' people's heads (cf. Harris, 1976) by talking to them about their perspectives, intentions and emotions involved in conflicts that I had either witnessed or heard about during fieldwork.

For example, when I observed disagreements and arguments between people in the organisation, I would use the interview to talk to those involved, as well as observes, about how they had experienced those situations. Moreover, during daily work and particularly at

department meetings, I would observe how they talked about their collaborations with the other organisational groups, and in interviews I would further explore intergroup relationships with the interviewees. I viewed intergroup relationships not only between departments but also between different occupational and hierarchical groups. Finally, I observed how staff and management talked about conflict and organisational values, and in interviews I would ask directly about how conflict and collaborative problems were addressed by the organisation.

Czarniawska (1998) emphasises how investigating representations is an important part of doing research in organisations because interviews can be used to elicit standard accounts of a practice investigated by the researcher and that the researcher's observations may contrast with these accounts. As a result, the researcher may use the gap between the two as a source of knowledge, providing richness and a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under study. Van Maanen (1979a) additionally argues that the notions and theories we use to explain events and patterns in the empirical material simply rest upon both our talking to the studied people and observing the contextual contingencies upon which the studied people base their representations. I therefore consider that my use of the empirical materials gathered via interviews and observations complemented each other so as to allow me to explore how conflict often played out at multiple levels in the organisation.

This focus on people's experiences, their motives and meanings and the context and circumstances of action (cf. Denzin 1978, cited in Johnson & Duberley, 2000) in situations of conflict allowed me to study processes of how conflicts play out. The research method of participant observations allowed me to understand the routines and mundane activities that make up life at NGO Plus. More importantly, this focus positioned conflict and conflict handling as everyday phenomena, embedded in the social interactions between organisational members as they go about their daily activities, rather than as exceptional situations that occur and are dealt with outside the usual day-to-day business of organisational life (cf. Barley, 1991). The research method of participant observations additionally allowed me to make explicit the knowledge that is often taken for granted and to investigate the social order (cf. Garfinkel, 1967) of how to address conflict at NGO Plus. Specifically, a number of rules and values shaped what were the appropriate ways for staff and management at NGO Plus to address and act out conflict.

In the second round of interviewing, I interviewed people about their work values, their knowledge of conflict at work; their own experiences with conflict; how they dealt with conflict, their perception of intergroup relations, and their motives for participating in the conflict management training. I conducted a large number of interviews to obtain multiple perspectives

(cf. Smircich & Stubbart, 1985) on any situation of conflict. More importantly, I tried to obtain material about the same conflicts from several different points of view (cf. Kolb & Putnam, 1992) to gain further insights into conflict dynamics at NGO Plus.

For ethical reasons, I carefully structured the interviews to make sure that the conflict situations we talked about either were situations that the interviewees knew I had observed as they unfolded in practice or situations that the interviewees themselves brought up. I asked interviewees to bring up any situations that were frustrating to them personally and that involved other members of staff and/or management. I encouraged them to talk freely and at length about what had happened and how they had experienced it. Often I already knew about the particular situation or conflict relationship that an interviewee was talking about, either from the observations or I had heard about it from others. Still I always made sure that whatever perspectives and feelings were shared during the interview only came from the interviewee him/herself. This was my way of practicing confidentiality in the interviews. In chapter 8, I elaborate on how I dealt with different ethical dilemmas that arose in the process of doing conflict research.

The conflict management training took place between the second and third rounds of interviewing. I documented the conflict management training by using direct observations (Bernard, 1994) of training activities. I focused on the information and exercises that were presented during the training and how the participants embraced these, and how the trainer developed a relationship with the participants. As my documentations of training activities were rather detailed, I was able to use those five days of training as one large focus group interview with various members of staff and management discussing theories of conflict and how these theories could be applied to their own organisation. I elaborate on the training in chapter 5 and chapter 7.

The third round of interviewing took place immediately after the conflict management training, and I primarily used the interview to explore reflections about the training from the participating staff and management. For this I not only used single interviews, as I had done in the first two rounds, but also focus group interviews. I interviewed them about what they liked and disliked about the training, the trainer's performance, the group's performance, and their reflections on whether there were training elements that had gotten them to think differently about conflict at work.

The third and last period of fieldwork took place one year after the conflict management training in 2010. This period included both participant observation and a fourth round of

interviewing using single interviews and focus group interviews. As I had done the previous year, I conducted participant observation in the clerical unit and the fundraising department. I tried to look for whether there were any changes in the ways conflicts were addressed in the organisation and whether conflict situations played out differently. I used the fourth round of interviewing to address the same situations or conflict relationship that had been brought up in the second round of interviewing with the aim of detecting if any changes had occurred. However, I carefully ordered the questions to prevent self-fulfilling answers from interviewees about changes. I began an interview by inquiring about the same situation or conflict relationship that we had talked about the previous year, and then proceeded to ask about what they remembered from the training. Only at the end of the interview did I ask them to consider how the training had affected the aforementioned problems.

The four rounds of interviewing developed into serial interviewing that explored developments in specific events and in interviewees' experiences of conflict. Although I focused specifically on changes in conflict behaviour in the last round of interviewing, interviews conducted during this round nevertheless often gave me a more comprehensive understanding of conflict dynamics at NGO Plus. Through the serial interviewing, I developed an ongoing relationship with the interviewees, which facilitated discussions of sensitive issues while also allowing exploration of changing experiences.

Instead of using the four rounds of interviewing to examine effects by revisiting the same questions in every round of interview to see what effects the training had had, as I should have done had I stayed with my initial positivist assumptions about conflict, I used the four rounds of interview in a way where I asked questions that 'build on' what was covered in previous interviews. This provided me with richer and more detailed information. I also used the participant observations in this cumulative away. By taking the learning from a previous fieldwork period to inform my focus in the current fieldwork period, without excluding myself from events and phenomena that were 'new', I pushed myself towards more nuanced understandings of what was going on in the field. I conclude that the longitudinal fieldwork and the serial interviewing offered considerable advantages in exploring evolving and complex processes of how conflicts play out at NGO Plus. These methods simply enabled a more complex account of conflict dynamics because they helped me to see more things in the empirical material (cf. Kan & Parry, 2004). In the next section I describe how I used different methods for analysis for analysing the empirical material.

Analysing the empirical material

I used two different methods to analyse the empirical material: thematic analysis and narrative analysis. Below I describe how I used these methods for analysing the empirical material and why I changed them.

I used thematic analysis because this approach seemed productive in terms of learning about what themes and patterns were in the empirical material. As argued by Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis should be among the first methods of analysis that qualitative researchers learn to use because it provides core skills of thematizing meanings that will be useful for conducting other forms of qualitative analysis. The procedures for coding empirical material with thematic analysis seem similar to that of grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but unlike grounded theory, thematic analysis is not directed towards theory development and does not either have a foothold in positivism and or treat data as "*something separate from the researcher* [implying] *that they are untouched by the competent researcher's interpretations*" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510). Thematic analysis is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I used thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report the themes and patterns within the empirical material, which I present in chapter 6. Staff and management's *sensemaking* in conflict appeared very prominent in the empirical material. Through my use of the thematic analysis, I was able systematically to explore themes of sensemaking in conflict because these themes emerged clearly every time staff and management talked about conflict. Staff and management's accounts of what had happened in conflict were always entangled with their view of why the conflict had occurred in the first place and why the conflict unfolded the way it did. Thus, it was not that the thematic analysis enabled staff and management's sensemaking in conflict; rather it enabled *me* to systematically explore how their sensemaking in conflict worked. I was very careful not to interpret staff and management's sensemaking in conflict as reports of real life events, but as their ways of narrating conflict.

Given that there were significant patterns of staff and management's sensemaking in conflict, I decided to apply Karl Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1995a; Weick, 2001; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) to extend my understanding of conflict dynamics at NGO Plus. I unfold Weick's theoretical framework of organisational sensemaking in the next chapter. For now I merely explain that I used the methods for analysing the empirical material in order to explore staff and management's sensemaking in conflict.

I changed my method of analysis from thematic to narrative (Czarniawska, 1998) for the rest of the study. I decided to use narrative analysis because it allowed me to pursue storylines in the empirical material that represented staff and management's changing sensemaking in conflict (chapter 7) and my own sensemaking in the process of doing research about conflict (chapter 8). Compared to thematic analysis, I felt that I with narrative analysis was better able to explore conflict *processes* over time by working systematically with the longitudinal character of the empirical material; that is, tracing the meanings and fates of conflicts longitudinally. This also included noticing how my own sensemaking of research experiences that arose throughout the research process evolved.

In both chapters 7 and 8, I used the narrative approach to make sense of events and bring them into a meaningful whole. A narrative entails the construction of a plot that moves through an original state of affairs, an event, and the consequent state of affairs. A narrative approach includes a temporal dimension by introducing time and space to understand particular events and actions (Czarniawska, 2004). Chronology is used to understand events and actions in logical coherence that extends the chronology of the data collection process (through time), thereby broadening the temporal scope of a particular narrative.

I specifically distinguish between narratives *from* the field that I produced from analysing the data and narratives *of* the field that were my collection of stories from the organisational floor. While the former is counted among interpretative approaches to organisation studies and conceptualises research as sensemaking, the latter emphasises stories told in the field, their provenance, formulations, and authors (Czarniawska, 1998).

The narratives *of* the field are the stories told at NGO Plus, which I gathered while doing fieldwork. Narratives of the field encompass symbolic language like metaphors and euphemisms, and integrate the view that the organisational setting influences the language choices made and enacted in conflict (Putnam, 2004). As shown in chapters 7 and 8, sensemaking processes in the organisation were often communicated via narratives. Narratives *of* the field are carriers of meaning in that they serve a purpose of sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995a). Being connected to experience, narratives provide a means for capturing the everyday character of organisational sensemaking as they highlight sensemaking that lead to enactment.[4] Mills (2010) concurs by arguing that sensemaking makes an "*important*

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[4] Although narratives are identified as important means of sensemaking, this is not exclusive since not all sensemaking is narrative, as noted by Weick (1995a). Other means of sensemaking that are not narrative can be represented in conversations and discussions where the iteration between discussants displays processes of

contribution to our understanding of everyday life in organisations" and if we want insight into what is meaningful to people in organisations and why they think and act the way they do, then we must explore the construction of meaning conveyed in narratives and discourses.

Focussing only on talk and discourse is insufficient (Hansen, 2006). While talk and discourse capture those discursive understandings that have been made explicit, many understandings remain at a tacit level where they exist in the form of unspoken assumptions that actively guide our behaviour. When we examine talk, we get insight into the construction of meaning, but the tacit assumptions and cultural knowledge that are present in organisations are equally used in meaning constructions (Hansen, 2006). The question is how we make such tacit assumptions and cultural knowledge equally explicit. Ethnography is a methodology that aims to make cultural or tacit knowledge more explicit because it explores the contexts in which narratives and discourses are produced. Hansen (2006) writes: "*If our focus is on the construction of meaning in organisations we must attend to the construction site, or context*" (p. 1050).

I combined the narrative analyses of conflict with contextual analysis of NGO Plus. The contextual analysis linked the narratives to actions and events beyond their immediate scope (across space), thereby embedding the narratives in organisational social dynamics and structure. The narratives themselves therefore assumed ontological significance beyond the immediate context in which they were told (Bryant & Lasky, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004). This combination of methods for analysis allowed me to pursue storylines in the empirical material that were appropriately placed historically and contextually, and longitudinally investigated. Specifically in chapter 7, I investigate what had happened prior to the conflict emerging – that is, how participants would talk about the antenarrative, and how the conflicts unfolded and were related to and entangled with other phenomena in the organisational system, for example management practices, external demands, and intergroup hierarchies.

The contribution of combining narrative analysis with contextual analysis is that it is through the contextual descriptions, which I derived from months of doing ethnographic research at NGO Plus where I was on site every day of the working week, that I can display contextual influences on sensemaking in conflict and how it is possible to understand the sensemaking activities that occur. This is however neither about bringing in context by

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argumentation. I managed to capture such sensemaking processes in the unfolding of disagreements for example, but not exclusively, at department meetings.

combining narrative and ethnographic approaches, nor is it about turning the analysis of sensemaking in conflict into a context analysis of conflict. Rather, it entails a distinct way of working with the empirical material that reflect the iterative movements between staff and management's sensemaking in conflict and the organisational context in describing and interpreting the materials in use in sensemaking activities in conflict. This way of working with the empirical material starts from concrete situations of social interaction when analysing enacted sensemaking in conflict and therefore has the social act as the level of analysis. As argued by Hansen (2006) this approach emphasises "*the in situ analysis of narrative construction*" (p. 1066). I have found that this iterative approach to working with the empirical material makes the analyses about sensemaking in conflict at NGO Plus more meaningful and more plausible.

In chapter 8, I display my own sensemaking of research experiences; that is, my own search for meaning throughout the research processes. I do this by reflexively describing my own process of theorizing about conflict.

My own role as a researcher

The change in epistemology meant that my role as a researcher changed. Instead of trying to minimize my own bias to obtain a neutral fly on the wall character, I actively used myself in the generation and analysis of the empirical material. In chapter 8, I thoroughly reflect upon what it meant for my role as a researcher to study conflict – how this positioned me in certain ways, how I had to establish trust prior to getting access to knowledge and experience with conflicts at NGO Plus, how I sought to decide which stories from the field were conflict stories, how I dealt with ethical dilemmas that arose in the process of doing research about conflict, and how my long-term engagement with the field resulted in my own involvement in conflict. The accounts in chapter 8 position me, not as an objective researcher of conflict at NGO Plus, but as taking the role of a sensemaker, actively constructing representations of the reality of NGO Plus conflicts.

Summarising: to study conflict

To sum up, my fieldwork at NGO Plus ran over two years from August 2008 to September 2010

and comprised participant observation, observations, and interviews. Throughout that period my epistemological commitments changed from reflecting positivist assumptions about conflict to committing to a more interpretative view of conflict. This change in epistemology meant that my perspective on conflict changed. Instead of approaching conflict as 'something' in itself I focused on the configuration of meaning in conflict. Thus I approached conflict as *an everyday phenomenon* that arises naturally in daily working life when people meet in social interactions.

I used methods for analysing the empirical material to explore processes of sensemaking in conflict. In the analysis, I described narratives of sensemaking in everyday situations of conflict. By exploring sensemaking in conflict, I focussed specifically on how social meaning and action interact in processes of conflict handling. In the next chapter, I outline the theoretical positioning for the study represented by Weick's theoretical framework of organisational sensemaking.

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Sensemaking and Conflict

The study integrates insights from Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking (1995a; 2001; Weick et al., 2005). Although sensemaking is an evolving theory, there are several agreed upon tenets. I begin this chapter by outlining my 'sensemaking' of what I view as the main tenets of sensemaking theory and by explaining its microsociological roots. I then explain my use of the two main theoretical concepts of 'framework' and 'enactment' to understand the empirical material in terms of how sensemaking and enactment interact in conflict handling. I then describe my application of sensemaking theory to the study of conflict by discussing some of the criticisms that have been made of Weick's sensemaking framework and by presenting my own strategies for confronting these criticisms in my analyses.

Organisational sensemaking

Sensemaking is the process by which people give meaning to experience. Sensemaking as a theory of that process involves the three main moves of perception, interpretation, and action, occurring in an ongoing cycle of revisions (Weick, 1979). There are two core assumptions in sensemaking theory. The first conceptualises sensemaking as the social construction of meaning, where individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues, or signals, from their environments. The second core assumption in sensemaking theory is that thinking and action define one another (Weick et al., 2005), which emphasises the theory's potential to explain the role of agency in organising.

According to Weick, "[t]*he basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs*" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). Students of sensemaking define sensemaking as: "…*the*

ongoing, retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Thus, sensemaking makes circumstances comprehensible both prospectively and retrospectively. Sensemaking theory differs in important ways from psychological theories. Having been developed in the field of organisational behaviour, sensemaking theory is concerned with meaning construction and enactment in and among groups rather than the effects of enacted sensemaking on individuals. Sensemaking theory therefore differs fundamentally from cognitive and social psychological theories by being a microsociological theory rather than a psychological one.

Sensemaking is what it says it is, because it literally means the making of sense. Weick writes, "[h]*ow* [people] *construct what they construct, why, and with what affect are the central questions for people interested in sensemaking*" (Weick, 1995a, p. 4). Sensemaking is about constructing meaning, comprehending, placing events into frameworks, patterning, reacting to surprise, and interacting in pursuit of understanding. Thus, sensemaking is the primary site where meanings materialize, and inform and constrain action and identity (Weick et al., 2005). By the phrase "*meanings materialize*" Weick et al. (2005, p. 409) mean that sensemaking is an important issue of language, talk, and communication, because situations, organisations, and environments are simply talked into existence.

What sensemaking is not synonymous with, Weick argues, is interpretation, because most descriptions of interpretation focus on a text, and what sensemaking does is address how the text is constructed in addition to how it is read (Weick, 1995a). This suggests that interpretation is only a component of sensemaking because as noted by Weick, "*Sensemaking is about authoring as well as reading*" (1995a, p. 7).

As mentioned above, sensemaking is a theory of that process. While process thinking has puzzled philosophers as well as social and natural scientists since before the early Greek philosophers, Weick is an early contributor of process thinking in organisation studies. Process thinking is a way of thinking about the world while acknowledging that the phenomena under study contain an inherent gradualness, which is not to be mistaken for the assumption that everything undergoes gradual change. Rather, process thinking directs attention to the analytical distinction between *process* versus *entity*, which, in the study of organisations, is a fundamental ontological distinction (Bakken & Hernes, 2006).

Applying a sensemaking perspective to the study of conflict means to view conflict and conflict handling as events that arise in the flow of daily organisational life rather than as outcomes from our manipulation of the system to cultivate or reduce whatever conflicts we want

or do not want. Applying a sensemaking perspective to the study of conflict additionally means a focus on how conflicts are recognized and interpreted collectively within the organisation since it is these emergent conceptualisations at the collective level of the organisation which can explain the dynamics of conflict.

Sensemaking is about the accomplishment of reality rather than the discovery of it. Weick writes:

> "*To talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creation*" (1995a, p. 15).

When people engage in sensemaking activities, Weick (2001) emphasises that it is more precise to think of them as accomplishing reality because to make sense is to focus on a limited set of cues, and to elaborate those cues into a pragmatic, plausible, and momentarily useful guide for actions that themselves are constructing the guide that they follow; thus, action tends to confirm the preconceptions which shaped the action in the first place (Weick, 1988, p. 307).

The seven properties

In 1995, Weick published his book *Sensemaking in Organizations*, in which he explored the social aspects of organisations and proposed a framework that described how individuals and organisations make sense of their environment. Weick essentially suggested that, rather than focusing on outcomes, we could use sensemaking to understand the social processes that contribute to organisational outcomes. In the book, Weick develops seven sensemaking properties, which he suggests serve as "*a rough guideline for inquiry into sensemaking in the sense that they suggest what sensemaking is, how it works and where it can fail*" (Weick, 1995a, p. 18). Thus, sensemaking properties can provide insights into what we need to look for if we want to understand why an outcome has occurred. I therefore, with the hope of systematically clarifying the meaning of 'sensemaking', structure this section around the seven explanatory properties of sensemaking: *social* processes, *retrospective*, reliance on *cues*, *plausibility*, *identity*, *ongoing* experience, and *enactment*.

Social. Sensemaking is ongoing, subtle, and easily taken for granted. To make sense of events, we draw on the meanings we have constructed through past experiences and interactions in society (Weick, 1995a). Even though sensemaking may seem like a private, individual process, it is inherently social because what a person does internally is contingent on others,

whether they are present or not. At a micro level, this means that individuals engage co-workers, relatives and friends in processes of making sense of events in everyday life and work. But at a more collective level, it also means that organisational rules, symbols and language have an impact on an individual's sensemaking activities by providing procedures or scripts for appropriate conduct and behaviour.

The social pillar of sensemaking emphasises how our knowledge is not created in a vacuum. People actively shape each other's meanings through interactions in the context of relationships and expectations of others. Hence, people studying sensemaking pay a lot of attention to talk and discourse because that is how much of social contact is mediated (Weick, 1995a), and such inquiries therefore primarily operate at micro levels of analysis. The emphasis on meaning construction as happening through social interactions in groups is another important example of how sensemaking theory differs from psychological theories. Compared with other microsociological theories, sensemaking theory does not investigate specific individual cognitive processes or behaviours. Rather, it is concerned with the actions of groups and communities (Weick et al., 2005), where it provides a framework for understanding how social phenomena play out in organisational cultures and group dynamics.

Retrospective. Sensemaking happens when people make retrospective sense of situations that they find themselves in, and it involves constructing, filtering or framing the subjective into something more tangible (Weick et al., 2005). The retrospective characteristic of sensemaking means that we rely on past experience to make sense of current events, which makes sensemaking a comparative activity: to give meaning to the present we compare it to a similar past event and rely on this to make sense of it. Implications of sensemaking being a retrospective process are that events must be noticed before they can be interpreted and understood. In other words, it is only possible to direct attention to what already exists (Weick, 1995a). When people engage in sensemaking activities, they create accounts or explanations of events to fit them into their beliefs and values.

Focused on and by extracted cues. Our sensemaking activities involve focusing on and extracting cues, which are elements from the context and past events that help us decide on what information is relevant in order to make sense of a situation. Extracted cues provide points of reference for linking ideas to broader networks of meaning (Weick, 1995a). But our sensemaking activities are selective in terms of which cues we extract to support our interpretation of an event. Often individuals focus on particular elements of a situation while completely ignoring others. The question of which cues we extract is related to the context and

past experiences. For example, rules, norms and regulations may dictate what cues we will extract to make sense of a situation (Mills et al., 2010). Individuals may also interpret cues in ways that support their values and beliefs.

Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Making sense of things is not about truth or accuracy but driven by plausibility**.** Weick writes, "*accuracy is nice, but not necessary*" (Weick, 1995a, pp. p. 56). Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy means that when we make sense of an event, we look for cues that make our sensemaking seem plausible. We do not rely on the accuracy of our perceptions. Sensemaking is consequently about creating plausible explanations in order to orient new circumstances to present contexts. The property of plausibility accounts for inconsistencies in sensemaking among organisational members. Different groups within an organisation may derive different meanings from the same action, event or policy, which may explain why organisational behaviour may not be consistent across the organisational hierarchy (Weick, 1993).

Grounded in identity construction. A core preoccupation in sensemaking theory is the construction and maintenance of identity. Because identities are constituted out of processes of interaction, identity construction lies at the root of sensemaking: who we think we are and the factors that have shaped our lives affect how we interpret them and what we enact – that is, how we see the world. Our identity is constantly being constructed and reconstructed as a result of experiences and contact with other people. This in return affects what outsiders think we are – that is, our image, and how they treat us, and stabilises or destabilises our identity (Weick et al., 2005). In terms of organisational identity, questions such as 'who are we?' or 'how do we do things?' may be triggered by changes within organisations as well as by their external societal relations.

Enactive of the environment. Weick describes enactment as "*the activity of 'making' that which is sensed*" (Weick, 1995a, p. 30). At one level this means that individuals create their own reality. But as they produce part of the environment they face, they may find themselves constrained by the environment. Below I explore the property of enactment much further because it constitutes a main theoretical concept in my model of analysis.

Ongoing. Sensemaking is ongoing; it is a sequential process that never stops because sensemaking flows are constant. However, this characteristic of sensemaking as an ongoing process that happens all the time seems to contradict Weick's (1995a, p. 85) statement that sensemaking is provoked by shocks or ambiguity. This contradiction requires further exploration into occasions for sensemaking.

Weick writes that occasions for sensemaking include shocks, changes, ambiguity, or unexpected actions that may be small as well as massive but that are a break in routine and therefore interrupt an ongoing flow. Sensemaking is therefore often studied in contexts marked by extreme circumstances, such as crises and major organisational changes, where it has contributed to explaining substantial interruptions to normal orders (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1990; Weick, 1993). Weick, however, maintains that we continuously make sense of what is going on around us but that this activity often becomes more obvious in organisations when staff and management confront issues, events, and actions that are unexpected or confusing or in other ways constitute a break from the routine (Weick, 1995a). It is in such situations where staff and management isolate moments and cues from this continuous sensemaking to make sense of the current situation. Thus, while sensemaking becomes more obvious in situations that emerge from a break in the routine, the ongoing characteristic of sensemaking maintains that any noticeable event represents an occasion for sensemaking (Weick, 1995a).

The ongoing characteristic of sensemaking relates to Weick's assumption of sensemaking as a process that is reinforced through interactions with others in an attempt to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty (1995a). Weick sees ambiguity as a common type of sensemaking occasion in organisations, because it constitutes a 'shock' that triggers sensemaking. When people experience ambiguity, they engage in sensemaking because they are confused by too many interpretations. When a disruptive event occurs, what once made sense no longer does so, and the individual experiences temporary disorganisation, an experience of ambiguity that predisposes individuals to make sense of things differently.

Because sensemaking becomes more obvious in situations that emerge from a break in the routine, an evident approach to organisational sensemaking has been to examine the social processes of sensemaking in contexts that are marked by extreme circumstances, such as crises (e.g. Brown, 2005; Weick, 1988), disasters (e.g. Gephart, 1993; Vendelø & Rerup, 2009; Weick, 1990; Weick, 1993) or major organisational changes (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Louis, 1980; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). However, as argued by Weick (2010), organisational sensemaking during extreme and turbulent contexts are not representative of ordinary processes of organisational sensemaking. Other students of sensemaking have additionally highlighted that the goal of a sensemaking perspective is to understand how organisational life is possible in its particulars (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999).

Sensemaking processes can therefore advantageously be examined in events not characterized by crisis and turbulence. Maitlis (2005), for example, focuses on ordinary

everyday sensemaking processes over extended periods of time in British Symphony Orchestras to display how distinct forms of everyday sensemaking unfold, interact, and connect to different types of accounts and actions.

Similarly, I focus on the ways in which distinct forms of everyday sensemaking in processes of conflict handling are marked by being everyday experiences of organisations rather than situations of crises. Since conflicts are ambiguous and involve different often opposing points of view, they are excellent occasions for the study of sensemaking.

A sensemaking perspective to the study of conflict emphasises conflict as an inevitable part of everyday organisational life and aims towards understanding the dynamics of conflict in their particulars. Weick cherished ambiguity and equivocality and gave them a central place in processes of human behaviour, although this contrasted with the organisation studies field's notion of 'uncertainty', which at that time was understood as a negative to be eliminated for organising to take place (Czarniawska, 2005). Similarly, conflict often represents situations of ambiguity, which were traditionally understood in the literature as dysfunctions to be eliminated for cooperation to take place.

Although acknowledging that depending on the sensemaking event one or another could be more dominant, Weick (1995a) initially claimed that all properties were equally important to sensemaking processes. Recently, he has acknowledged some of the criticisms of sensemaking that suggest that some properties may be more pivotal than others (Weick et al., 2005).

Identity construction is one of the two basic properties that are regarded as pivotal to the sensemaking process because identity construction is argued to influence individual sensemaking as well as how individuals understand the other six properties (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Mills & Helms Mills, 2004; Weick et al., 2005). The other basic property that is regarded as a fundamental criterion of sensemaking is plausibility (Mills et al., 2010; Weick et al., 2005).

In this study, I apply two main theoretical concepts to the study of conflict: First, because sensemaking tends to be swift, we are more likely to see the products of sensemaking than its process. The products of sensemaking are conceptualised as perceptual *frameworks* that summarise past experience, which people draw on to explain situations in the organisational environment (Weick, 1995a). In the empirical material such frameworks for explaining conflict appeared very prominent and represented significant patterns of staff and management's sensemaking in conflict. These different and opposing frameworks were what initially opened my eyes to working specifically with how sense was made of conflict at NGO Plus.

Second, because of my initial interest in whether the staff and management's participation in conflict management training could change the ways that they dealt with conflict, I had a strong focus on agency in conflict; that is, how conflict was addressed, handled, and dealt with. Given that I maintained this specific interest in the agency element of conflicts throughout the study, I focused specifically on enactment as a main theoretical concept, because enactment allowed me to study the enacted sensemaking in processes of conflict handling. Thus, the concept of enactment helped me explain the forms that conflict took in social interactions. However, before describing the main theoretical concepts, I explain the microsociological foundation of sensemaking theory.

Rooted in microsociology

Sensemaking theory has evolved from microsociological theories, particularly symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and frame analysis (Goffman, 1956).

Ethnomethodology

In chapter 3, on studying conflict, I described how my emerging epistemological commitments to studying conflict turned towards those found in ethnomethodology, because these are about studying practices of how people in groups and communities share and create social orders. Accordingly, Weick does not see groups and organisations as being controlled by social norms, but as the result of the structuring of events and actions. This means that Weick assumes that social structures are formed through what he calls 'interlocking behaviors', which form 'grammars' that help people to make sense of past events and actions and to draw causal maps through which their past experiences guide their future actions (Weick, 1979, p. 3). It is through actions that connect actors that the interlocking takes place. Accordingly, interlocking behaviours should be understood as casual loops and not as a linear chain of causes and effects (Weick, 1979). Weick's concern with the processes by which groups create and reproduce cultures, norms, and social structures emphasises the ethnomethodological heritage of sensemaking. However, with a prime focus on how meaning and action interact and develop out of social interactions, sensemaking theory has evolved particularly from symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism has been significantly influential in both microsociology and social psychology. It is concerned with how "*human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them*" and "*that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows*" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2), which are, in fact, the two tenets integral to a symbolic interactionist's notion of social interaction.

At the heart of symbolic interactionism is a rejection of the stimulus-response model of human behaviour, which is the core of the methodological arguments of positivism and a basic proposition of behaviourism (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Blumer (1969) writes:

> "*The term "symbolic interaction" refers, of course, to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior*" (p. 78-79).

Theorists behind symbolic interactionism conceptualise social interactions, not as based on simple stimulus-response mechanisms, but as mediated by symbols, interpretations, and the social and structural context. People interpret stimuli, and these interpretations shape their actions. Consequently, the same stimulus can mean different things to different people.

Characteristics of symbolic interactionism are emphasis on (1) interactions among people; (2) use of symbols in communication and interaction; (3) interpretation as part of action; (4) self is as a product of social interactions and interpretations; and (5) flexible social processes (Blumer, 1969). Similar to ethnomethodology, it is concerned with the interaction order of daily life and experiences rather than the structures associated with more or less fixed social forces. Given that reality is constructed through social interaction using symbols, the symbolic interactionist studies the processes that involve the use of symbols and communication, and always considers actions as joint.

Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology differ on how to construe the nature of social interaction. For symbolic interactionists, the understanding of interaction depends entirely on actors' interpretations and understandings, while for ethnomethodologists the meaning of any

interaction is reflexively tied to its context since sense, action, and situation are mutually elaborative in situ (Dennis, 2011). For symbolic interactionism, meaning is something that is a product of social interaction, but requires active interpretation to be acted on. Ethnomethodologists agree with symbolic interactionists that meanings are generated in social interaction. But instead of focusing on *what* interpretations are made, ethnomethodologists emphasize the *ways* in which meaning is produced, recognised, and transformed during an interaction and by treating the context in which social interaction takes place as an interactional accomplishment (Dennis, 2011).

Frame analysis

The idea in sensemaking theory that people draw on perceptual frameworks when they make sense of actions and situations is particularly influenced by Goffman's (1974) theory of frame analysis. Frame analysis presents a theoretical framework for studying how situations are defined through frames that label schemata of interpretation and allow individuals or groups "*to locate, perceive, identify, and label*" occurrences and events (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Through frames, people derive meaning from actions and events, organise their experiences, and obtain guidance for actions. Sometimes a particular framework that is most relevant may be applied to answer the question of what is going on here, during any moment of an activity an individual may additionally apply several frameworks.

Goffman's theory of frame analysis does not refer to frames as stable categories; rather, it calls attention to complex, multiple and often unarticulated processes that people use to categorise experiences of everyday life. Although not always articulated, frames constitute a repertoire for interpretation for members of a community, and this repertoire reflects a central element of that particular community's culture. Awareness of a community's repertoire of interpretation provides insight into that particular community's culture: "*One must try to form an image of a group's framework of frameworks – its belief system, its "cosmology*" (Goffman, 1974, p. 27).

Goffman's contribution to sensemaking theory is evident from the focus on the development of meaning – that is, how people in organisations make sense of and derive meaning from what occurs. Additionally, Goffman uses the symbolic interaction approach to investigate human interaction in a number of social settings that are often characterised by being

everyday social situations[5]. As such, Goffman has contributed significant insight into how people interpret and act in ordinary situations of everyday life.

This legacy from Goffman, together with that of Garfinkel, stresses the need for careful attention to the micro-particulars of everyday interaction contexts. It further positions my application of sensemaking theory to the study of conflict. More specifically, it focuses on my interest in deriving meaning from everyday conflict that arises naturally in everyday working life, and not as matter of studying extreme situations of heated arguments marked by crises. Being similarly focussed on social interaction and meaning, as well as the creation of social orders, sensemaking theory is an outgrowth of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and frame analysis. However, while symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology represent broader theories of the social in context, sensemaking theory focuses more narrowly on documenting responses to disruptions in social contexts.

Main concepts making up my model for analysis

Given that Weick's sensemaking theory is a massive theoretical framework, I have chosen two main concepts to study sensemaking in conflict. It is these two concepts that make up the model for analysing conflict in the three articles, which are presented in chapter 6-8. The two main concepts that make up my model of analysing the interaction of everyday sensemaking and action in conflict handling are 'framework', because frameworks are used to explain situations of conflict in the organisation, and 'enactment', because agency has a prominent role in organisational responses to conflict.

Framework

Sensemaking becomes more obvious when people encounter disruptions – that is, events that deviate from the normal order of things. Weick (1995a, p. 108) argues that people who study sensemaking get caught up in the process imagery and forget to look at what is being processed. Thus, to give substance to sensemaking, there needs to be an understanding of the meaning of its content. Weick suggests that a way to focus on the substance of sensemaking is by investigating the different vocabularies that inform the content of sensemaking in

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[5] Goffman also investigated unusual situations such as asylums and prisons in addition to his empirical focus on everyday life (see Goffman, 1961).

organisations. People pull words from vocabularies of society, organisations, occupations and professions, and of predecessors. Thus, the substance of sensemaking is key when studying the role of agency in organising.

Products of sensemaking are conceptualised as frames of reference or perceptual frameworks that "*people 'draw on' to construct roles and interpret objects*" (Weick, 1995a, p. 109) in response to situations in the organisational environment. Thus, Weick works from the assumption that people draw upon frames of reference to cue their understandings. He explains that frameworks of pre-existing knowledge are derived from past moments of socialisation and that cues are the result of present moments of experience (1995a, p. 111), and that the way that these two settings of experience are connected forms the content of sensemaking.

While frameworks are socially constructed, they enable staff and management to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences in their lives (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986) and these frames are what guide people's actions in the world. Frameworks act as lenses through which staff and management interpret conflict dynamics (Lewicki & Gray, 2003). It is through the frameworks that they construct what the conflict is about and so decides how to act and deal with the conflict. The choice of what frame to adopt in a given situation depends on one's own memory, the cues that others send, and the context in which the situation occurs (Gray, 2003), emphasising that sensemaking is influenced by the imagined, implied, or actual presence of others (Weick, 2001).

Although similar to concepts of interpretation and meaning-making, sensemaking according to Weick (1995a), goes beyond interpretation and meaning-making by not only being about discovering that which already exists, but being about inventing meanings and patterns. He argues that interpretation is involved when an already existing frame of meaning is used, while in sensemaking, no frame exists and hence one has to be created. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) show how people often shift from perceptually based knowing (no frame exists) to categorically based (frame exists) knowing. As people develop knowledge, their cognitive processing becomes concept-driven, or schema-driven, rather than stimulus-driven and begin to assign perception to frames such as types, categories, stereotypes, and schemas (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Studying sensemaking however, involves more than explaining interruptions or unexpected events through frameworks. It involves an important action component, which essentially makes sensemaking a cycle of creating our experiences and environments in the

process of interpreting events by identifying the specific problems and cues to be attended to (Weick, 1995a; Weick et al., 2005).

<div align="right">**Enactment**</div>

In Weick's book from 1995, 'Sensemaking in Organizations' enactment is just one of the "*seven characteristics*" (p. 18), or properties of sensemaking. However, given this study's special interest in conflict management – that is, how conflicts are handled and dealt with, I give particular attention to the concept of enactment in conflict. Weick writes that 'enactment' is "*both the process of making ideas, structures, and visions real by acting upon them and the outcome of this process, "an enacted environment"*" (Weick's distinguished address to Technology and Innovation Management Division, Academy of Management 1998, cited in Czarniawska, 2005, p. 271). I focus on enactment in conflict particularly for a number of reasons.

First, Weick argues "*actions devoted to sensemaking play a central role in the genesis of crises and therefore needs to be understood if we are to manage and prevent crises*" (1988, p. 308). I similarly contend that actions devoted to sensemaking in conflict play a central role in the genesis and unfolding of conflict. We therefore need to understand these actions if we are to manage conflict. Insights into enacted sensemaking in conflict at NGO Plus thus explain how conflicts are dealt with, why they are dealt with the way they are, and how the conflict was or was not resolved. Moreover, with an enacted sensemaking perspective, the focus is on the development of meanings and how such meanings motivate engagements, actions, and practices. Hence, sensemaking is not only about interpreting the world but equally is concerned with creating the world around us by noticing and responding to unexpected disruptions.

Second, Weick et al. (2005) argue that the concept of sensemaking keeps action and cognition together and that the term enactment captures the fact that people in organisational life often enact part of the environment they face. In Weick's 2010 reflection on his analysis of the Bhopal disaster from 1988, he emphasises that cognition and action are inseparable, "*Acting without thought is blind, thought without action is empty*" (2010, p. 547). The much-used phrase 'enacted sensemaking' shows how sensemaking is equally about both action and cognition. Smircich and Stubbart additionally argue, "*Enactment means action as well as thinking*" (1985, p. 732), which implies a combination of people's attention *and* action. They further contend that researchers who analyse organisational sensemaking often underappreciate the action component. Twenty-five years later in 2010, Maitlis and Sonenshein, in a review of

sensemaking studies in the crisis and change literatures, also maintain that the action component in sensemaking studies is widely underappreciated. They contend that cognitive processes have received much more attention than the social processes and embodiments in sensemaking. The authors find this surprising since sensemaking, with enactment at its core, is inherently embodied. "*We make sense through acting*" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 574) the authors clearly state.

Third and finally, central to a sensemaking perspective is how people enact the environments they interpret and constitute their identity within these enactments, shaping how they interpret events, things, phenomena – in short, situations (Weick et al., 2005). The sensemaking property of how people shape the social environment in which they interact is yet another important example of how sensemaking theory, due to its microsociological roots, differs from psychological theories. Whereas most theories of social psychology explore only how the social context shapes people's experiences, sensemaking also explore the reverse: how people shape cultural and social contexts. Daft and Weick even writes: "*The interpretation may shape the environment more than the environment shapes the interpretation*" (1984, p. 287). The concept of enactment underpins this idea. Through their actions and through their attempts to make sense of these actions, people generate the environment. A sensemaking perspective thus entails that while social context in many ways influences how people interpret events, people also participate in creating and maintaining their social contexts, which makes sensemaking iterative and reflexive (Weick et al., 2005).

My application of sensemaking theory to the study of conflict

It is the focus on process thinking, on the collective level of the organisation and on the acknowledgement of ambiguity that have set Weick's theorizing apart from the rest of the field of organisation studies (Bakken & Hernes, 2006; Czarniawska, 2005; 2006; Mills et al., 2010) and which also make sensemaking theory particularly suited for the study of conflict in organisations. In this section, I discuss some of the criticisms that have been made of Weick's sensemaking framework, and I present my own strategy for confronting these criticisms in my analyses.

What about sensemaking and context?

I have argued that scholars studying sensemaking pay a lot of attention to talk and discourse because that is how much of social contact is mediated (Weick, 1995a). But what about the background factors that influence sensemaking? For example, what about organisational rules that are established as rules of behaviour that influence sensemaking?

Weick has received criticism for not explicitly involving the context in the act of sensemaking (Mills et al., 2010; Weber & Glynn, 2006), but a closer reading of his texts displays a more subjective perspective on the issue of context. First of all, what we extract as cues in the first place, what we notice, depends on the context in which the cues are extracted. Secondly, context affects how the extracted cue is interpreted, that is, the meaning that we assign to the cues. Weick sees the social context as crucial for sensemaking because "*it binds people to actions that they then must justify, it affects the saliency of information, and it provides norms and expectations that constrain explanations*" (1995a, p. 53). But context should not be seen as some kind of monolithic, fixed environment, existing detached from and external to people's experiences. Instead, people are very much a part of their own environment, because they act and, in doing so, they create the materials that become the opportunities and constraints that they face.

Here the ethnomethodological heritage in sensemaking becomes visible, because the enactment component of sensemaking emphasises an interest in how groups and communities create and maintain social context. Thus, Weick sets aside the idea that actions are externally governed by context. Instead he focuses on how people accomplish reality by acting it out. This is precisely what makes the concept of enactment unique. With these theoretical developments of sensemaking and enactment, Weick has turned the attention of academia from structures of organisations to processes of organising (Czarniawska, 2006). Thus, Weick sees sensemaking as the feedstock for institutionalization (1995a, p. 36) because of the institutionalisation of social constructions into the way things are done links ideas about sensemaking with those of institutional theory.

Still, the idea that contexts of a more cultural or historical character play a role in explaining sensemaking appears to be missing from Weick's framework. Given that this study employs an ethnographic method to the study of conflict, it moves background factors and organisational rules to the forefront of understanding enacted sensemaking in conflict at work. The study therefore embraces the critique that sensemaking theory overlooks the role of larger

social, historical or institutional contexts. This critique is, for example, articulated by Weber and Glynn (2006) who contend:

> *"[C]riticisms of sensemaking ... claim [that] the theory overlooks the role of larger social, historical or institutional contexts in explaining cognition. As a theory of seemingly local practice, sensemaking appears to neglect, or at least lack an explicit account of, the embeddedness of sensemaking in social space and time." (p. 1639)*

As with other phenomena of organisational life, sensemaking cannot be properly understood apart from its wider structural and social context (Mills et al., 2010).

I define context as natural and symbolic spaces, which includes non-discursive materials that surround and influence meaning making (cf. Hansen, 2006). Whereas sensemaking and narratives are understandings that have been made explicit, many understandings are at a tacit level where they act as unspoken assumptions that guide our behaviour. By defining context as space, this definition includes this tacit level of unspoken assumptions, aesthetic and unspoken implicit feelings that are embedded in settings, objects and social interactions (Hansen, 2006). Furthermore, the social context is divided into structural and cultural components. Whereas the structural components encompass properties such as status, power, friendship, educations and wealth, cultural components refer to the beliefs, values, language, attitudes, and conceptual categories that are used by members of a collective (Barley, 1991).

To address this problem of larger social and institutional contexts missing from Weick's framework, I have extended my theoretical positioning in the analysis in chapter 6. Here I have combined the theoretical framework of organisational sensemaking with that of institutional theory. Whereas institutional theory is one theory of context that has been connected with sensemaking theory (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1995a), I integrated the two frameworks in a way that emphasised the idea proposed by Weber and Gynn (2006) that the context in which we make sense guides our sensemaking.

Institutional theory holds that organisations, and their populations, are suspended in a web of rules, norms, values, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions. Scott (2001) defines institutions as "*social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience*" (p. 48). Institutions are situational mechanisms such as rules, norms, values, and, more importantly for this study, cultural-cognitive elements of shared understandings that constitute social reality and frame through which meaning is made (Scott, 2001). Institutional ideas are however, under-

theorized in actual sensemaking research, which Weber and Glynn (2006) argue stems partially from a scholarly division of labour. Whereas research drawing on institutionalism focuses primarily on macro-level structures, sensemaking research emphasises micro-level processes.

The authors propose that one particular aspect of context – that of cultural-cognitive institutions is an implicit component of Weick's depiction of sensemaking.
Building on Barley and Tolbert (1997), Weber and Glynn view the framework of social mechanisms as useful for exploring connections between the cultural-cognitive context and processes of sensemaking. Accordingly, mechanisms-based theorizing specify how a specific input will reliably create a specific output (Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998 cited in Weber & Glynn, 2006), and builds bridges across micro and macro levels of social analysis.

By getting beyond the often heard view of how institutions work as internalized cognitive constraints on sensemaking, mechanisms-based theorizing provides theorizing about the interconnections between institutions and sensemaking. In that sense, institutions are contextual mechanisms that serve as building blocks for sensemaking, guide and edit action formation, and are enacted in ongoing sensemaking processes (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Since institutional content comes in both before and after action, this indicates that the institutional context enters into sensemaking through more intricate mechanisms. Weber and Glynn (2006) argue that people make sense *with* institutions and not in spite of institutions, and as a result, institutions make the substance of sensemaking less varied and more stable.

This way of working with cultural-cognitive institutions in sensemaking appears to be similar to the concept of social order in ethnomethodology. Social order refers to the relatively persistent system of social structures, social institutions and everyday social practices that shape and maintain 'normal' ways of relating and behaving (Garfinkel, 1967). Cultural-cognitive institutions equally guide and are enacted in sensemaking processes in accordance with predominant institutionalised meanings of often the most appropriate ways of relating and behaving. Accordingly, in the analysis in chapter 6 I make the tacit or cultural knowledge at NGO Plus more explicit and relate this directly to how the conflicts are framed in this organisation.

What about sensemaking and power?

Another crucial issue for understanding organisations that is missing from Weick's framework is the issue of power. Mills et al. (2010) particularly highlight the underplay of power in Weick's sensemaking framework, arguing that this assumes that sensemaking is a

democratic process, whereby all voices are more or less equally important. As a way forward, they suggest critical sensemaking as an analytical tool for understanding organisational events:

> "*Since sensemaking happens within a social context and as an ongoing process, and it also occurs within a broader context of organizational power and social experience, the process of critical sensemaking may be most effectively understood as a complex process that occurs within, and is influenced by, a broader social environment.*" (Mills et al., 2010, p. 188)

Why do some social practices, language, and experiences become meaningful for individuals and groups, while others do not? Mills et al. (2010) suggest that the focus in a sensemaking perspective should also be on how power and dominant assumptions privilege some identities over others. For example, the importance of being an 'egalitarian organisation' may be privileged in an organisation through language, rules, etc. that emphasise the characteristics of this identity. The construction of this identity includes tacit and explicit rules for how staff and management should function and they may be encouraged to draw upon cues from similar organisations or from a broader social context to reflect and legitimize this identity.

A sensemaking perspective must take into account the unequal distribution of power within an organisation, which leads to some individuals having more influence on interpretation and meaning than others. The result is that some individuals with more power may exert their power to influence the sensemaking of organisational members toward a preferred definition of reality. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) characterise this dynamic of sensemaking and meaning construction as sensegiving. While individuals make sense of actions, experiences and events on a local level, the notion of organisational power situates local meanings in a broader understanding of privilege. Analyses of sensemaking in organisations must therefore include the power relationships that are reflected in inequalities within organisations and ensuing consequences for certain individuals (Mills et al., 2010).

Finally, Foucault's work on power and knowledge (1980) illuminates how knowledge influences the possibilities of thought. He writes that power "*reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives*" (1980, p. 30). According to Foucault, truth, meaning, and morality are created through discourse, and every age in time has its dominant group of discursive elements that people live in unconsciously. Today's sensemaking possibilities of for example gender, conflict, and meaningful work, are very different than 60

years ago when any sense of such matters were dominated by different discourses. This notion of discursive practice thus broadens one's perspective on the possibilities of sensemaking because it shows how sensemaking is driven by plausibility and how this process is thoroughly embedded in powerful discourse.

As I show in the analysis of conflict at NGO Plus in chapter 6 and 7, the issue of power relationships is ubiquitous to sensemaking and enactments in conflict. The simple reason for that is that one of the ways that the clerical workers make sense of intergroup conflict is by explaining them as emerging from a hidden status inequality between different occupational groups, despite this being contextually very inappropriate as a way of making sense. A more appropriate interpretation of meaning is the diversity framework, which maintains the organisation's self-image of being an egalitarian and democratic organisation. This way, my analysis embraces how unequal power relationships among different occupational groups at NGO Plus influence the sense that is made of some conflicts experienced by the clerical workers of the organisation. Since the unequal distribution of power in certain contexts is ubiquitous in many organisational analyses, this also sways the assumption in sensemaking theory that sensemaking is a democratic process in which all voices are equally important.

What about non-consensual sensemaking?

A further critique of Weick's sensemaking framework pinpoints the critical feature that consensus is assumed in sensemaking. Landau and Drori (2008) in particular, raise this critique:

> "*While conventional wisdom suggests that sensemaking is targeted towards consensual understanding of the organization's intent and action (Weick, 1995), our study indicates that variations of conflict-oriented sensemaking accounts can serve management's strategic quest for hegemony.*" (p. 714)

Since sensemaking is grounded in the construction of organisational identity (Pratt, 2000), organisational research therefore claims that during periods of crisis and change, organisations' ability for successful crisis and change management depends on their ability to maintain internal coherence and joint action when making sense of what is going on (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Weick, 1993; 1995a). Consequently sensemaking is considered as a mechanism that reduces ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick, 1995a) because it provides organisational members with an interpretive point of reference during and/or after periods of change (Landau & Drori, 2008). By

contrast, Landau and Drori (2008) call attention to sensemaking as an incoherent process of diverse interpretations in processes of change.

More importantly, they show that conflict and power relationships are ubiquitous to sensemaking because sensemaking may contain multiple, sometimes conflicting accounts. Contradicting the assumption that usually describes sensemaking as positive and consensual in nature, the authors show that when sensemaking evolves from conflicting viewpoints, accounts and actions, it can support dissension. The authors conclude that the study of sensemaking should also consider conflict as an alternative sensemaking mechanism. In chapter 6, I support this critique of sensemaking by showing how different frameworks for making sense of conflict at NGO Plus interact and compete in shaping social realty of how conflict within the organisation should be interpreted.

The critique of epistemological circularity

For the remaining part of this section, I discus the dilemma of epistemological circularity as this has been argued to be present in Weick's theoretical framework of organisational sensemaking. This critique is particularly raised by Mills et al. (2010), who argue that Weick's treatment of sensemaking draws on interpretive insights that are often presented as grounded in an almost positivist notion of epistemological certainty. This problem of epistemological grounding raises the problem of epistemological circularity in sensemaking because sensemaking is basically about problematizing the basis of knowledge production in organisations through reference to "*a presupposed knowledge of the conditions in which knowledge takes place*" (Johnson & Duberley, 2000, p. 3). Accordingly, sensemaking theory's 'explanation' of how certain knowledge about organisations is produced is grounded in a more or less incontrovertible knowledge base, which in this case is sensemaking (Mills et al., 2010). As Johnson and Duberley (2000, p. 4) argue, this is a circular argument that raises questions about sensemaking accounts that do not consider the researcher's own imposed sense on the observations involved. I have addressed this paradoxical problem of epistemological circularity in sensemaking in three ways.

First, I consciously emphasise the heuristic character of sensemaking. Right from my early acquaintance with organisational sensemaking, I primarily used sensemaking as a heuristic (cf. Mills et al., 2010) to understand organisational events related to conflicts at NGO Plus. I never used the theory to conduct a systematic analysis of all seven sensemaking properties and their interrelatedness. Rather than systematically investigating these particular theoretical

elements in the empirical material, I focused on sensemaking and enactment – that is, the constructions of meaning that revolved around conflict and in what ways such constructions of meaning influenced how people at NGO Plus engaged with conflict at work. Accordingly, the concepts of sensemaking and enactment worked to illuminate my understanding of what was going on in the field, and therefore acted as resources in my investigation of conflict.

Second, I sought a triangulation of methodologies to provide different frames of reference that could ground the knowledge claims that I make in this thesis. Specifically, my combination of ethnographic methods and interview methods in the analyses of everyday conflicts at NGO Plus allowed me to shift between texts and the context in which the texts were constructed (cf. Hansen, 2006). In chapter 6, I moreover integrated sensemaking theory with institutional theory, which allowed me to triangulate empirical themes in the analyses. Through this triangulation I was able to make cultural and tacit knowledge at NGO Plus more explicit and expose how particular contextual elements shape conflict sensemaking.

Third, I followed Johnson and Duberley (2000), who recommend taking a "*consciously reflexive*" (p. 4) approach to the research process. Particularly in chapter 8, I describe certain events in the field that made me aware of my own imposed sense on observations and that put me on the track of grasping the complexities of conflict. In this process, I explore some of my own pre-understandings about conflict and how they impact upon how I engage with the field. From this sort of researcher reflexivity, I adopt the position that sensemaking theory can be applied to another level where the craft of research is conceptualised as sensemaking (cf. Weick, 1989) and where the researcher in the role of being *the sensemaker* actively analyses the empirical material and generates stories from it. This consciously reflexive approach emphasises that "*nothing is given to a gaze, but rather is constituted 'in meaning' by it*" (Jenkins, 1999, p. 1).

The purpose of ethnography is to generate understandings of culture. This is done through representation of the 'insider's point of view', which is also termed an *emic* perspective (Harris, 1976). By contrast, an *etic* perspective refers to a more analytical orientation to conceptualise experience. Ethnographic accounts often aim to emphasise critical categories and meanings that emerge from the researcher's encounter with the field, rather than imposing meanings and categories from existing models on the field.

While this emic/etic distinction is widely regarded to be a core in the ethnographic method, it has recently received some criticism for being an outdated relic of a colonial heritage that emerged from a particular construal of the relationship between 'natives' and researchers

that almost every ethnographer, in every discipline, today rejects (Yanow, 2009). However, although terms such as the emic/etic distinction and distinguishing between insider and outsider positions carry outdated ideas, many organisational studies ethnographers have incorporated these terms in their sources. Yanow (2009) calls for more heightened, critical reflexivity on the use of such terms, alongside more explicit considerations of power relationships between the ethnographic researcher and the organisations that she studies. In chapter 8, I tell the story of how I struggled with analysing one particularly strained relationship between a department manager and her staff. In the account, I openly reflect on my power to determine what is going on and how I decide to manage this power. Given that every researcher possesses such powers, I support Yanow's (2009) call for more explicit considerations of power relationships between the researcher and the empirical organisations in studies conducted with ethnographic methods.

How sensemaking is combined with the methods for analysing conflict

In chapter 6, I work with the concept of framework to display the substance of sensemaking in conflict at NGO Plus. Additionally, I work with the concept of enactment to explain the ways that conflicts are dealt with at the collective level of the organisation. In the theoretical background of this chapter, I explain both concepts. The method for analysis is thematic data analysis. Through the use of thematic analysis, I generated three main themes that each constituted a socially shared belief about conflict; that is, frameworks that staff and management draw on when they enact conflict in the organisation. Through the combination of interviews and observations as methods of inquiry, I was able to capture both overtly and covertly expressed forms of conflict and to show that conflict sensemaking may evolve from conflicting perceptual frameworks.

In chapter 7, I primarily work with the concept of enactment to explain the forms that conflict takes in social interactions before and after the conflict management training at various levels in the organisation. In this chapter, I use a narrative method for analysis because narratives represent ways of talking about organisations and enacting reality, as it is perceived, by giving existence to things and events in the world (Czarniawska, 1998). It is through this method that narratives reflect collective perceptions of and enactments in conflict.

In chapter 8, I reflect critically on my own imposed sense on the research that I have been conducting. Here I apply Weick's sensemaking framework to the craft of research as sensemaking, where the researchers as sensemakers actively analyse the empirical material and generate representations of how reality is (Weick, 1989; Weick, 1995b). From this perspective,

Weick calls for more explicit descriptions of the theorizing process – what is being extracted from the research process and presented as the theory of that particular research activity (1989). In the chapter, I display my process of theorizing by reflecting upon how I dealt with research experiences and how my interactions with the field and the empirical material shaped my construction of knowledge about conflict. Essentially, I display my retrospective sensemaking about the research process and how this led me to construct knowledge about conflict the way I did. In this chapter, I also use a narrative method for analysis because the narratives provide insight into processes of interaction and researcher reflexivity that will explain to the reader how I came to know what I know about my object of study. Thus I use the narrative method to craft my research accounts.

Summarising: Sensemaking and conflict

To sum up, there are two core assumptions in sensemaking theory. The first defines sensemaking as the social construction of meaning happening through social interactions in groups. The second core assumption in sensemaking theory is that thinking and action define one another. In this study, I specifically use the concept of framework to capture the substance of sensemaking in conflict at NGO Plus and the concept of enactment to explain the forms that conflict takes in social interactions. The implications of a sensemaking perspective on conflict are twofold:

On the one hand, a sensemaking perspective on conflict allows me to focus on conflict as distinct disruptions because they are a break in routine and therefore interrupt an ongoing flow. Such situations of disruption give rise to different and sometimes opposing interpretations of a situation that may display how intersubjective sensemaking generates varying degrees of tension or discomfort in social interactions.

On the other hand, the question of whether conflicts are distinct disruptions remains an empirical question because it really depends on whether the individuals and groups experiencing the conflicts view the conflicts as distinct disruptions that pose ambiguity or as normal parts of everyday working life. Similar to how Weick suggests that organisations embrace ambiguity and uncertainty because they are everywhere and unavoidable in organisational life, a sensemaking perspective on conflict equally suggests that organisations embrace conflict because it is everywhere and unavoidable. It must nevertheless be taken into account that in many

organisations, conflicts are often perceived as distinct disruptions because conflicts essentially pose ambiguity and reflect differences in interpretation some of these differences, since they come from different views of reality, are extremely difficult to work with.

A sensemaking perspective on conflict allows me to explore how these differences, which give rise to the conflict in the first place, may pose tensions between different ways of explaining the conflict and between different ways of handling the conflict. It is these interactions of meaning and action in processes of conflict handling which a sensemaking perspective on conflict illuminates.

The next chapter contains a presentation of the empirical context for the study. I include this empirical description due to space limitations in the article format and because I wish thoroughly to embed the study's observations and derivations about conflict within NGO Plus' organisational culture and the organisation's embeddedness in society.

5

The Empirical Context

While all three articles in this thesis include the role of the NGO Plus' social context in conflict handling at work, space limitations in the article format left no room for extended presentations of NGO Plus as the organisational context for this study. This chapter seeks to make up for that by describing the empirical context of NGO Plus more extensively, including its embeddedness in society.

I begin the chapter by describing the process by which NGO Plus was selected as the case for this study and then proceed by describing NGO Plus' incentives for participating in the conflict management training. I then present more fact-oriented knowledge about the people working at NGO Plus, and the organisation's purpose, physical structures, and funding practices. Then I describe the kind of work that is carried out in the organisation's three departments and present what staff and management say about their salaries. I end the chapter by describing various local practices that tell us more about working life at NGO Plus. This division between describing NGO Plus' larger structural, historical and material contexts and describing various local practices is productive in terms of providing an adequate empirical framework to demonstrate the way in which sensemaking is embedded in social space and time.

The selection

The selection process began as I started to collaborate with the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution. We had made an agreement that they would provide conflict management training free of charge to an organisation that would allow me to undertake a study of the effects of such training. To fulfil their part of our agreement however, they had one condition: the organisation that would receive the conflict management training had to be a nonprofit

organisation. In the spring of 2008, I therefore sent out invitations to eight different nonprofit organisations to participate in the study.

Of the eight nonprofits that were invited, three showed interest in participating in the study. However, since I needed only one organisation, I conducted meetings with representatives from each of the three nonprofits to clarify incentives and prior experiences with formal conflict management activities such as training, workplace mediation and negotiation. I employed a selection process based on the following criteria: the organisation had not previously participated in conflict management training; both union and management representatives were present at the initial meeting; they talked openly about conflicts in the organisation and their usual modes of handling them; and for practical reasons, the organisation had to (a) have at least 20 but no more than 50 employees, and (b) be located in the Copenhagen area. NGO Plus was the only organisation that met all those criteria and was therefore selected as the case in the study.

The training

Incentives for participating in conflict management training

An experienced trainer from the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution conducted the conflict management training. I documented the conflict management training by using direct observation (Bernard, 1994) of training activities.

During my first encounter with NGO Plus, I learned that it was the external demands from donors that had activated the organisation's desire to learn conflict management. The fundraising manager, Fran, explained that it was the external pressures from funding agencies that created tensions in the organisation's social climate: "*We need tools to cope with and effectively navigate in this pressure cooker of an organisation*" Fran said. As the organisation struggled to fulfil external pressures, tensions emerged in the way people behaved towards each other, which the manager presented as the main reason for wanting to learn about conflict management and participate in the study:

> "*The conflict management training fits well with our interest to improve the working environment. Work pressures affect how people feel and create conflict when people are too busy. Basic conditions for us are that we're small, we've no money, and we're under severe pressure from the environment. We therefore*

want our staff to thrive better with the conditions that are given to us." (Fran, fundraising manager)

Staff members also blamed the organisation's external pressures for conflict erupting between people:

"We've a very strong community; I mean people do what's important here and they really want to. That's what I see. I think there is a spirit here that we want to resolve this together. Conflicts arise because things simply run too fast. Sometimes they run much too fast." (Lisa, fundraiser)

There were only 18 places available on the training course. From the beginning of the study, I made it clear that NGO Plus itself would be in charge of negotiating who got to participate in the programme. During the first round of interviewing, I asked every member of staff and management whether they would like to participate in the training and why/why not. It appeared that the number of people who showed an interest in the training more or less matched up with the number of available places. All four managers at NGO-Plus, including the general secretary, got a place in the training, as did four to five staffs from each department. There were, however very different expectations of the training:

"We can learn a lot from tools about de-escalating conflict, I mean gain awareness of where things go wrong. I also think that exercises about listening and talking to each other in tense situations will be quite useful." (John, clerical manager)

"I've experienced situations where co-workers have found themselves in escalating conflict situations where I wished that I'd had the tools to deal with those situations to help them. Typically we witness conflict among people working for our partners overseas. I think that this is the primary reason for people in the programme department to be interested in the training." (Stewart, programme worker)

"I think that it would be interesting and good for NGO Plus that our leaders gain awareness of when they contribute to escalating conflict and when they actually help to de-escalate conflict." (Deborah, fundraiser)

"Well, first of all, I just love participating in training programmes and learning something new about myself, but also learning something new about my co-workers. It just sounds so interesting, conflict resolution. - Not that I see a lot of conflicts in our organisation, I feel that it would be off great help to learn about how to define conflict. I mean, when to say no and confront people and when to interpret things as 'we just disagree on the matter'. That's what I expect to get

out of it." (Hilary, clerical worker)

The quotes show that there were different expectations of the training among staff and management. Whereas some were mainly interested in the training to learn more about the nature of conflict due to the kind of work and collaborations in which they are engaged abroad, others expected to learn tools and techniques to better harness conflict at work. These motives for gaining tools for conflict management were in alignment with the objectives set by the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution for training in conflict management. By providing participants with skills training to enrich understanding and practice with conflict management the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution believe that this will enable a more productive resolution of conflict. The Centre's objective for capacity-building in conflict management emphasises the normativity of the training programme.

Training elements

The duration of the programme was five full-days intensive training (35 hours). The training format alternated between presentation of theory and models in the large group and exercises in pairs or small groups of three participants. The groups were formed on a voluntary basis and participants were asked to form new groups at each exercise.

The training was divided into two consecutive parts. The first part took place over three days and focused on knowledge and skills development in the following areas: defining conflict, working with escalation and de-escalation of conflict, distinguishing between negotiable and non-negotiable conflict situations, distinguishing between destructive and constructive negotiation styles, reframing the issues in conflict, differentiating between underlying needs versus positions, working with dialogue and active listening, working with phases in mediation and developing "win-win" solutions. This part of the training was about general methods for conflict management and focused on conflict management between individuals. During exercises, it was up to the participants themselves whether they wanted to work with conflicts at work or conflicts experienced in more private spheres like in the family or with a neighbour.

Throughout the first part of the training, the trainer repeatedly emphasised that the training purpose was dissemination of knowledge about conflict management to foster participants' reflection and not the resolution of specific conflicts at NGO Plus. By the end of the first part of the training, the participants decided in consultation with the trainer that the second part of the training should be about conflicts specifically at NGO Plus. This decision was

made in an effort to move the organisation forward: "*If we really want this training to matter, then I definitely think that the last two days should be about NGO Plus*", Mary the programme manager explicitly said. The trainer emphasised that the second part of the training would not deal with specific interpersonal conflicts but would be about group processes and impediments at NGO Plus. The group consented to work with groups processes at NGO Plus. As a result, the second part of the training was about conflict and conflict management at NGO Plus and involved exercises explicitly about negotiating values for NGO Plus and working with its organisational flow. The latter exercise, however, retained an individualised focus as it asked participants to share how they reduced the flow in the organisation. This second part of the training lasted two days and took place two weeks after the first part of the training. Table 2 displays the different elements of the training.

Day 1: 9 March 2009	Day 2: 10 March 2009	Day 3: 11 March 2009	Day 4: 24 March 2009	Day 5: 25 March 2009
Defining what is conflict	Reframing the issues in conflict	Working with phases in mediation and developing win-win solutions	Working with the organisational flow	Negotiating values for the organisation
Working with escalation and de-escalation of conflict	Differentiating between underlying needs versus positions			
Distinguishing between negotiable and non-negotiable conflicts	Working with dialogue and active listening			
Distinguishing between destructive and constructive negotiation styles				

Table 2: The Conflict Management Training Programme

Attendance varied markedly between the two parts of the training. While attendance during the first part of the training was very high with between 16 and 18 participants every day, the second part of the training did not draw the same number of participants. Only between 9 and 10 participants showed up for the second part of the training. This decline in attendance may have been caused by a change in the schedule. And since NGO Plus is a busy organisation characterized by a high level of external activity in country missions, conferences, and meetings, it was not surprising that only little over half of the participants from the first part of the training were able to participate in the second part.

The training was highly focused on participants' learning and acquiring skills and tools to deal with conflict more productively. This tool-focused ethos of the training was depicted by presentations about conflict theory and development to analyse conflict and focus on certain aspects of conflict, group work with different strategies for approaching conflict situations, and exercises with dialogue and other communicative strategies to be used in actual situations of conflict. Eventually, the participants took away from the training three main lessons: (1) an awareness of what conflict is and how it may escalate and deescalate; (2) a chance to practice dialogue and active listening in situations of disagreement; and (3) an appreciation for collaborating with co-workers outside of work.

In chapter 7, I explore how awareness of what conflict is and how it may escalate and deescalate may change conflict situations, and a chance to practice dialogue provided participants with a language to use in potential conflict situations. Essentially, the language of dialogue aided participants to curb potential conflict situations. Given that participants' prejudices towards each other and interpersonal collaborative problems continued after the training, primary gain ensuing from the training had to do with the management of conflict rather than its resolution.

The basics

People

NGO Plus employs 30 full time staff members and has approximately 15 student helpers, interns and volunteers. Primarily it is the full time staff members, including management, who participated in this study. Staff and management are in their mid-30s to early 60s with a mean age of 46 years, while student helpers, interns and volunteers are typically university students in

their 20s. There is little diversity in staff and management; all are middle-class native Danes, most are women, and most are university graduates with either under- or post-graduate degrees. I term staff members who are university graduates as academic workers. Staff members who are not university graduates are employed as clerical workers.

A management group, consisting of three departmental managers and the secretary-general, administers NGO Plus. Each departmental manager is responsible for one of the three departmental units: the clerical unit (nine staff members), the fundraising department (ten staff members excluding interns, volunteers, and part time call centre staffs working evenings), and the programme department (ten staff members excluding student helpers and interns) (see fig. 2 for an organisation diagram for NGO Plus). The management group is made up of two male and two female managers, who have all been working for NGO Plus for more than ten years, as have many long-time staff members. With a mean tenure of eight years, NGO Plus is characterized by long-term tenure among staff and management. In addition to its staff and management that are employed to work in Denmark, NGO Plus also hires qualified people to work on development projects abroad, which they conduct in partnerships with overseas local NGOs. The current study however was confined to only involve staff and management working in Denmark and thus did not engage with the everyday realities of those working overseas.

Organisation diagram for NGO Plus
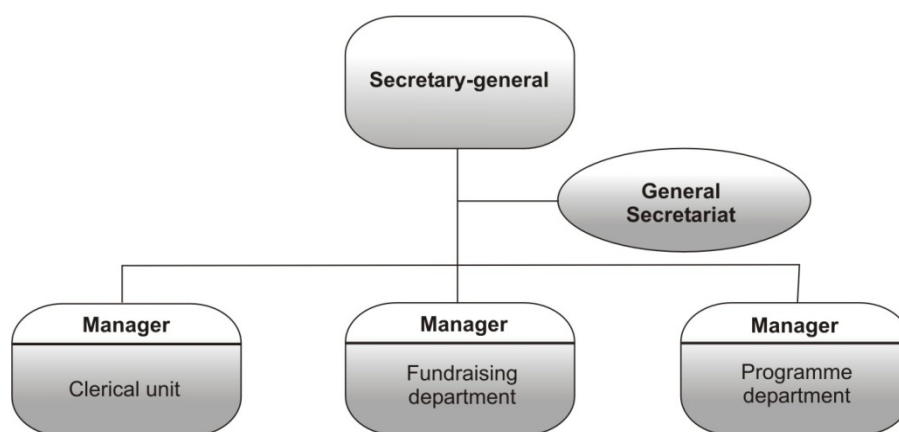
Fig. 2

NGO Plus has a highly moralized vision of a more egalitarian world. It works with aid and development agencies to create social change for poor and marginalised groups in developing countries. Its main purpose is to promote human rights and democracy by strengthening civil societies and encouraging them to participate in reforming authoritarian governments. From the organisation's foundation in 1970, the mission has been to work to strengthen civil societies overseas because it views an active and organised civil society as an important pillar in democracy. To pursue its purpose, NGO Plus mainly uses bottom-up approaches, where it works directly with marginalised groups. Often the organisation indirectly attains the role of 'breathing the fire' in those overseas countries where it intervenes. This role emerges because the process of empowering marginalised groups to challenge those in power is often a conflict ridden process that may worsen a country's instability. NGO Plus commonly works in countries that have or are experiencing oppression, violence and war.

While most people work at NGO Plus because they want their work to benefit social change for poor and marginalised groups, they do not agree on *how* social change should be accomplished. A fragmented vision of how social change is best accomplished is evident primarily in the programme department. Staff members in this department agree that NGO Plus as an intervening organisation does not reflect sufficiently on what development and social change is and how this is best accomplished. They complain that they are creating their own definition of what development is and how to achieve it. They don't feel sufficiently satisfied with how much work they get done and they feel that the management is partly to blame for this: "*We don't achieve the kind of results that we would like to achieve and that is particularly due to management not being clear about what our joint purpose is*" (Frank, programme worker). According to this view, management is blamed for the lack of synergy effect of staff members' work effort because it does not establish a clear joint purpose for the organisation.

Physical structures

Situated in an old building in Copenhagen, NGO Plus occupies two floors, which are structured around a long corridor with small cellular offices on both sides. Most staff members share an office with at least one other person from their own unit, while managers sit alone in their offices. There are unspoken norms about having the door open. It is generally considered unacceptable to close the door to the office when one is inside working alone. This tacit open-door policy applies to both staff and management and signals access and availability. While an

open door signals 'come in'; the closed door connotes 'stay away'. Only when one is having a meeting inside the office is it considered acceptable to close the door.

Although the physical arrangements appear rundown, the offices on both floors are light and clean. The technical equipment is older than last year's version; they say it is because they do not spend funding on technical equipment. On the second floor, 'empty' offices contain piles of out-dated computer hardware or big brown boxes with printed newsletters and magazines. It seems that some offices are being used for storage whilst waiting to be occupied by new staff members. Outside the entrance to the first floor corridor are stacks of tables and chairs. Even in the small canteen, where people eat their pack lunches, a corner is devoted to the storage of broken chairs. It doesn't appear to draw attention or bother anyone. Nevertheless, one day someone put up a sign that said "*Cemetery for broken chairs*". When I returned to the organisation in 2010, the 'cemetery' had been cleared and I was told that the chairs had either been fixed or thrown away.

Funding

Primary funding comes from the State, represented by 'the Development Agency', but NGO Plus also receives funding from private and institutional funding agencies and donors. The entering of neo-liberal political ideals in the funding system has established a number of rules and regulations that NGO Plus has to comply with to get access to public funding. One example of such regulations is that NGOs relying on funding from the Development Agency, since 2006 have had to raise a certain share of those funds themselves. In 2008 this amount was raised from 5 % to 10% of the organisation's core financing from the Development Agency. Such external demands have meant a significant shift in organisational practices: doing well in humanitarian aid and development activities is no longer sufficient for the organisation's survival; it also has to engage itself in fundraising, marketing and branding.

The external demands have taken its toll on the organisation as it struggles with raising funds, branding and marketing. Compared to before the emergence of external demands, the organisation now has to deliver on multiple fronts, which increases performance and creates more work for staff and management. Irritation and stress were prevalent among staff and during the two-year periodof the fieldwork, several meetings were held about the organisation's critical financial situation, which at least on two occasions led to cutbacks and layoffs among staff. The layoffs in particular have sent shock waves throughout the organisation, because they have signified a new line at NGO Plus; that it is okay or even necessary to lay off people if they

cannot raise enough money. Joanne, one of the fundraisers explains, "*The fundraisers who were fired last year simply were not worth their own pay and therefore they had to go although they had a lot of interesting ideas.*" But there were also staff members, who saw the external demands of fundraising and marketing as a good thing because it forced NGO Plus to prove that it was worth its funding:

> "*We're the smallest of the aid organisations but we received the largest amount of funding from the Development Agency. I think that it's a very healthy exercise for the organisation to examine what it's worth in terms of funding.*" (George, fundraiser)

For management, implications of the shift in organisational practices have been that it needs to get involved in branding activities aimed at positioning NGO Plus as a powerful player within the aid and development industry. Branding activities are, for example engaging in CSR relations with external businesses to create awareness of NGO Plus' work abroad and engaging in partnerships with other associations to collaboratively raise funds for the NGO Plus mission. This broadening in managerial practice has meant that time is taken away from leadership tasks such as defining purpose and strategies for NGO Plus. Particularly in the programme department and the fundraising department, staff complained about management not being sufficiently clear about either the organisation's strategy and direction or its leadership of staff. While management acknowledged that its workload was spread out on too many tasks, it did not seem to sufficiently recognize that the broadening in managerial practice and focus only reinforced the staff's needs for direction and leadership. Over the course of the study, staff saw no improvement in leadership.

As shown in chapter 7, management's failure to meet the staff's needs for direction and leadership formed trajectories of conflict at various levels of the organisation. This was particularly evident in work teams where the lack of leadership meant that it was up to the team members themselves to decide the direction and strategy for their team, sometimes resulting in disagreements and conflicts about which direction was the right one.

Other implications of the shift in organisational practices involved the expansion of the fundraising department. Where it used to be a very small department consisting only of three staff members and a manager, it now consisted of fifteen staff members including interns and part time student helpers. The increase in staff reflected the expansion and dispersal of fundraising activities undertaken by NGO Plus. But this organisational shift was not merely a

question of numbers of fundraisers. Being a nonprofit organisation, NGO Plus' endeavours were strongly motivated by its core values of egalitarianism and belief in social change, but these values were in stark contrast to the profit-oriented, capitalistic and competitive values of business, which were the drivers for the organisation's branding and marketing activities.

This conflict between values surfaced as projections onto the fundraising group: "*In particular we don't understand the fundraising department. I think that generally they confuse us.*" (Hilary, clerical worker)

> "*Our work is different and we serve very different target groups. In the fundraising department, issues have to sell well. Everything there goes very fast and must be short and concise. In our department we simply speak a different language, a more aid nerdy language.*" (Linda, programme worker)

The perceptions that 'we don't speak their language' and 'we don't understand them' became reasoning for why the fundraising department is difficult to collaborate with. While the fundraisers were forced to embrace a market ideology if their mission of raising enough funds is to succeed, the threat that the market ideology posed to NGO Plus' core values became highly personalized, even though this really was a conflict between values, or ideologies. While the conflict between values had implications for the organisation's self-image of working for non-profit, it also had implications for the organisation's functioning and its overall accomplishment of its mission. Interestingly, several staff members feared that the external demands of fundraising would result in an ideological sell-out for the organisation and they worried about what kind of organisation NGO Plus would become:

> "*There's an inherent conflict in the more we profile ourselves and focus on what might sell, the narrower our focus on what we can sell becomes, at the risk of only doing development activities overseas that will sell our image here in Denmark.*" (Catherine, programme worker)

The work

There are three entities at NGO Plus: the clerical unit (managing finances, accounting, bookkeeping, and everyday administrative tasks), the fundraising department (handling fundraising tasks and external communications with the media), and the programme department (managing, monitoring and reporting on development projects overseas).

The clerical workers work in the clerical unit and the work carried out here is multifarious. Primary tasks are managing the organisation's finances through budgeting, accounting, bookkeeping activities, and conducting payment of salaries. Additional tasks are the administration of the organisation's ten thousand external members, financial tasks such as collecting their fees and donations, and non-finance tasks, like providing IT support and updating the organisation's stationary supplies.

Routines and repetition characterize tasks carried out in the clerical unit. Work is commonly organised to (a) reach fixed deadlines, and (b) follow fixed rules and procedures. Examples of the former are the organisation's quarterly and annual accounts to donors and monthly payment of salaries to staff and management. In chapter 6, I tell the story of Alice and the conflicts she experiences when she tries to reach the fixed deadlines of the quarterly accounts to donors. Examples of clerical tasks that are organised to follow fixed procedures are the opening and closing of project accounts when overseas projects are started and completed, the actual processing of salaries, and the dealings with daily recurrent administrative tasks. Like the other clerical workers, the bookkeepers receive a daily pile of documents that they need to go through and enter into accounts. It is a day-to-day routine, and they know what awaits them when they come into work: the meticulous registration and filing of documents that show the income and expenses of organisational activities.

The fundraising department also comprises a variety of work activities. Work in this department has the purpose to (a) generate enough income for NGO Plus to receive its annual share of core financing from the Development Agency, and (b) enlighten the general public about the results and processes of NGO Plus' development work overseas. Activities concerning the generation of income are: writing funding applications targeted towards private and institutional funding agencies, conducting campaigns aimed at persuading private and business donors to contribute financially to the NGO Plus mission, recruiting new external members to the organisation, and performing telemarketing and face to face street marketing activities to solicit private people to make donations. These fundraising activities generate income in the form of donor funding, private donations and gifts, and membership fees.

As mentioned in the funding section, fundraising is a relatively new activity at NGO Plus that still has its problems:

> "*Management keep telling us that we have to optimize, but the problem is that we don't have the tools or the necessary knowledge to do that. It's a huge stress*

factor that we don't have the tools to properly solve our campaign tasks. In every meeting, the external demand of fundraising is first on the agenda because every other issue depends on us reaching this demand." (George, fundraiser)

The need to make the general public aware of NGO Plus' results relates to the external demand that NGOs fulfil its mandate of accountability. One way that it fulfils this mandate is by presenting results from its development work overseas to its external members in quarterly magazines and in monthly newsletters. Another way is to try to create interest in the media about NGO Plus' mission and results. Although the fundraising department meticulously carries out its work of running campaigns, reaching application deadlines and publishing newsletters, there is a widespread belief among staff in other departments that fundraising work is done impetuously and carelessly

Much of NGO Plus' development work is based on partnerships with local actors in developing countries, who share NGO Plus' vision democracy and social change. Through these partnerships, NGO Plus aims to implement a number of programmes that foster change locally. In the programme department, the programme workers work to implement, monitor, and evaluate such programmes. Additional tasks are the development of methods for monitoring programmes. Staff members in the programme department often act as support persons to those working with programmes overseas in that they provide professional sparring and advice on how to work effectively with the programmes. The role of support persons involves carrying out significant programme administration because running the programmes demands a lot of administrative work. They also provide support and advice to staff members and partners overseas as to how they may become a player in the political system in which they operate and practice political lobbyism.

The fundraising department and the programme department have a team-based organisational form of production. Many tasks are interdependent within departments but tasks may also be interdependent across departmental structures. According to management, task interdependence across departments sometimes lead to conflict between staff members. And most staff members are aware that they need to have a good relationship with staff members in the other departments because they are dependent on the work effort to be able to their own job well:

"*It has to work and I'm very aware of building relationships with everyone, including those whom I may think are a little annoying. I mean that's an*

important part of getting things running. It's much easier to have a good relationship with the clerical workers – some of them are a bit prudish you know – but we have a good time when we work together and that I work on quite consciously." (Steve, programme worker)

Pay

There is a general belief among staff and management that because they work for a nonprofit, they receive a lower salary than they would if they were doing a similar job in the private sector. Most accept that this is an inevitable trade-off when working not for financial gain but for fulfilment and a deeper sense of meaning. Most feel that their work at NGO Plus is socially valuable and that their work is an end in itself due to the fulfilment that doing the work brings to them:

"*I'm extremely privileged because I know that many people work in a place that they can't identify with. I love working for NGO Plus because it's an organisation that is very close to my heart. We work for a cause that I'm passionate about and professionally I feel very inspired in the work that I do.*" (Karen, fundraiser)

"*I think that everyone here believes that what we are doing is important and makes a difference. That's also one of the reasons that I applied to work for this organisation in the first place.*" (Alice, clerical worker)

"*I think that I've got the world's greatest job! I get to do some of the most important work within aid and development in Denmark, which I just love. As I've often said, for me stress is about not getting to do the kind of work that I want or if my work isn't meaningful.*" (Steve, programme worker)

Employing people who care more about 'making a difference' in the world than making a lot of money is a conscious strategy deployed by management. And indeed there seems to be agreement at NGO Plus that the reward structure does not consist of monetary gains, but is made up by something else.

Although the organisation explicitly wants staff to be driven by a heartfelt urge to change the world and not by making money, it still has to follow existing collective agreements when negotiating salaries with staff and management working in Denmark. It is, however, not necessary to follow such agreements when hiring people to work on developmental projects overseas and therefore there is a difference in salary between those who work at NGO Plus in Denmark and those who are employed by NGO Plus to work overseas. The salary level for people working overseas is 25% below the rates set by the Development Agency for this type of

work because "*this is thought to attract the right kind of people*", Carolyn, a clerical workers says.

NGO Plus has a policy to disclose all salaries paid to staff and management, which means that everybody in the organisation knows how much their co-workers and the managers earn. This openness regarding salaries has resulted in the widespread belief among staff and management that everybody virtually earn the same amount. Staff sees this as a positive because it fosters a collaborative environment in which they help each other:

> "*We have a good collaborative culture where no one hides or avoids being seen, and no one shows off in front of management and takes all the credit. I think this relates to our structure of equal pay and the fact that there're no bonuses or other personal allowances. There's a leftist working culture here.*" (Frank, programme worker)

Management argues that performance is not measured individually but that it is approached at the department level, where the department as a whole is evaluated in terms of its ability to contribute to NGO Plus' activities and mission. The recent year's change in external conditionalities has however challenged this practice of not measuring individual performance: during the two years that the fieldwork lasted, several fundraisers were fired because they did not bring in enough funding.

Despite the widespread perception that equal pay is standard practice at NGO Plus, differences do exist between how much different groups earn. While managers are paid approximately 25% more than the academic workers, the clerical workers belong to a lower salary scale, earning approximately 30% less than the academic workers. Like the rest of the organisation, the clerical workers accept the same trade-off of a lower pay when working for a socially valuable cause, as they equally find their work meaningful and fulfilling, but they feel ambiguous about earning less than the academic workers. On the one hand, they feel that NGO Plus' ideological foundation of egalitarianism embedded in the mantra that "*everyone's contribution is equally important for the NGO Plus machinery to function properly*" (Peter, general secretary) should be mirrored in more equal salaries between different occupational groups. On the other hand, they feel that it is only fair that the academic workers earn more because they have more education than the clerical workers. The clerical workers also know that NGO Plus, in its distribution of salaries and its differentiation between those with university degrees and those without, is only following rules that have been created by society.

While justification for openly disclosing all salaries is about fostering equality and a collaborative environment, it nevertheless makes visible a large crack in the organisation's ideological foundation of egalitarianism as it openly displays that different groups are paid differently for their work at NGO Plus. The clerical workers say that if they ask for a raise, they are told that the organisation does not have the funding for a salary increase and that any potential salary increases will be taken from the budget, which means that NGO Plus will have less money for its development activities overseas:

> *"It's an idealist's salary that we get here, and we don't ask for a raise because we know that they'll* [management] *say 'you know what it means to get a raise...' No one here travels on business class or stays at expensive hotels. Even the secretary-general is at the lower end of the salary scale compared with what top management of other nonprofits earn."* (Maria, clerical worker)

Salary negotiations are systematically used to remind people that they should not ask for big raises if the organisation's work overseas is to remain intact. The psychology of the sector to 'do good, not make a good living,' together with NGO Plus' policy to disclose all salaries that are paid to staff and management, affirm a societal practice, which the clerical workers feel they can do nothing to change.

The social

NGO Plus has a welcoming atmosphere, and staff and management agree that NGO Plus is a very good place to work and that the spirit of the organisation is "*freedom, equality, and fraternity*" (Carolyn, clerical accountant). Together with the urge to 'change the world', it is this spirit that has attracted many staff members to come and work for the organisation:

> *"NGO Plus is a good place to work; it's got a good working climate with sympathetic, tolerant and easygoing people, probably because they have chosen to work for social change in a nonprofit organisation."* (Jane, clerical worker)

> *"It's a privilege to do this kind of work, with opportunities to travel and meet people abroad and to see for oneself that our efforts work. There's a good atmosphere among staff, we feel supported and the organisation is good at taking in new staff members. I definitely sense that people are happy to work here."* (Helen, programme worker)

"I experience a kind of solidarity among my co-workers that is pretty unique to NGO Plus. We all get frustrated sometimes and that's totally okay and there's always someone to talk to here. There's a high degree of trust in this organisation." (George, fundraiser)

"Our organisation is characterized by good social relations because people care about each other. Moreover, in our department, staff turnover is very low and most people have been here for many years. Most think that there's a good community here and people don't experience conflict. There's harmony in our department." (Mary, programme manager)

The quotes show how both staff and management praise the community present at NGO Plus and the way colleagues support each another.

In all three articles (chapter 6-8), I describe how both staff and management use unifying images to frame their organisation as being well functioning and free of conflicts. Common images of 'the organisation as a family' are exemplified by Fran, the fundraising manager saying "*the management group will look into whether the whole of the NGO Plus family should participate in the conflict management training*"; 'co-workers as friends' exemplified by Jane, a clerical worker saying "*I feel that the relationships I have with several of my colleagues are equal to the relationships I have to my friends. In some instances my colleagues are like friends*"; and 'the relationship to the organisation as a marriage', exemplified by Evelyn, a programme worker saying "*one doesn't just work here; one is married to NGO Plus*".

Additionally staff and management emphasise accounts of NGO Plus as a horizontally structured organisation with strong values of egalitarianism. This sentiment is echoed by management saying "*we have a flat organisation structure*", which contrasts the organisation to those with a hierarchical organisational structure because it, (1) creates direct contact between staff and managers with staff and top management interacting on regular basis, (2) often involves staff's knowledge and opinions in decision making, and (3) distribute all knowledge horizontally in the organisation. Staff and management use these accounts to express pride in how they convey the values of egalitarianism governing its work with human rights overseas to the organisation itself. In chapter 6, I show how these images and accounts emphasise the term 'frictions' as a euphemism for conflict.

Regarding the term 'frictions', I describe in chapter 6 that it worked as a neutralisation strategy, toning down the disputants' feelings and hosing down the issues at stake, emphasising non-confrontation as the main strategy in processes of conflict management.

Many members of both staff and management strongly identify with the occupational community at NGO Plus and are very dedicated workers. They have a burning passion for what they do and many of them work more than fifty hours a week, including weekends and holidays. Societal improvement and democratization overseas are issues that are personally important to them. Many see their work as a crucial part of who they are:

> "*There are people who work to earn a living and then enjoy life outside of work, but people at NGO Plus find personal meaning in work, which is what makes work here important. People almost become their work*" (Joanne, fundraiser).

Communications about work is characterized by great pride in what they do. Most cannot even see themselves working in other organisations within the industry, simply because other organisations do not do development work the way that NGO Plus does it: "*Whereas some development organisations are very good businesses, we are good at doing NGO work. We have to protect our image of being one of the best in the industry*" (George, fundraiser). Staff members show their dedication by taking it upon themselves to save the organisation money during difficult financial times.

However, this strong dedication also means that it is difficult for people to let go of what they are doing and to think that it is good enough. Many say that they are too ambitious and because they want NGO Plus to be a strong player within the industry, they increasingly put pressure on themselves. This also means that most members of staff and management are never satisfied with the results of their work, and that there is an unproductive tendency to focus on small issues. They say that they are idealists and that is why what they do will never be good enough. One consequence of this idealist attitude is that communications rarely include praise. They say that they find it difficult to praise each other and that praise is lacking both among staff and particularly from management:

> "*Management never gives us Christmas gifts to show its appreciation by thanking us for our work effort. In the beginning of January I received an envelope in my pigeonhole, which made me really happy because I thought it was some kind of thank you card for all the hard work we did in 2008. But when I opened it, I saw that it was that goddamn postcard, which I had written to myself as a writing exercise during the organisational seminar last summer. I really got SO disappointed!*" (Evelyn, programme worker)

Several staff members describe their feelings that NGO Plus is characterized by a culture of fault-finding, which is exhibited by the red ink pen:

> "*The way feedback is given in this organisation, with writings always covered in red ink. This has really made me doubt myself in terms of my abilities to write. I've no trouble writing in other contexts, but at work it's really a struggle for me to get it done. I believe it relates to all the red ink that one can expect to receive on one's writings.*" (Joanne, fundraiser)

Both staff and management engage in fault-finding, which, according to some staff members, often concerns trivial things. Staff members from all three departments talk about the lack of praise at NGO Plus. But whereas the academic workers often complain that they do not receive praise from either management nor from each other, the clerical workers complain that the other organisational groups do not appreciate their work.

One way that clerical workers have dealt with this problem has been to set up rules for how clerical assistance can be obtained. In a staff meeting in the clerical unit, discussions were about the new part time flex-worker who would begin working in the unit next week. John, the clerical manager asked for ideas for tasks to be given to the flex-worker. "*I have lots of ideas for tasks he can do*" Hilary says. Others also had ideas for things he could do and an animated discussion ensued with everyone pitching in examples of tasks until John seemed satisfied. "*But - ehm – what should the rules be like*", Alice says. "*I mean, if everyone in the organisation can give him tasks to do as well then we must have a system for how that is done*". Everyone understood what she was talking about and nod. "*I totally agree*" Jane said, "*Otherwise they will just come with all sorts of tasks all the time*". "*Yes, - and always last minute*", June said. She further suggested that tasks for the day should be submitted to the flex-worker before 10 o'clock in the morning. "*And if a task is submitted after 10 o'clock then it is not read until the next day or what?*" Alice asked. Everyone struck up a "*Definitely!*" "*If the task is submitted to late – to bad!*" Hilary summed up. Everybody nodded in agreement.

As exemplified by this meeting extract, the clerical workers commonly deal with non-appreciation by establishing rules and procedures for the rest of the organisation to follow in order to get administrative assistance. Sarah, a fundraiser notes, "*Generally what they do when they're displeased with things is establish more rules or involve management when they're displeased, but neither helps*". These establishments of rules and procedures are attempts to generate appreciation and respect for the clerical work effort and thereby prevent conflict from

emerging from the enactment of organisational hierarchy. However, the underlying issues of inequality inherent in the allocation of work practices are not dealt with sufficiently, resulting in the frequent resurfacing of inequality conflicts.

Leadership

Overall, the staff is very critical of management, which they perceive as being too centralistic and secretive: "*management keeps its cards very close to the chest*" (Catherine, programme worker). Despite various strategies and policies intended to decentralize power and spell out actions, staff perceived management as wanting to retain power at NGO Plus. This is particularly evident by management's lack of clear communication:

> "*Clear communication from management definitely lags behind in this organisation. While clear communication could ensure that we the staff would support our leaders, this is something that seems to be very difficult for them to practice – to put it nicely*" (Frank, programme worker)

Staff feel that the lack of clear communication is a big problem in current changing times considering the organisation's poor financial situation and the need for NGO Plus, despite its non-profit status, to operate more like a business.

The top manager, colloquially referred to as 'the General' displays this perception of power preservation: "*It's difficult to convince the General that we need an organisational strategy. I mean we've lots of visions of how we want to save the world, but none about what it is we want with NGO Plus*" John, the clerical manager says. Sarah, one of the fundraiser further explains:

> "*He* [the top manager] *always begins a discussion by telling us what the worlds look like and then it's difficult to disagree with him because he's already told us what the nature of problem is and then why we need to deal with it his way. That is, he begins discussions by closing off any space for disagreement.*"

Despite the organisation's mission to work for worldwide democracy and its efforts to have a democratic approach to internal organisational decision-making, several staff members at NGO Plus point out the autocratic leadership style exhibited by top management. "*The top manager is outwardly open and democratic, but he knows what he wants and how to get it. He's difficult in situations of disagreement, especially when people disagree with him*" (Linda,

programme worker). Top management not taking account of staff's wishes or opinions in matters that concern organisational well-being and welfare issues and how these issues relate to organisational functioning according to staff, characterises this autocratic leadership style.

Management's need to control outcomes from actions and decision-making is a problem that many staff members talk about. For example, several programme workers complain that everything written needs to be approved by their departmental manager before any action can be taken: "*Reality is that she <u>wants</u> to see everything before it leaves the office – that is, she want to read everything that we produce, but the problem is that she hasn't got the time for this*" (Steve, programme worker). A consequence of this practice is that it takes time away from defining a clear strategy for the department. "*Being able to feel satisfied with ones work output is definitely connected to management in this place. We don't know what strategy to follow and our work is therefore not as productive as it could be.*" (Helen, programme worker) They perceive the problem as being a lack of clear communication and strategy from management, and because they find themselves in a new and difficult financial situation, they need clear communication more than ever. Given that they feel this is missing from their work creates a situation where staff is in opposition to management rather than being with management.

Moreover, management's effort to apply a democratic approach to internal organisational decision-making is only perceived as confusing people. Several staff members raise the problem that it is simply non-transparent who has got the power in decision-making at multiple levels. Lisa, a fundraiser explains, "*It's difficult because management sort of establishes a latitude, which they afterwards invade.*" Staff explain that they often experience that their power to make decisions gets side-tracked, mainly because after the decision has been made, they are told that this was something they should have talked about with management.

I am aware that the various elements in this chapter diverge in terms of depth and analytical display and that some elements may appear to be analytical rather than descriptive accounts of life at NGO Plus. I consider this, however, to be unavoidable as I wish to describe life at NGO Plus so that it relates to how conflict plays out in the organisation. Consequently there may be some overlap between elements in this chapter and part of the analyses presented in the three articles. I expect, however, the accounts in this chapter to supplement rather than repeat the particulars of how conflict plays out at NGO Plus and thereby enable a deeper understanding of conflict at NGO Plus. From this chapter's accounts of working life at NGO Plus, I expect the

reader to gain an advantageous platform from which to engage with the three articles in the following chapters below.

6

Conflict and Sensemaking Frameworks in Nonprofit Organisations: An Analysis of the Social Meanings of Conflict

Abstract

This ethnographic study illustrates how staff and management's sensemaking in conflict in a clerical unit in a Scandinavian nonprofit organisation is shaped by institutionalised meanings. Staff and management draw on three institutionalised frameworks when making sense of conflict: the defective personality framework, the diversity framework, and the status inequality framework. Similarly to the organisation's practice of framing 'conflicts' as 'frictions', the diversity framework is guided by organisational values of egalitarianism and similar to the defective personality framework it emphasises non-confrontation as a main strategy in processes of conflict management. Despite the organisation's strong commitment to egalitarianism, the clerical workers view status inequality as the origin of many conflicts and they thereby draw from the same institutionalised meanings of political economy of distributional conflicts that the organisation was founded to change. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords

Introduction

A long tradition of research into conflict in organisations establishes that they are an inescapable aspect of organisational life. Conflict presents different faces in organisational conflict research where it has been conceptualised as either detrimental or beneficial to organisations. Additionally, another group of theorist views conflict as neutral and suggests focusing more on how we can understand the complexities and dynamics involved in conflict. This line of conflict research draws attention to meaning making in conflict in relation to how conflicts unfold (e.g. Barley, 1991; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Lewicki & Gray, 2003; Morrill, 1989; Putnam, 2004). According to this theoretical view, we must examine the talk and discourse of conflict to gain insight into how people build understandings and make sense of conflict, how they address and act out conflict, and how they interpret and influence each other's actions in conflict.

Conflict sensemaking is the process of framing, or organising experience through a certain way of defining what is going on in a situation (Goffman, 1974). This process occurs retrospectively, when people bracket their experience and give it meaning (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). How a conflict is framed must be understood within the context in which the conflict occurs (Bartunek, Kolb, & Lewicki, 1992; Mather & Yngvesson, 1980) as social processes of sensemaking and framing are thoroughly embedded in the wider social and institutional context in which they occur (Jordan & Mitterhofer, 2010; Weber & Glynn, 2006).

Nonprofit organisations present a particular type of cultural and institutional base. Because their commitment is to a specific social mission, their members are primarily interested in and motivated by the organisational mission and by their wish to contribute to make the world a better place. They also tend to be less hierarchical than other institutions (De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, & Jegers, 2011; Hudson, 1995; Leete, 2000; Lewis, French, & Steane, 1997; Mirvis & Hackett, 1983; Rose-Ackerman, 1996). The central argument of this article is that the distinct cultural and institutional base, making up 'the social' in nonprofit organisations, influences how conflicts are conceptualised, addressed, and dealt with in such organisations.

In this paper, I present an ethnographic study undertaken to explore processes of conflict management in nonprofit organisations. The study investigates the question: *How do staff and management experience and act out conflicts in a nonprofit organisation?* Over the course of a ten-month field study, I used interview and observational methods to investigate conflicts as they occurred in the routines and mundane activities that made up daily life in the organisation.

From observations of in-the-moment-conflicts and participants' own accounts of their experiences with conflicts, I present empirical grounding for analysing the social meanings of conflict.

Theoretical background

Conflict sensemaking

Sensemaking as a theory of process involves the three main moves of perception, interpretation, and action occurring in an ongoing cycle of revisions (Weick, 1979). There are two core assumptions in sensemaking theory.

The first assumption is that sensemaking is the social construction of meaning happening through social interactions in groups. This assumption constitutes an important example of how sensemaking theory differs from psychological theories occupied with individual cognitive processes or behaviours (Weick et al., 2005). Although sensemaking may seem like a private, individual process, it is a social process because it is contingent on our interactions and relationships with others, whether they are physically present or not. Weick's approach for how individuals and organisations make sense of their environment has moved the study of interpretation and meaning making beyond the individual experience and into the domain of organisations and organising (Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). People studying sensemaking therefore pay a lot of attention to talk and discourse because that is how much of social contact is mediated (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking happens when people make retrospective sense of situations that they find themselves in and involves constructing or *framing* the subjective into something more tangible (Weick et al., 2005). In this process, people often draw on frames of reference or *perceptual frameworks* to construct roles and interpret objects in response to situations (Weick, 1995). It is the Goffmanian notion of framing that comes to the fore in sensemaking theory (Czarniawska, 2006). Goffman's (1974) theory of frame analysis suggests that individuals and groups use frames to define situations, organise their experiences, and obtain guidance for actions.

To date, frame theory has been used primarily by social movement scholars (e.g. Benford, 1997; Gamson, 1995; Johnston, 1995; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986) to show how situations become framed collectively. But within this body of literature, framing is primarily conceptualised as a strategic process of constructing meaning for participants that is in

line with political interests. Conceptualising framing as the construction of meaning for others is also found to play a crucial role in studies of organisational leadership at times of organisational change (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994), where leaders tend to engage in *sensegiving*, a term that has been coined as the activity of altering the meaning construction of others. Framing is, however, also an inherent part of people's everyday sensemaking where it refers to the use of a particular repertoire of stable and unstable, articulated and unarticulated categories to bracket and interpret experience and inform action (Goffman, 1974).

The second core assumption in sensemaking theory is that thinking and action define one another (Weick et al., 2005). Mills et al. (2010) argue that the value of applying Weick's sensemaking framework to an empirical phenomenon lies in its potential to explain the role of agency in organising. Indeed, the term *enactment* captures that people in organisational life often enact part of the environment they face. Nonetheless, in a review of sensemaking studies in the crisis and change literatures, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) maintain that the action component is widely underappreciated and that cognitive processes have received much more attention in sensemaking studies.

Studies that have taken a sensemaking approach to the investigation of conflict reveal similar limitations. For example Kusztal (2002) shows how sensemaking and discourses in use determine what conflicts arise in organisations and how they are understood, and Cloven and Roloff (1991) show that sensemaking activities are an important factor in determining perceived severity of conflicts. Additionally, Brummans et al. (2008) show that disputants within the same stakeholder group may or may not make sense of conflict situations in the same ways, which have implications for strategies directed at resolving conflicts. None of these studies however, examine the disputants' enactment of conflict sensemaking *in actual conflict interactions*. With an enacted sensemaking perspective, the focus is on the development of meanings and how such meanings motivate engagements, actions, and practices. From this perspective, sensemaking is not merely about interpreting the world, but is equally about creating the world. Moreover, most of this research does not explain how the context influences sensemaking. The choice of what frame to adopt in a given situation depends on one's own memory, the cues that others send, and especially the context, or culture, in which the situation occurs (Gray, 2003). To address these limitations, I have analysed sensemaking from an action perspective and below I elaborate on the role of context in sensemaking theory.

Making sense with institutionalised meanings

Institutional theory is one theory of context that has been connected with sensemaking theory (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1995). Institutional theory holds that organisations are suspended in a web of situational mechanisms such as rules, norms, values, and cultural-cognitive elements of shared understandings that constrain as well as enable action (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Moreover, institutional theory supplies a set of possible elements with which identities can be constructed, legitimised, and ascribed meaning to. Glynn (2008) argues that institutionalised identities are embodied in personal experience by means of roles and come with expectations of how individuals should perform an identity in particular situations.

In the current study, I particularly draw from the component of taken-for-granted *cognitive-cultural* elements of institutional theory to illuminate how institutionalised meanings shape signification, or the actual making of meaning, in sensemaking processes and are crucial sources of meaning structures. From this perspective, institutionalised meanings are contextual mechanisms that serve as building blocks for sensemaking, guide and edit action formation, and are enacted in ongoing sensemaking processes (Weber & Glynn, 2006). In essence, people make sense *with* institutions and not in spite of institutions.

Due to the dominant view of conflict as dyadic interactions that have long been present in the conflict research literature, few scholars have applied theories of context to the study of conflict in organisations. Those who do invoke theories of context, for example, Gray et al., (2007), Bartunek et al., (1992), and Friedman (1992) argue that the meaning that individuals and groups make of a conflict situation is influenced by the structural and culturally negotiated contexts within which the conflict occurs.

With a sensemaking perspective on conflict, focussing only on talk and discourse is therefore insufficient. While we get insight into the construction of meaning when examining talk, we miss out on the tacit assumptions and cultural knowledge present in organisations that are equally used in meaning constructions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Hansen, 2006). We must therefore turn to methodologies that are able to make cultural or tacit knowledge more explicit by exploring the contexts in which conflict sensemaking is produced. Ethnography is one such methodology.

Methodology

The site of this research is a Scandinavian nonprofit development organisation, which I will refer to by the pseudonym of NGO Plus. I particularly examine conflicts experienced by the organisation's administrative department, here called 'the clerical unit'. NGO Plus works to create equal access to education, democracy and resources for marginalised people in third world countries. NGO Plus employs 30 full time staff members and has approximately 15 volunteers. The mean age for staff and management is 46 years and the mean tenure is eight years. There is only a little diversity in staff and management; all are middle-class natives and most are university graduates. The organisation also employs a group of clerical workers, who work in the clerical unit. In addition to the clerical unit, NGO Plus consists of two other units: the fundraising department and the programme department. A management group, consisting of the three departmental managers and the general secretary, administers NGO Plus. Most funding comes from the State, represented by 'the Development Agency' and private donors and funding agencies.

The data collection at NGO Plus was conducted in two periods with ethnographic fieldwork and ran over a ten-months period (June 2008 to March 2009), amounting to four months of full time fieldwork. The two periods of fieldwork were June and August 2008, and January to March 2009. The fieldwork consisted of repeated open-ended qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996) and on-site participant observations (Bernard, 1994; Neyland, 2008; Van Maanen, 1988; Waddington, 2004). The participant observations allowed me gradually to ask more sensitive questions about conflict during interviews. More importantly, by using multiple sources of data and multiple data collection methods I reflexively sought to triangulate research themes and increase dependability of findings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 184).

Over the course of the field study, I conducted repeated interviews with members of staff and management. In total, I conducted 39 single interviews and two focus group interviews. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Half the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, while for the other half, I took notes during the interview and wrote them up later that same day. Interview questions included opinions about community and collaboration at work; opinions about management, experiences with conflicts at work; conflict management; and perception of intergroup relations. More importantly, I often used the interviews to investigate the interviewees' views, intentions and emotions involved in conflict interactions that I had observed during the fieldwork. This method captured marginalised conflict accounts that were

influential in conflict interaction but only evident in interviews insofar as I could inquire about details in concrete events. As I inquired into conflict from a sensemaking perspective, I defined conflict as a set of different and sometimes opposing interpretations of the same situation, these differences resulting from the participants' differing views of reality led to increasing tensions in social interaction.

The ethnographic methodology congruent with phenomenology enabled me to investigate the emic view (Harris, 1976; Pike, 1967) of research participants, focusing on their accounts of conflict events while retaining focus on the broader social and institutional context. I acknowledge that my interpretations are not the only interpretations possible. The method of data analysis that was used for this study was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is used to identify, analyse and report themes and patterns within the data. The process of data analysis was ongoing throughout the research process. The early stages of analysis took place during fieldwork, where I focused on documenting those conflicts that were visible to me as an observer and that staff and management at NGO Plus would talk about.

After the fieldwork, I undertook the following steps in analysing the data. First, I conducted close, line-by-line readings of interview transcripts and field data, searching for as many ideas for themes and patterns as possible, all in relation to emic conceptualisations of conflict. Second, I conducted the initial coding of transcripts and field data using the computer software Nvivo8. Here I found a prevalence of accounts about how particular individuals were difficult to work with and about stereotypical attributions ascribed to different occupational groups. Third, I sorted the different interpretations into potential themes, and as I got a sense of significant themes, I identified the theoretical approaches that would extend my understanding of the data in terms of emic views of conflict.

Conflict and sensemaking frameworks in a nonprofit organisation

This section describes three frameworks for how staff and management make sense of conflict: *the defective personality framework*, *the diversity framework,* and *the status inequality framework*. The frameworks represent central tendencies in core beliefs about conflict in the clerical unit in particular and at NGO Plus more generally.

Staff and management rarely talk about conflicts at NGO Plus but when they do, they label conflict situations 'frictions'. They commonly make sense of frictions by blaming particular individuals in certain positions who are regularly involved in frictions. Accordingly, these particular individuals simply cannot get along with everyone else, and they are therefore regarded as the black sheep in the organisation. It is those black sheep's personalities that cause frictions. Thus, staff and management draw on a framework of defected personalities when making sense of frictions.

"The problem is her personality." In interviews, staff and managers talk about frictions going on at NGO Plus, frictions that are recurrent, "*center around the same three people*" one manager says, and affect the job satisfaction of other. At NGO Plus, collectively shared meanings assert that Alice, who is the payroll officer, is one of these black sheep: "*She always says NO! as the first reaction whenever you approach her in her office, so you always have to take a deep breath before entering her office*" Jane, a clerical worker explains. John, the clerical manager says, "*the problem is her personality. Maybe you become squared from working with something squared for a long time.*" In this process of making sense of frictions the problem becomes Alice's personality by maintaining that Alice has turned into the rules and procedures that she tries to uphold, and by explaining that Alice gets into frictions with people at work because she is rigid and does not have room for flexibility in her work procedures and pace. Being in this job for such a long time has turned her into a rigid person. Accordingly, the defective personality framework effectively locates frictions with the person managing the system for registering working hours and not with the system itself.

Alice's job refers to a specific Development Agency regulation of documenting working hours at NGO Plus. Every month, she gathers staff and management's registration of working hours in Timesheets to disseminate this information in quarterly reports to donors. She inspects other's conformity to this rule; however, she has no authority to sanction when the rule is not followed. Rather, late Timesheets mean she will be late with her contribution to the quarterly report and have more work because now she has to spend time writing emails reminding people to submit their Timesheets. Rarely is she on time with her contribution to the quarterly report and that frustrates her. Over the years, frictions about late Timesheets have constructed an image for Alice in which both staff and management perceive her as someone who is bad-tempered and difficult to work with: "*It is often a problem for people to work with the clerical unit, especially with Alice. You have to know exactly how she wants things,*" Steve, a programme

coordinator observes. Alice, however, feels that late Timesheets display a general lack of respect for her job of collecting Timesheets, and she therefore gets frustrated and angry when people are late with their Timesheets.

"Negativity only generates more negativity." Alice, aware that she is perceived as the problem in the frictions about Timesheets and sensitive to the effects that the frictions have on her image, still wants to do a good job and therefore tries to alter her image in the organisation. She has used the strategy of changing her conflict behaviour, which is her own enactment of the defective personality framework. She has particularly changed her way of reminding people to submit their Timesheets as she has realised that her negative attitude does not give her the things she needs. She therefore no longer writes communal emails to everyone at NGO Plus but only to those individuals who the matter concerns, and she really tries to use a positive and friendly tone in her reminding emails. She finds this new way of reminding people much more effective, although she still gets frustrated and angry when Timesheet deadlines are not kept. Staff and management have noticed her changes, but old expectations of how Alice interacts in particular situations still linger.

The diversity framework

Another framework for making sense of frictions is by explaining them as intergroup conflicts caused by clashing organisational subcultures. Within this framework, frictions are enacted as organisational diversity.

"What we are talking about is two different worlds, which both have to be here." In the following fragment John, the clerical manager explains why frictions arise between the fundraisers and the clerical workers:

> "But it *is* because of these two completely different cultures. Look, some of them [the fundraisers] *go through phases with green hair and red hair and they are so messy and break up our peace and quiet down here. And yes, then you have 37 coffee cups and that really annoys people down here, but I mean everybody will recognise 'wow that was a damn good idea' right."*

John explains that because the different units at NGO Plus undertake such different tasks, staff in the units need to have different skills and even different personalities. The units therefore develop different, sometimes divergent subcultures. Stereotypical attributions and traits ascribed to the clerical workers contend that since their work is repetitive and requires meeting deadlines

and following fixed procedures, clerical workers have to be organised and punctual. By contrast, stereotypical attributions and traits ascribed to the fundraisers maintain that this group has to be good at getting and executing ideas, and therefore has to be creative and impulsive. David from the clerical unit sums up, "*We are the prudes of this organisation and they* [the fundraisers] *are the creative staff.*"

It is in the interaction between clerical workers and fundraisers that these different roles, or identities, have been established and are assigned to the two groups. Grounded in the constructions of two divergent organisational sub-identities, the diversity framework explains frictions as innate to the different organisational roles that clerical workers and fundraisers have. Due to these different roles, clerical workers and fundraisers see the world differently and sometimes act in opposing ways. However, since NGO Plus both needs staff that are good at fundraising as well as staff that are good at administrative tasks, diversity becomes a dominant model when the clerical workers try to rationalise what people from the fundraising unit are doing when frictions occur. The interview and observational data are rich in examples of how the clerical staff and management use the diversity framework to explain frictions with the fundraisers. Hilary, a clerical worker observes:

> "*Well the fundraisers, they have this relaxed attitude and don't care much about the rules* (…) *When they get an idea they don't think about whether it's feasible within the rules we have, they just try to pursue the idea, right. Whereas in the clerical unit, we react with questions like 'can they do that', 'are they allowed to do that', 'is it possible'.*"

Laura, another clerical worker says, "*Some are creative and impulsive and some are organised and punctual…it's all about culture and the different ways we work,*" which shows that it is the fundraisers' behaviours of impulsiveness and not adhering to rules or following deadlines that evoke the diversity framework when the clerical workers explain frictions going on with the fundraisers.

"Conflicts between groups will always be there." It is John, the clerical manager who has constructed this interpretation of frictions with the fundraisers in an attempt to narrow and control frictions between the two groups. An important source of power constitutes the control over which cues serve as the point of reference and get attention (Weick, 1995). In frictions between the clerical workers and the fundraisers, John directs the clerical workers' attention to the need for creative yet sometimes impulsive fundrasers, whose qualities are seen by the

clerical workers as clashing with their ethos to be organised and punctual. By emphasising the value of the fundraisers being so different from the clerical workers, John *gives sense*, or alters how the clerical workers understand frictions with fundraisers – that is, as a matter of organisational diversity. In effect, he manages to reduce friction intensity.

Enactments of the diversity framework socialise the clerical workers to endure behaviour they define as inappropriate by the fundraisers. By framing frictions as a matter of organisational diversity and thus preventing their escalation, the clerical workers understand that when the fundraisers do not comply with bureaucratic rules, it is not because they are bad people but because they are so busy being creative and getting good ideas and therefore do not think about formalities like rules and deadlines. To a certain extent, the clerical workers buy into this way of thinking: "*Some people are good at keeping deadlines and some are not,*" David says; an interpretation which represents the clerical unit's internalisation of frictions as arising from organisational diversity. Over time, the diversity framework has reduced frustration and anger, and fostered collective indulgence among the clerical workers towards the fundraisers. Alice observes:

> "*When people for example hadn't submitted their Timesheets, we, the clerical workers, would always get upset, that was the tendency. Whereas today we all try to see it differently (…) When I look back I see this sort of general change in the unit.*"

Although the stereotyping in the clerical unit is characterised by simplified zero-sum conceptualisations of the clerical versus the fundraising identity, this mutual disidentification is not expressed in emotions such as hatred or anger. Rather, those are feelings that the stereotyping and the diversity framework aim to reduce.

The status inequality framework

In addition to using the diversity framework, the clerical workers also draw on a framework of status inequality between different occupational groups when they make sense of frictions with non-clerical staff and management. This happens, for example, when non-clerical staff and management show up in the clerical unit and expect instantaneous administrative assistance. Although only covertly expressed amongst themselves, the clerical workers perceive different status positions between occupational groups as central in frictions.

"We don't feel respect for our work." The clerical workers feel that there is a lack of respect for the work carried out in their unit. They feel frustrated and angry that their work does not seem as important or as valued as other types of work carried out in the organisation, and those feelings deplete the energy they have available for work. Hilary, a clerical worker explains:

> "We don't always understand the other entities and their way of working, particularly the fundraising unit. We don't understand that they are so steered by their creativity and we get confused by their impulsive ways of behaving. We sometimes feel that some things they do only to annoy us. I mean, they don't seem to take in that they have to tell us in advance if they want our help. They could show a little more interest in what we do."

According to the clerical workers, there are two ways that status inequality is enacted. The first way has to do with how non-clerical staff members make their requests for clerical assistance. Carolyn, another clerical worker says: *"I think that if they said it differently like 'would it be possible to do this for me – I would really appreciate it if you could do it this afternoon', then I would lay down whatever I was doing even if it was urgent, and try to help."* The clerical workers feel that the way people from the other departments make their requests for clerical assistance often signals a lack of respect. The second way of enacting status inequality is when non-clerical staff members show up in the clerical unit and expect to be served instantaneously by the clerical workers. Jane explains: *"If everyone always comes in at the last second, although it has been said several times that some things are not doable if you show up five minutes before a deadline and want this, that and the other. In the fifteen years I've been here, it's been an issue."* Expectations of instantaneous clerical assistance frustrate the clerical workers because they feel unable to determine the order of tasks for which they are responsible. In contrast to the fundraisers and the programme coordinators, the clerical workers simply do not feel in charge of their own work, and that makes them feel inferior to the other occupational groups at NGO Plus. The two ways of enacting status inequality position the clerical workers with an inferior status at NGO Plus – that is, as a group that serves the other groups.

"Some of them act as if we are only here to serve them." The status inequality framework contends that it is the practice of work allocations that causes frictions. June, a clerical worker says, *"I feel that some people in this organisation take it for granted that we perform tasks that we see as service tasks, and I don't think that's okay."* The organisation of work categorises some tasks as being service tasks. Being placed in the clerical unit, service

tasks give rise to roles, or institutional identities like 'the clerical workers', and the expectation of service work creates a clerical identity of being a service provider.

New values in the aid industry nine years ago forced serious cut backs in organisational spending, and management decided that the clerical unit should no longer provide its services to the rest of the organisation. Instead, many traditional support functions were implemented at every level of organisational activities. In the same period, many tasks, such as membership administration and human resource management, drifted from the other units to the clerical unit – tasks that have nothing to do with support to other groups and tasks in which the clerical workers take great pride. Although the change in the unit's support functions has been communicated several times to the rest of NGO Plus, some still turn up at the clerical unit expecting some kind of service: "*By now many people in the organisation know how to do things themselves, but there are still those who think that they can always ask us to make the necessary last minute arrangements*", Maria from the clerical unit observes.

The status inequality framework constrains the identity of being a clerical worker, because it means feeling inferior to the rest of NGO Plus. The inferior position in the organisation makes the clerical workers angry. Having worked in the private sector before taking on their current positions at NGO Plus, they all consciously replaced working for stockholder profit with working for nonprofit and social change at NGO Plus because they wanted to feel differently about their work. "*It's important to me that my heart is in my job*", David says. They see their work too, is "*benefiting a higher purpose*", as Laura says. Just as any other occupational group at NGO Plus, the clerical workers feel fulfilled by their work and perceive it as contributing to making the world a better place. Consequently, the clerical workers feel that they are entitled to the same kind of respect for their work as other groups at NGO Plus enjoy.

Discussion

When staff and management at NGO Plus use the framework of personality defects they draw on an institutionalised concept of individualism to diagnose and to make decisions on how to approach frictions. Individualism leads to more blame-laden explanations in frictions and singles out and ascribes faults to individuals, like Alice, exempting management, other staff members and the organisational system itself from responsibility during frictions. For Alice, the

defective personality framework treats image repair and conflict management at the individual level; conflicts encountered by Alice are defined as her private problems that she must resolve herself. Consequently nothing changes and frictions about Timesheets and other bureaucratic rules continue to resurface.

By contrast, the diversity framework is drawn from an ideology of egalitarianism to diagnose and approach frictions. At NGO Plus, the ideology of egalitarianism constitutes the organisation's vision of a more equal world and guides its mission to change global injustices. But egalitarianism is also a common framework of meaning that shapes staff and management's internal interpretive processes of relational enactments. Within NGO Plus, egalitarianism is enacted through stories, told by staff and management alike, about (a) the organisation's horizontal, non-hierarchical structure; (b) how everyone's contribution is equally important irrespective of where they are placed in the system, and (c) NGO Plus' exceptional work for democracy and human rights carried out in developing countries. And all members of the organisation share the organisation's mission of working for a more just world in which people have equal access to food, education and democracy.

Egalitarianism is, moreover, enacted through the use of metaphors, which seek to create unity in the organisation, e.g., 'the organisation as a family' and 'co-workers as friends'. The enactment of egalitarianism, through metaphors that emphasise unity in the organisation, must be understood in relation to Scandinavian culture and language. Here, the colloquial meaning of 'being equal' is that of 'being the same,' meaning that people must consider themselves as more or less the same to feel of equal value (cf. Gullestad, 2002). While this translation of egalitarian is woven into Scandinavian societies, it also implies that it is a problem when others are perceived to be 'too different'.

At NGO Plus, enactments of a culturally translated meaning of egalitarian have molded the concept of conflict in such a way that conflict is often not labelled as 'conflict' at all. Instead of the word 'conflict', staff and management much prefer to use the word 'frictions' to describe tensions, disagreements and clashes going on between people in the organisation. 'Conflict' is considered a threat to the organisation's ideological foundation of egalitarianism and thereby also to organisational unity. 'Conflict' is something that NGO Plus tries to resolve through its mission overseas; it is not something that happens in its own backyard. 'Frictions' on the other hand, are more tractable, less harmful and hence much more acceptable and something staff and management feel they can work around in daily working life. At NGO Plus, the word 'frictions' is regarded as the culturally specific way of conceptualising tensions, disagreements and clashes

between people, because it conceals or downplays differences between people in social interactions.

Just as the word 'frictions' is a pacifying framing that acts as a neutralisation strategy for 'conflict,' the diversity framework and the defective personality framework equally reduce the scope of conflict intensity. While the diversity framework reduces conflict by framing them as unavoidable clashes between subcultures, the defective personality framework reduces conflict to be a matter of personal issues. All three ways of conceptualising conflict emphasise nonconfrontation as a main strategy in processes of conflict management. This finding resembles the results from Howell (1981) and Temkin and Cummings (1986), who found the same to be the case for both volunteers and paid staff in nonprofit organisations. While this has been explained by nonprofit workers being more concerned with the organisational mission in situations involving personal differences (Temkin & Cummings, 1986) and by conflict in nonprofit organisations being unexpected and therefore feared (Allyn, 2011), I have showed *how* institutionalised meanings shape interpretation and communication internally in the organisation, which strongly influence the forms that routine conflict management assumes. But with a strategy of nonconfrontation as the dominant form of dealing with conflict, the existing organisational status system is very likely to go unchallenged.

The status inequality framework is used to make sense of a fundamental conflict of inequality within NGO Plus. In the following fragment, Joanne, a fundraiser sees this as a paradox for the organisation:

> "*Generally the clerical unit see themselves as the underdogs in this organisation; they provide a service function that no one really values. This is a paradox because originally NGO Plus emerged from a very leftist university milieu and works for human rights.*"

This sort of conflict in nonprofit organisations has been termed as *mission mirroring (Allyn, 2011)*, a term used to describe when organisations become enmeshed internally in the same sort of conflicts that it was founded to deal with externally.

While the diversity framework is guided by NGO Plus' vision for a more egalitarian world, the same egalitarian ideal obscures that there is a paradoxical inequality within the organisation. On the one hand, ideals of egalitarianism support the clerical workers' identification with NGO Plus that everyone is equal, but on the other hand, institutionalised role expectations threaten their identity as equal members of the organisation, which shows

organisational enactments of an invisible system (Gadlin, 1994) of hierarchical difference that contradicts the organisation's strong ideology of egalitarianism. Given that egalitarianism at NGO Plus asserts that everyone and everyone's contribution is equal, conflict sensemaking drawing on the status inequality framework is only covertly shared among the clerical workers, emphasising the invisibility of the hierarchical system at NGO Plus. When the clerical workers invoke status inequality as an explanation for being denied the identity of equal partners in the organisation, they draw from the same institutionalised meanings of political economy of distributional conflicts, that is, the unequal global distribution of power and influence, which the organisation was founded to change.

Throughout the field study, this fundamental conflict of status inequality remained unaddressed within in the organisation. Instead, frictions were primarily conceptualised as going on between people lower in the system, either as private problems to be solved individually or unavoidable intergroup clashes, both narrowing the scope of conflict and ignoring its cultural and structural causes.

The last issue I wish to discuss is how the application of sensemaking theory to studying conflict has revealed a weakness in the theoretical framework. Mills et al., (2010) and Landau and Drori (2008) have recently criticised Weick's sensemaking framework for assuming that sensemaking is a democratic process in which all voices are equally important and that sensemaking processes are targeted towards consensual understanding. In conflict events, however, or in any other event for that matter, individuals within organisations may not make sense of the same conflict in the same way. While conflict may have indisputable manifestations in clashes and arguments, these are peaks in a process that is, most of the time, enacted in opposing perceptual and verbal representations of what is going on. By showing that conflict sensemaking may evolve from conflicting perceptual frameworks, this study refutes the assumption that describes sensemaking as democratic and consensual in nature.

At NGO Plus, the diversity framework and the status inequality framework cannot coexist as legitimate ways of making sense of conflict, because they are mutually exclusive. If the organisation accepts that internal conflicts are basically about status inequality between occupational groups, it cannot uphold its self-image of being an egalitarian organisation. But with the organisation's strong ideology of egalitarianism, the clerical workers cannot openly address their feeling of inequality with respect to the other groups. The view of conflict as being a matter of status inequality manifested itself by being marginalised within the organisation. It

was therefore only evident in practice and only empirically demonstrable by being there, observing social situations of conflict.

Conclusion and implications

In this paper, I reported the findings from an ethnographic study of how staff and management in a nonprofit organisation use different frameworks to make sense of those conflicts that occur at work. While the defective personality framework effectively confines conflict to be a matter of particular individuals' difficult personalities, the diversity framework similarly reduces the scope of intergroup conflict by emphasising organisational ideology of diversity and egalitarianism, the same ideology that governs the organisation's work with aid and development abroad. Likewise, egalitarianism shapes how conflict internally at NGO Plus is recognised and talked about, emphasising 'frictions' rather than 'conflict' as the way to conceptualise tensions and clashes between people. Overall, these dynamics foster a nonconfrontational approach to dealing with conflict at NGO Plus.

Despite the NGO Plus commitment to egalitarianism, the clerical workers additionally view status inequality as the origin of many conflicts. Although this view of conflict manifested itself by being marginalised within the organisation it indicates that NGO Plus is experiencing a conflict of mission mirroring, a phenomenon unique to the sector.

I find that we can trace processes of conflict management to perceptual frameworks of meaning, which are guided by institutionalised meanings. While institutions act as interpretive frames, they do not *determine* specific kinds of sensemaking (Jordan & Mitterhofer, 2010), since, as shown by the study, individuals draw upon a diversity of, and sometimes conflicting, interpretation repertoires. Through ethnography, I was able to capture both overtly and covertly expressed forms of conflict. As a result the study reveals a weakness in Weick's sensemaking theory by showing that conflict sensemaking may evolve from conflicting perceptual frameworks, and it thereby refutes any assumptions that describe sensemaking as democratic and consensual in nature.

I conclude that sensemaking and framing provide an advantageous approach to understanding conflict, because they display dynamics of conflict by describing how conflicts are recognised and interpreted *collectively* in the organisation and how such meanings motivate actions in conflict. This approach has a lot of potential in terms of application across different

organisational settings and beyond. At NGO Plus, the institutionalised meanings that shaped conflict sensemaking were strongly linked to the organisation's specific social mission.

Whether or not this adds primarily to a theory of nonprofits, or is also a contribution to theory of conflict can only be specified by similar future research undertaken in for-profit organisations. I must emphasise however, that the hallmark of NGO Plus, that although it sees the world as conflictual, its staff and management do not talk about conflicts in the organisation itself, is particularly characteristic of nonprofit organisations. Future research into conflict in for-profit organisations, could explain how other institutionalised meanings are linked to notions of a particular organisation's business purpose, its methods of doing business, or notions about professionalism. This would further confirm that organisational ideology and identification among staff and management contain an important link to understanding the dynamics of conflict in a particular organisation.

So how can understanding conflict sensemaking help address conflict? Not understanding how conflict sensemaking in an organisation is constructed may prevent the organisation from effectively addressing and dealing with conflict. The way to deal with conflict depends on how the conflict is framed, which is shaped by the culture and ideology in a particular organisation and by the regional culture in which the organisation operates. At NGO Plus, the defected personality framework and the diversity framework were used to effectively diffuse the status inequality framework as a legitimate way of understanding conflict. This study therefore suggests ways of intervening in organisational conflict that are able to get at subtle sensemaking processes and that can raise awareness of how different perceptual frameworks may interact and compete in shaping social reality.

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7

Exploring how Conflict Management Training Changes Workplace Conflict: A Qualitative Case Study

Abstract

While many organisations offer conflict management training to both staff and management, there is little research investigating the changes resulting from such training. Using an interpretive framework of analysis, a qualitative case study was conducted to understand how 'sensemaking' about conflict change as they are enacted from the perspective of staff and management in a non-profit organisation that participated in conflict management training. The case study was constructed as a longitudinal investigation with ethnographic fieldwork as the primary method of inquiry. The training worked as a catalyst for the development of new sensemaking about workplace conflict. These included incremental acknowledgement of workplace conflict, recognition of interdependent and context embedded relationships in interpersonal conflicts, and enactment of active resistance in a subordinated occupational group. Some conflicts did not change through training, where the conflicts' perpetual structural bases remained intact. Insights from the study call attention to the embeddedness of conflict in the organisation's social fabric. As a practical implication of the study, trainers in conflict management are recommended to give more weight to the structural dimensions of conflict and organisational level conflict management when putting training programmes together.

Keywords

Workplace conflict, conflict management training, sensemaking theory, change

Introduction

While many organisations offer conflict management training to both staff and management, there is little research that describes the workplace change outcomes resulting from such training. This dearth of studies is remarkable, given that conflict research literature for more than four decades has posited that conflicts in organisations are inevitable processes that need management through particular forms of intervention. The literature claims that, if *managed* correctly, conflicts can bring about development, collaboration, problem solving, and organisational change (e.g. De Dreu, 1997; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Jehn, 1997; 2001; Johnson, 1991; Pondy, 1967; 1969; Rahim, 2000; 2002; Ramarajan et al., 2004; Thomas, 1992; Tjosvold, 2006; 2008; Van de Vliert, 1998; 1999).

Only a few studies have examined the effect of conflict management training in organisations. Where they have done so the focus has been on the effects on clients or public at large, with overwhelmingly positive results. Johnson (1991) measured the effects of conflict management training on the conflict management styles of teachers, finding that the majority of the teachers developed a more problem-solving conflict management style. Zacker and Bard (1973) measured the effects of conflict management training on police performance, finding that officers who had taken conflict management training as part of the Police Academy curriculum scored higher on performance than those who had not. Ramarajan et. al. (2004) found that UN peacekeepers on international intervention missions in complex humanitarian emergencies experienced fewer conflict situations with NGO workers after receiving training in negotiation.

The three studies reviewed in the previous paragraph focused on how training in conflict management and negotiation affects staff relationships with different external groups (pupils, citizens, NGO workers). By contrast, the following case study was undertaken to explore the change outcomes of conflict management training in the workplace itself. It does so by comparing how staff and management from the same workplace enact and describe changing meanings about conflicts in the workplace before their participation in conflict management training and in the ensuing year. Research within conflict and negotiations studies conceptualises conflict and its management as interpretive processes strictly dependent of human observation and the making of meaning (Barley, 1991; Kolb, 2008; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Van Maanen, 1992). Several researchers have adopted a focus on the context-specific meanings of conflict and negotiation and the processes that shape such meanings (Bartunek et

al., 1992; Collier, 2009; Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Morrill, 1989; Putnam, 2004).

Building on an interpretive epistemology represented by Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking (1995; 2001), the present case study follows training in conflict management longitudinally to investigate how staff and management make sense of conflicts. Focussing on the actual processes of change resulting from such training, the research question is: how does changing sensemaking enact and affect conflicts at work? I use interview and observational methods to trace the meanings and fates of workplace conflicts longitudinally. The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, I provide the theoretical background for the study, and then I describe the methods of data collection and analysis. I thereafter present four narratives of how changing sensemaking enact and affect conflict at work, and conclude by discussing how the study informs our understanding of how organisational conflict management can change.

Theoretical background

In this paper, Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1995; 2001; Weick et al., 2005) contributes to understanding the meaning of conflict, including how the dynamics of conflict meanings unfold and shift in the organisational context. While much of (organisational) life is routine, comprising situations that do not demand our full attention, whenever something that needs or demands our attention occurs, we engage in a process of searching for meaning – a process that Weick (1995) terms 'sensemaking'. Sensemaking theory has evolved from microsociology, particularly symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1956; Mead, 1967) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Symbolic interactionism is concerned with how "*human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them*" and "*that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows*" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Sensemaking theory's roots in symbolic interactionism emphasise the dynamics of interactions between individuals and groups on the one hand and the organisational social context on the other. The lineages from Goffman and Garfinkel stress the need for careful attention to the micro-particulars of every interaction contexts.

According to Weick, sensemaking is ongoing, subtle, social and easily taken for granted. Sensemaking makes circumstances comprehensible both prospectively and retrospectively. Much of the time we make sense routinely, invoking rationalized accounts of actions past, present and future. Rationalized accounts do not always hold, however, especially where jolts that disturb these accounts are experienced (Meyer, 1982). Jolts transform routines and rationalized accounts by introducing ambiguity that prompts revisioning of meaning. On such occasions, when normalcy is disturbed, new forms of sensemaking often emerge. Such occasions for sensemaking might include shocks, changes, or unexpected actions that may be small or massive. Conflict epitomises challenge to the ongoing flow of intersubjective sensemaking. Changed sensemaking happens when people make a different sense of situations in which they find themselves. While social context influences how people interpret events in many ways, people also participate in creating and maintaining their social contexts, which makes sensemaking iterative and reflexive (Weick et al., 2005). With a sensemaking perspective, the focus is on the development of meaning and how such meaning motivate engagement, action, and practice. Weick et al. (2005) argue that the concept of sensemaking keeps action and cognition together. Central to a sensemaking perspective is how people enact the environments they interpret and constitute their identity within these enactments, shaping how they interpret events, things, phenomena. Identity and identity construction are therefore central to sensemaking.

The goal of a sensemaking perspective is to understand organisational life (Drazin et al., 1999). From this perspective on workplace conflict, focus is less on reducing the level of conflict in the workplace than it is on understanding the processes through which individuals and organisations enact and make sense of conflict. As with other micro-sociological theories, sensemaking is concerned mostly with the actions of groups and communities (Weick et al., 2005), where it provides a useful framework for understanding how social phenomena, such as conflicts, play out in organisational cultures and group dynamics. Organisational situations dedicated to changing sensemaking are, from the point of view of research, naturally occurring experiments (Silverman, 2007). Conflict management training as a form of organisational intervention that has as its aim the transformation of behaviours around conflict provides a unique naturally occurring experimental situation. The conflict management training researched took place in a Scandinavian non-profit development organisation, for which the pseudonym 'NGO Plus' is used.

Methodology

NGO Plus works to promote democracy in post conflict developing countries. Funding comes from the state, represented by 'the Development Agency' as well as private funding agencies. Founded in 1970, NGO Plus employs 30 full time staff members, all of whom participated in the study. Mean age is 46 years, mean tenure is eight years, and the gender division skews female. The organisation consists of a clerical unit, a fundraising department, and a programme department. The management group, consisting of the three departmental managers and the general secretary, administers NGO Plus.

Data collection

The data collection was conducted through ethnographic fieldwork (Brewer, 2004; Neyland, 2008; Van Maanen, 1988) over a two-year period (June 2008 to September 2010), consisting of six months of full time fieldwork at NGO Plus (see fig. 1). The fieldwork included repeated interviews with staff and management (Kvale, 1996; Schensul, 1999; Steyart & Bouwen, 2004) from which qualitative accounts were collected, observations of the training, and on-site participant observation (Bernard, 1994; Waddington, 2004). Following Kolb and Putnam's (1992) view that conflict has a sensitive nature, I chose the method of ethnographic fieldwork to gain participants' trust before conducting interviews and to obtain insight into the daily life of the organisation as a way of investigating cultural meaning systems encompassing conflict (Dubinskas, 1992). In total, I conducted 52 individual interviews and four focus group meetings. Individual interviews lasted from 20 to 75 minutes, and focus group meetings lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. Interviews addressed issues of community, collaboration, and conflict management in the department/organisation. In the pre-training interviews, participants were asked to bring up any situations that were frustrating to them and that involved other staff members. They were encouraged to talk about what had happened and how they had experienced it. Post-training interviews addressed the same situations that had been brought up in the pre-training interviews to detect if any changes had occurred.

March 2009:
Conflict management
training

Timeline

June-August 2008 and
January-March 2009:
Fieldwork

June and August 2010:
Second follow-up

April 2009:
First follow-up
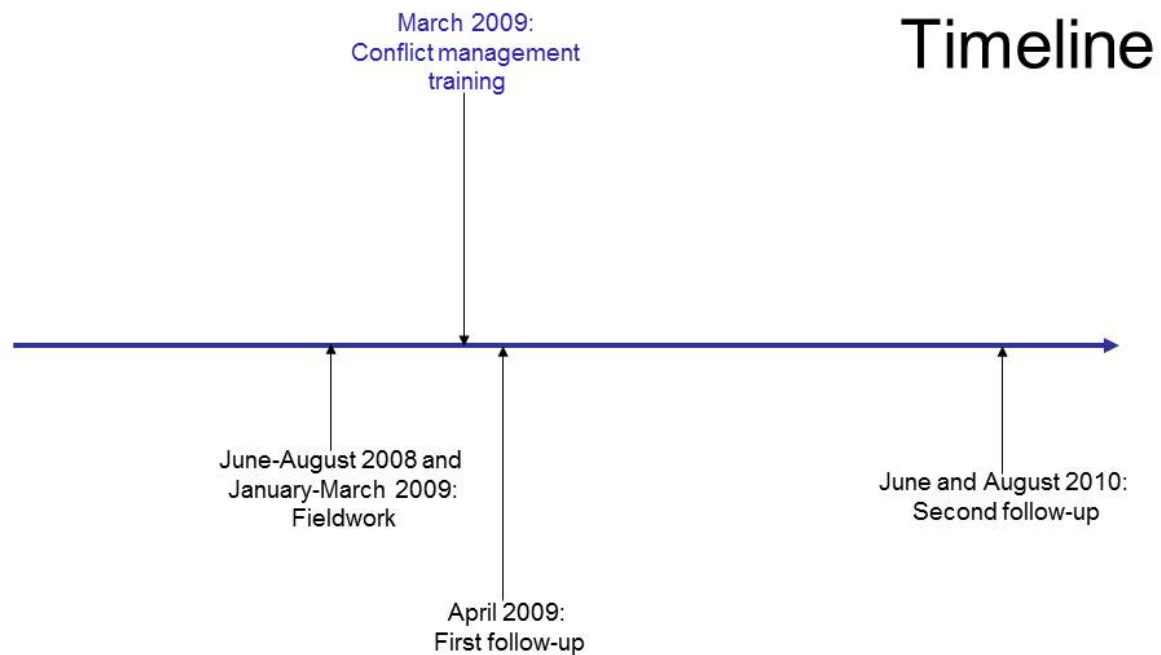
Fig. 1. Research process timeline

The conflict management training

The 35-hour programme in conflict management had the purpose of promoting knowledge about conflict resolution and of providing training to deal more constructively with conflict. The training programme was normative: by providing participants with methods and tools for understanding and working with conflict it was believed that this would enable a more productive resolution of conflict. The training programme was presented to 18 out of 30 staff members at NGO Plus. All four managers at NGO-Plus participated in the training. All staff members who wished to participate in the training were given a place on the course, resulting in participation from all areas of the organisation.

An experienced trainer from a local agency, external to the study, conducted the conflict management training, which included knowledge and skills development in the following areas: defining what conflict is, working with escalation and de-escalation of conflict, distinguishing between destructive and constructive negotiation styles, reframing the issues in conflict, differentiating between underlying needs versus positions, working with dialogue and active

listening, working with phases in mediation and win-win solutions, and negotiating values for the organisation. The training methods alternated between presentation of theory and models in the large group and exercises in pairs or small groups.

Data analysis

Using qualitative methodology congruent with phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Van Maanen, 1979) enabled me to learn how participants viewed the world by attending to how they talked about it. I acknowledge that my interpretations are not the only interpretations possible. The analytical strategy focused attention on the empirical materials in terms of changed meanings and enactments of conflict. After the fieldwork, I conducted line-by-line readings of interviews and field data to uncover as many potentially relevant narratives about conflicts in the empirical material as possible. I used a narrative approach (Czarniawska, 1998) for analysis to make sense of events and bring them into a meaningful whole. While chronology is used to understand events and actions in logical coherence that extends the chronology of the data collection process (through time), thereby broadening the temporal scope of a particular narrative, contextualisation links the narrative to actions and events beyond its immediate scope (across space), thereby embedding the narrative in organisational social dynamics and structure. The narrative approach allows for the pursuit of storylines in empirical material. I distinguish between narratives *from* the field that I produce from analysing the data and narrative *of* the field that are my collection of stories from the organisational members (Czarniawska, 1998).

Findings

From denial to incremental acknowledgement

Generally, conflict was not talked about at NGO Plus. For staff and management the notion of 'conflict' was heavily associated with violence and war. Conflict was something that the organisation tried to resolve through its human rights and development work overseas, it was not something that happened in its own backyard. Whenever I tried to get people to talk about conflict, they would praise the sense of community internally in the organisation and emphasise colleagues' support of one another. Staff members talked about collaboration in their departments as being more or less conflict-free. Additionally, both staff and management frequently used unifying metaphors of the organisation that conceived of it as a family and co-workers as friends, and emphasised narratives of NGO Plus as a horizontally structured

organisation with strong values of egalitarianism. The metaphors and the narratives were like a cultural lens (Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005) that served to confirm the organisation's self-image as well functioning without dysfunctional elements such as conflict. It was not that conflict was avoided, I was told – conflict just did not happen in this organisation. The denial of conflict also emphasised that there was no outspoken need in the organisation for training in conflict management. Staff and management, however, were generally interested in participating in the training and explained their interest with wanting to learn more about the nature of conflict due to the kind of work in which the organisation was engaged abroad.

Everyone at NGO Plus knew about my role as a researcher and that the organisation would participate in conflict management training; nevertheless I was assured, more than once, that I had chosen the wrong organisation as my research site if conflict was my object of study. Gradually, I realised though that whenever staff and management *did* talk about the subject of conflict going on in their organisation, they would use particular cultural codes such as 'frictions' to describe tensions and clashes between people. By contrast with the negative connotations they attached to conflict, 'frictions' were more tractable and much more harmless.

Due to the preponderance of the family metaphor and the organisational values of egalitarianism, 'frictions' were an accepted way of making sense of the tensions and clashes that occurred between people. Accordingly, staff and management interpreted 'frictions' as something they could work around in daily working life. While 'frictions' was a euphemism for conflict at NGO Plus, this dynamic also emphasises how sensemaking of conflict is shaped by the social structures and cultures within which it occurs. Although the euphemism 'frictions' created access to studying conflict at NGO Plus, staff and management primarily conceptualised these frictions as certain individuals' personal problems.

A year after the conflict management training, staff and management had changed their way of making sense of conflict. The change showed incremental acknowledgement of conflict as something that *does* occur at NGO Plus: "*One probably sees it more as conflicts than one would have done before*" a staff member says in a focus group interview. With the changing belief that conflict is not always synonymous with violence and war, staff and management at NGO Plus had begun to develop a broader idea of what the term conflict comprises: "*Viewing conflict, not only negatively, but rather viewing conflict as being resolvable*" another staff member says in the focus group interview, as a summary of the changes that have occurred.

Moreover, a manager says that it was when she worked with a particular exercise in the training that she realised that a certain level of conflict always exists in organisations:

"Well, I remember in the last part of the training where we worked through an exercise about the latent level of conflict, which exists in all organisations. I suppose in a way this is healthy as long as it remains deep down. For me this has been a tool to say to myself 'ooh, don't be so afraid of conflict'. It's okay that conflicts occur when we meet each other and see things differently".

The manager talks about how she tries to deal with her fear of conflict by acknowledging 'the latent level of conflict' present in all organisations. For her, the latent level of conflict assumes that different people inevitably produce disagreement and conflict. She accepts that conflict exist at NGO Plus, as long it remains deep down underneath the organisational surface, which emphasises her sustained fear of conflict. This fear stems from uncertainties about how to deal with conflict: "*But we must also face the fact that although many of us participated in the training we simply don't know how to resolve conflict*", a staff member says in a focus group interview. While broadening their understanding of conflict, staff and management incrementally acknowledge conflict as being inevitable when people are working together, gradually toning down their conceptualisation of conflict as being attributable to certain individuals' personal problems. Interestingly, over the course of the study, those certain individuals significantly changed their enactments in conflict.

From personality deficiency to interdependent and embedded relationships

Frictions at NGO Plus were mainly conceptualised as being about personal differences and incompatibilities between staff members and termed as, 'bad chemistry between individuals'. In this way of making sense of frictions, staff and management pointed to the odd personalities ascribed to certain staff members as the problem. Because these individuals could not get along with everyone else, they were regarded as the black sheep in the organisation. Frictions between the black sheep and others were cyclical and repetitive in nature and would go on for years. Given that management essentially regarded such frictions as personality problems, frictions were considered both unavoidable and very difficult to resolve: "*These sorts of frictions will always be here, it's a matter of working around them*", one manager said. On the other hand, management's approach to dealing with these frictions was typically through one-to-one talks with the problematic personality involved, to try and help this individual be less problematic. More often than not, however, the parties involved were left to deal with the problems themselves, which the example below of frictions between a clerk and a fundraiser shows.

Every time the clerk and the fundraiser had to communicate about tasks to be processed between them it ended in friction. The fundraiser saw the clerk as a support person, who was there to help her process administrative tasks. By contrast, the clerk felt that the fundraiser's way of communicating signalled non-appreciation of her work effort. Moreover, the fundraiser always turned up in the clerk's office expecting administrative assistance to be performed right away, which the clerk felt displayed the fundraiser's lack of respect for her work processes. The clerk, sensitive to being taken for granted, often refused to help the fundraiser and claimed that she was busy with other stuff. "*You are not first in line here and if you so urgently need me to help you today, you should have asked me yesterday*" the clerk would say without hiding her resentments. Such remarks made the fundraiser angry and would only make her stand even more rigorously on her right to administrative assistance. Usually these episodes ended with the clerk verbally dismissing the fundraiser from her office.

A year after the training in conflict management, both the clerk and the fundraiser independently noted that their relationship had changed, mainly because, they claimed, through the training, they had become aware of their ways of communicating. Gradually, both realised that they had a mutual responsibility for having kept the conflict going by not having communicated respectfully with each other. For example, in stressful situations that were likely to turn into conflicts because the clerk was busy when the fundraiser asked her to do something, the clerk now tried to tell the fundraiser, gently, that she did not have time to help her now: "*I think twice before saying anything to her now, and I really don't want our communication to end up in the wrong. I want us to have a collaborative relationship*", the clerk says. As an alternative, the clerk would suggest that she could help the fundraiser the next day, as a way of maintaining a positive relationship. As far as the fundraiser and her peers had been concerned, problems with the clerk were located entirely within her personality. But now the fundraiser saw their relationship differently.

Although the organisation had a self-image of being horizontally structured, an invisible system (Gadlin, 1994) of hierarchy at NGO Plus placed the group to which the fundraiser belonged – that is the fundraising group, above the clerical workers: "*I have to consider that in the hierarchy I am placed above her*", the fundraiser said. Despite the narratives of being an egalitarian organisation, the fundraiser acknowledged that her relationship with the clerk was embedded within the broader processes of cultural life at NGO Plus, which in reality meant that different occupational groups had different status positions. In situations with the clerk, the

fundraiser therefore realised that *the way* she asked for administrative assistance mattered greatly.

Their changed sensemaking about the conflict meant different things for the clerk and the fundraiser. While the clerk became aware of her actions in conflict situations as being interdependent the fundraiser realised how their relationship was embedded in social structures. Although both continued to hold grievances towards each other, they had invented new meanings for past conflicts that made it difficult for each to locate faults with the other. Exemplified by the conflict between the clerk and the fundraiser, some conflicts at NGO Plus changed from being conceptualised as certain individuals' personality problems to embracing a more relational and contextual perspective on conflicts. But the changes in the conflict between the clerk and the fundraiser were also shaped by changes going on in broader conflicts between groups in the organisation, which emphasised the clerk-fundraiser conflict's entanglement with another conflict going on at the collective level in the organisation.

From an identity of subordination to active resistance

At NGO Plus, staff and management metaphorically saw the organisation as a family and emphasised egalitarian organisational values. The clerical workers however, did not see themselves as an equal part of this family. They felt that some members of staff and management acted as if the clerical workers were only here to serve them. People outside the unit would turn up in the clerical unit and expect instantaneous administrative assistance, which made the clerical workers feel that they were not in charge of their own work. Furthermore, people outside the unit expected the clerical workers to take care of tasks such as arranging meetings and receptions, and set up courier services and transportation – tasks that, although commonly termed services, were accounted for as just the clerical workers being nice. Although the clerical workers had been steadily assigned more tasks that had nothing to do with supporting people outside the unit, they still felt a service image cast its shadow upon their contribution to the organisation.

Given that the clerical workers' performance in service tasks was neither recognised nor appreciated they felt such tasks were invisible work that only took time away from activities that 'counted'. Despite communications to the rest of NGO Plus emphasising that the clerical unit no longer had the resources to offer its range of services, some members of staff and management outside the unit still expected the clerical workers "*to be at their disposal*", as the clerical manager explained. This created a lot of frustration and irritation among the clerical workers

because they felt that their work was not as important or as equally valued as other types of work carried out in the organisation. Essentially, the clerical workers felt inferior to the other occupational groups at NGO Plus.

The clerical workers outwardly ignored their feelings of inferiority, but inwardly they privately expressed their resentment at being taken for granted, which intimately tied their identity of being clerical workers to a collective experience of subordination in the organisational hierarchy. From the outside, toleration and avoidance constituted the clerical workers' way of dealing with these frictions, which could explain why most staff and management from the other departments viewed their relationship to the clerical unit as positive.

A year after the conflict management training, it was evident that the clerical workers had acquired a new attitude when people outside the unit expected them to perform service tasks and expected instantaneous administrative assistance. They had begun to respond through active resistance by explicitly refusing to comply with such requests. One clerk explained it as a process where "*We are better at confining ourselves. I think that people little by little seem to know what they can and can't ask of us. I also think that we are no longer so irritated*". In the process, the clerical workers had discovered that explicit refusals to perform service tasks and instantaneous administrative assistance gave them more time to do the tasks that were accounted for in their job descriptions.

The clerical workers retrospectively used the training elements about conflict escalation and de-escalation as an extracted cue to help them decide on an acceptable explanation for enacting active resistance. Weick (1995) argues that extracted cues are "*simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring*" (p. 50) and which help them decide on what information is relevant. Through the theory about escalation and de-escalation of conflict, the clerical workers realised that they themselves could prevent grievances and feelings of irritation by, "*nipping the matter in the bud before conflicts about service tasks would escalate and create tensions*" a clerk explained. They used the theory of conflict escalation and de-escalation to redraft a narrative about legitimacy for refusing to perform service tasks and instantaneous administrative assistance.

Feelings of being taken for granted constrained the identity of being clerical workers because it meant that clerical workers essentially only had value through supporting other people in the organisation. Their enactment of active resistance was about negotiating a clerical identity as more than a service provider – that is, as an occupational group in their own right. Particularly, they had begun to emphasise the importance of meeting deadlines for their work.

One morning when a clerk came into work, a staff member from another department was waiting for her at her desk claiming that he needed her support immediately. She said that he would have to wait until she had gone through her clerical morning routines, with which announcement he became annoyed and tried to persuade her to leave her routines until after she had helped him. She would not bend however, and told him that if she did not get on with her morning routines, others could not get on with their jobs. The staff member ended up leaving the clerk's office in annoyance, but the clerk felt satisfied that she had not given in to his demands because it was important for her and for everyone at NGO Plus that she got through these routines as the first thing in the morning.

When the clerical workers enact active resistance they meet resistance from people outside the unit as they realise that they cannot always expect the clerical workers to perform assistance instantaneously. The clerical workers know that conflict levels may rise when they enact active resistance. But something more important is at stake here: claiming respect for the clerical work area and challenging the status quo at NGO Plus. Enacting active resistance is thus their collective way of dealing with grievances: "*We help and support each other in saying no to carrying out tasks that we don't have time to do or that we don't think are our responsibility*", one clerk said. The shared focus among the clerical workers highlights how sensemaking is inherently social. The clerical workers look to each other to get advice and support, which positions them collectively as they individually negotiate in frictions with people outside the unit. They moreover feel that they act on behalf of the whole group when they enact active resistance. For the clerical workers, the conflict management training signified a distinct shift in sensemaking about conflict. Rather than identifying themselves with subordination in the organisational hierarchy, they now actively try to claim that their work is equal to that of other staff members.

Conflict resolved?

Another friction conceptualised at NGO Plus as being about personal differences between individuals, involved two collaborating fundraisers that would not acknowledge each other's way of doing the job. The two fundraisers engaged in continuous frictions about the power to decide right from wrong in work procedures and communications frequently led to frustrations. After the conflict management training both fundraisers noted that through the training elements of dialogue and active listening they had gained a shared language to use in difficult situations, and that they were better at discussing things they disagreed about without taking it personally and getting cross with each other. One of the fundraisers says:

"Now we are better at saying 'well okay, now we have this disagreement so what do we do now?' You know, ask more questions to find out what she really thinks, rather than making early conclusions on something that we really don't know, but we think we know".

Although they feel that they are now better at managing their frictions, they are still ambiguous about whether this common language of dialogue really resolves anything. The fundraisers do not experience any change in what each perceives to be the core of the friction, which is that they disagree about how the job should be done. Despite improvements in communications, frictions continue to occur between the two fundraisers and are still conceptualised as being about personal differences, regardless of the training.

To understand the lack of change in how some frictions were made sense of, we need to look to the collective level of the organisation. It is in the relationship between staff and management at NGO Plus that we find the roots of these particular frictions and how that relationship is shaped by structures beyond the organisation's controls sphere. Ongoing conflicts about the staffs' general complaints with management were attributed as being due to management not being sufficiently clear about the organisation's strategy, direction, and leadership. These conflicts were played out particularly in the programme department and the fundraising department.

In the fundraising department, when it came to prioritising tasks and goal achievement the staff found the manager absent but no one confronted the manager with their grievances. The manager however, was aware that there was a problem but perceived it as a result of the organisation's funding system, where the entry of neo-liberal political ideals had forced non-profit organisations to fulfil certain conditions in order to obtain funding from the Development Agency. The manager regarded this compliance with external conditionalities as "*a constant pressure affecting the social climate at NGO Plus, particularly the ways in which people behave towards one another*". Accordingly this 'pressure' was manifestly to blame for conflicts erupting between people, highlighting management's conceptualisation of conflict as being mainly an interpersonal phenomenon.

A year after the training, the fundraising manager talked about how, in several critical situations with her staff, she had tried to apply some of the theory from the training, only to experience that the theory did not work as it was supposed to: "*I make an effort to de-escalate critical situations but on many occasions people do not join me in my attempts towards de-*

escalation". The quote shows a sustained sensemaking of conflict as an interpersonal phenomenon, because it is in situations between individuals that the manager has tried to apply tools for conflict de-escalation. Additionally however, the manager acknowledges that her workload is spread out on too many tasks, not sufficiently prioritising tasks to do with leadership. To understand the lack of leadership at NGO Plus, we need to look to the organisation's social and structural context.

The last decade's fashion for neo-liberal political ideals in the funding system has led to a commercialisation of the NGO sector, which has pushed NGO Plus' managerial practices in a new direction. Whereas the organisation used to engage itself only in activities concerning aid and development, the organisation now has to be engaged additionally in marketing and branding to raise funds. At NGO Plus, this broadening in managerial practice and focus has only reinforced the staffs' needs for direction and leadership. Over the course of the study, however, the staff saw no changes in management's lack of leadership and management's failure to meet the staffs' needs for direction and leadership continued to form trajectories of conflict at various levels of the organisation. Given that the training course in conflict management did not deal with how conflicts can be built into organisational structures, the ongoing conflict between staff and management at NGO Plus was not explicitly addressed either during the training or in the months that followed. For the two disputing fundraisers the lack of leadership means that it is continuously up to them to decide the direction and strategy for their team, resulting in continuing disagreement about which direction is the right one. While this illustrates how in some conflicts at NGO Plus overemphasis continued to be on interpersonal conflict management, conflicts that were not appropriately placed within their particular social and structural context by staff and management only changed marginally.

Conclusion

The case study highlights the under-studied dimension of change outcomes resulting from conflict management training in the workplace. The conclusion from the study is two-fold.

First, in conflicts where structural changes ensued from the training, the training worked as a catalyst for different sensemaking about conflict. For example, among some staff members involved in conflict, training changed their sensemaking of conflict from being about personality deficiency in individuals to being more about shared communication responsibilities.

Participants' changed sensemaking also saw conflict as being embedded in intergroup hierarchies, an organisational dynamic that similarly underwent changes following the training. Changes particularly consisted of the clerical workers enacting active resistance to claim that their work is equal to that of other staff members. Conflicts however that continuously were conceptualised as individual or interpersonal problems only changed marginally. This was illustrated through an interpersonal conflict between two fundraisers which was deeply embedded in a structural conditioned conflict between staff and management, in which no changes were observed in the year that followed the conflict management training.

At the organisational level, staff and management incipiently changed their sensemaking of conflict as being associated with war and violence to acknowledging conflict as inevitable organisational processes that potentially can be resolved. The change was illustrated by how staff and management began talking about conflicts at NGO Plus. One interpretation of this change could be that conflict has become more widespread since the training. The ethnographic method employed in this case study however, managed to capture that this change concerns new ways of framing and understanding conflict at NGO Plus, emphasising increasing acknowledgement of conflict rather than increasing prevalence of conflict. Had the study only *measured* the level of conflict before and after the training course, results would have shown more conflicts after the course compared to before, because conflicts before the course were rarely framed as such.

Second, focusing explicitly on meanings and the processes of change resulting from conflict management training, this study contributes to the strand of studies about conflict and negotiation in organisations that are made with an interpretive epistemology (e.g. Bartunek et al., 1992; Collier, 2009; Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Morrill, 1989; Putnam, 2004). Using insights from Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking to show how different people attach different meanings to conflict, this study offers a more holistic view of conflict in organisations. Insights from the study call attention to the embeddedness of conflict by showing how conflicts occur and are entangled across organisational levels and with the organisational cultural system and broader societal structures that create conditions for actions that lead to conflict. Indeed, through its interpretive framework the paper has shown that conflict and the meanings that staff and management attach to it is part of the social fabric in organisations, giving weight to a more complex understanding of how conflict management works in organisations.

Practical implications of the study are that trainers in conflict management are recommended to give much more weight to the cultural and structural dimensions of conflict – that is, how conflict is built into organisational structures and is shaped by organisational cultures – and organisational level conflict management, when putting training programmes together. Conflict management training elements that deal with conflict framing, communication, and techniques for managing interpersonal relationships could be enriched with more attention placed on power analyses (Hansen, 2008) and organisational influences on conflict.

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A Researcher's Tale: How doing Conflict Research Shapes Research about Conflict

Abstract

Purpose: To display and critically reflect upon how field experiences in the research process interacted with the author's subjectivity and shaped her construction of knowledge about organisational conflict.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on Weick's theoretical framework of sensemaking and the notion of reflexivity as a resource for dealing with research experiences, the paper presents empirical narratives that explore how research experiences of negotiating access to information and emic categories of conflict in the field, analysing events and morally deciding which stories from the field are conflict stories, and dealing with ethical dilemmas in the process of doing research about conflict constitute common factors that influenced the author's construction of knowledge about organisational conflict.

Findings: The paper shows that the way that we organise and make sense of research experiences shapes our process of theorising and the actual production of knowledge in a research field.

Research implications: We should document and display the process of theorising in our research and thoroughly pursue what we experienced in the field because this will create thoroughness to our research and add to, not devalue, the knowledge we produce.

Originality/value: This paper highlights the process of theorising in organisational research. The empirical narratives presented in this paper contribute to the narrow display within the field of how we as organisational researchers mobilise our theorising and construct knowledge.

Keywords

Reflexivity, Sensemaking, Theorising, Organisational conflict, Subjectivity, Access, Ethics

Introduction

> *"Good ethnography is not simply taking copious, journalistic notes on one's chumming with the natives. Yet, regardless of calculated attempts at discipline, fieldwork inevitably intensifies the tensions, the relationships, and the serendipitous events that influence all research. It is in the precarious balance between the controlled and the uncontrolled, the cognitive and the affective, the designed and the unexpected that fieldwork finds its distinctive vitality and analytic power."* (Barley, 1990: 220)

Consistent with Barley's conceptualisation of good ethnography above, my effort in this article originates in the observation that although there seems to be agreement among qualitative researchers that the process of doing qualitative research is a messy, oftentimes chaotic affair, there is a shortage of reflexive essays displaying how researchers organise and make sense of their fieldwork experiences and data, and construct knowledge from the research process. There has been increasing acceptance that the craft of research is conceptualised as sensemaking (Czarniawska, 1998; Weick, 1989; 1995; 2007) where the researcher in the role of being the sensemaker actively analyses the empirical material and generate representations of how reality is (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Mason, 2002; Van Maanen, 1988; 1995), yet, there is only little research that displays how the researcher actively uses field experiences to engage in the process of theorising (Locke, Golden-Biddle and Feldman, 2008; Weick, 1989).

In this article, I present empirical narratives that illustrate how I used research experiences related to getting access, making sense of data, and conducting ethical research to reflect critically on some common factors that influenced my construction of knowledge about conflict in organisations. For this end, I use the notion of reflexivity to step back and take a critical look at my own role in the research process and how it has shaped my production of

knowledge. I build on existing examples in the literature that display how researchers organise and make sense of field experiences to construct knowledge related to different aspects of the research experience. Barley (1990), for example, gives a vivid account of his struggles in getting access to a research site for his doctoral studies and how his management of relationships with informants influenced the information that he was able to receive. Becker (1993) reflexively describes how paying attention to a single word that his informants used, led him to discover important aspects of the interests of his informants, their views of their professional practice and of professional relationships. Peshkin (1985) honestly describes how his subjectivity interacted with his studies and narrowed and shaped what he saw and decided to present as his research about two distinct school-community relationships. In another very honest account, Abma (2000) describes how her experiences of conflict with the client of an evaluation study conditioned the quality of information and knowledge that she was able to generate in the research process. And Jemielniak and Kostera (2010) explore fellow researchers' narratives of how failures, or 'slips' in organisational ethnographic work have an impact on their identity work as organisational ethnographers.

It has been argued that stories of how researchers organise and make sense of field experiences are important for learning (Bryant and Lasky, 2007; Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). I agree with this argument and therefore aim to render visible the less visible side of organisational conflict research from the perspective of an early career researcher. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the narrow display within the field about how we as organisational researchers discover the empirical conundrums that mobilise our theorising.

I begin the article by introducing the study for which the longitudinal field research presented in this article was undertaken. Then, drawing on Weick's theoretical framework of sensemaking, I explore the notion of reflexivity as a resource for dealing with research experiences. I proceed by presenting empirical narratives that illustrate my critical reflections about how I negotiated access to information about conflict, how I analysed and decided which stories from the field were conflict stories, and how I dealt with ethical dilemmas that arose in the research process. I end the article by discussing its contribution to scholarship.

The study

This case study was undertaken to explore how staff and management experience and act out conflict and how this might be changed by staff and management's participation in conflict management training. The study was constructed as a longitudinal investigation of workplace conflict in a nonprofit aid organisation, referred to by the pseudonym of NGO Plus. Based in the capital of a Scandinavian country, NGO Plus employs 30 full time staff members, all of whom participated in the study.

The data collection was conducted in three periods of ethnographic fieldwork (Brewer 2004; Van Maanen 1988), and ran over a two-year period (June 2008 to September 2010), amounting to six months of full time fieldwork. The fieldwork employed repeated open-ended qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996; Schensul, 1999; Steyart and Bouwen, 2004) and on-site participant observations (Bernard 1994; Waddington 2004). Repeated interviews with members of staff and management were conducted yearly over the course of the two-year study. In total, 52 single interviews and four focus group interviews were conducted.

Epistemologically speaking, the study began by reflecting positivist assumptions about conflict and about how to capture changes in conflict management stemming from the training. Thus, the study employed a before-and-after research design and was structured to obtain longitudinal data. However, throughout the fieldwork as my empiricist's gaze on conflict unfolded, focus changed as I sought to understand the dynamics of conflict and, with this shift in focus, I began to commit to a more interpretative view of conflict. Although no longer fixated only on how conflict management training works, the study's original epistemological heritage is visible in the study's set-up with its before-and-after research design and longitudinal data. This epistemological turn nevertheless led me to take a "*consciously reflexive*" (Johnson & Duberley, 2000, p. 4) approach to the research process, which fostered an awareness of my own imposed sense on the research. It is those reflexive stories from the field, which form the empirical base for this article's topic of how research experiences pose factors that influence the researcher's construction of knowledge.

Research as sensemaking and researcher reflexivity

Weick argues that "[t]*he basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs*" (1993, p. 635). Often sensemaking becomes more obvious when individuals confront

issues, events, and actions that are surprising or confusing (Weick, 1995a). Accordingly, sensemaking is conceptualised as a process of social construction where individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues, or signals from their environments.

However, Weick's sensemaking framework can also be applied to the craft of research as sensemaking, where the researchers as sensemakers actively analyse the empirical material and generate representations of how reality is (Czarniawska, 1998; Weick, 1989; 1995b). From this perspective, how researchers organise and make sense of research experiences – that is, their fieldwork experiences, data, and their construction of knowledge is regarded as the researcher's sensemaking of an object of study. Moreover, given that sensemaking is often considered to be a mechanism that reduces ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick, 1995a), conceptualising research as sensemaking highlights the central role of sensemaking as a research activity that allows us to grapple with surprising or unexpected events during the process of doing research. Essentially this brings the process of theorising into focus rather than only focusing on theory as an output of the research process:

> "[I]t is tough to judge whether something is a theory or not when only the product itself is examined. What one needs to know, instead, is more about the context in which the product lives. This is the process of theorizing." (1995b, p. 387)

The issue seems to be a discussion of means and ends: should researchers publish only the ends or should they also publish the "*interim struggles*" (Weick, 1995b, p. 387) that may characterise our engagements with research activities. This particular process of discovery is rarely documented and presented to our scientific communities although our field's discussions of theory and method are well documented (Czarniawska 1999, Locke et al., 2008; Van Maanen, Sorensen and Mitchell, 2007, Weick, 1989). To improve theory, we must improve the theorising process, for this end, we need to describe the process of theorising explicitly and operate it more self-consciously (Weick, 1989).

I suggest that reflexivity is a helpful conceptual tool for understanding both the research experience itself and how certain events or factors influence the researcher's construction of knowledge. Mason (2002) views reflexivity as an inherent part of doing qualitative research:

> "*Qualitative research should involve critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, or active reflexivity. This means that researchers should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their 'data'.*" (p. 7)

In a similar vein, Chia (1996, cited in Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p. 36) argues that the notion of interpretation that is used in the research process should be 'turned back' onto the researchers themselves, so that they can take a critical look at their own role in the research process. As Mason argues, researchers cannot be objective, or neutral, or detached, from the knowledge they are generating, instead they should attempt to understand their role in that process.

To engage in such a process of critical reflection means to emphasise both the kind of knowledge that is produced from research and how that knowledge is generated (Hertz, 1997). For this activity, the researcher should ask the question of what factors influenced her construction of knowledge and how these influences are revealed in the conduct of research activities and the writing up of the research. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argues that the goal of being reflexive about one's own role in the research process has to do with improving the quality the research and also recognising the limitations of the knowledge that is generated. Thus this notion of reflexivity urges researchers to be reflexive in relation to interpersonal aspects of the research practice as knowledge is a relational product, and not just the methodological aspects of rigorous research.

In anthropology, such researcher reflexivity often takes place in confessional writings to show how particular works came into being. They are however, usually reported separately from the representation of the research work itself (Van Maanen, 1988; 2006), adopting the view that the empirical material must be separated from the researcher (Cunliffe, 2004; Van Maanen, 1988). However, as I argue in this article, accounts that display the researcher's personal experiences of researching a phenomenon reveal the fundamentals of the research sensemaking enterprise. Accordingly, I deliberately display experiences, interpretations, and critical reflexivity as knowledge that extends the sociological understanding of my object of study. As a result, I connect the personal not only to the cultural (cf. Ellis and Bochner, 2000) (what do I know), but particularly to my process of theorising (how I came to know what I know).

Research experiences that engender critical reflection about the researcher's role may arise in a number of places in the research process. In this article, I focus specifically on getting access to information about conflict in the field, deciding which field stories are conflict stories, and conducting ethical research, activities that should not be considered exhaustive.

Gaining access

As I selected NGO Plus as the case for the study, we agreed that the organisation would receive a weeklong training course in conflict management and in return grant me access to data collection before, during and after the training course. Entering the field, I thought my task was relatively simple. I was going to get inside, make some interviews, and spend some time observing the social life in the organisation. Because management had granted me access and moreover told me that the whole of the organisation was "*in on it*", and because staff seemed to accept my presence, it never occurred to me that getting access to information about conflict would be a long and unforeseeable process.

"Collaboration in our department is more or less conflict-free" – gaining trust to study conflict

From the beginning of the fieldwork, everyone in the organisation knew that I was there to study how training in conflict management works. This 'luggage' however, positioned me in a very particular way. In talks and interviews, people would on the one hand praise the sense of community in the organisation and emphasise their co-workers' support of each other. Although I did not ask any direct questions about conflict (at this point in the fieldwork), staff members talked about collaboration as being virtually "*conflict-free*". It was not that conflicts were taken to be avoided in this organisation – conflict, I was told, just did not happen. On top of that I was assured, more than once, that I had chosen the wrong organisation as my research site if conflict was my object of study.

On the other hand, I often sensed that interviewees appeared to be ill at ease when I talked to them. This unease was expressed either as a guardedness towards me where interviewees mainly talked about specific tasks and only hesitantly provided information of more personal character or as relief when the interview was over. Particular in one interview situation, the interviewee literally heaved a sigh of relief when, after thirty minutes of talking about her work, I told her that I had no further questions. "*Oh, was that really it?*" she said without hiding her relief that the interview was over and that nothing unpleasant had happened. "*Yes, it's not dangerous in any way*", I replied directly to her foregoing display of discomfort. "*But I thought that you would ask questions about conflict*", she said, which certified that my role of conflict investigator constructed me as someone with whom they felt uncomfortable. In an effort of trying to break with the illegitimacy surrounding conflict in this organisation, I

promptly suggested, *"Well, we could continue and talk about that if you want to"*. She immediately got up from the chair and started moving towards the door in an attempt to escape: *"No, no, there aren't any"* she hastily said, in a tone of voice that revealed her distress. She then ran out of the door and our talk ended.

From these field experiences, I interpreted conflict within NGO Plus as a taboo subject in the sense that its existence was denied and feared in the organisation. The experiences made me aware of how sensitive the subject of conflict was in this organisation and that I had to spend some time with people in order for them to get to know me and trust me enough to talk to me about conflict. The participant observations allowed me to engage in the mundane work activities that were going on in NGO Plus. Given that such research activities were not considered threatening by people in the organisation, they took the edge off my role of conflict investigator.

It was my engagement in one particular type of work activity in the clerical unit that helped to facilitate trust and that eventually paved the way for access to information about conflict. Feldman, Bell, and Berger (2003) have named such activities that help foster trust 'commitments acts'. The clerical workers would ask me to do a task related to their reporting of the organisation's charity donations to the Tax Authorities. Because charitable donations are tax deductible, NGO Plus provides the service to company and private donors of reporting the name and amount of each donation to the Tax Authorities. Sometimes, however, detective work had to be done to find out the exact name and address of the donor. Apparently all of the clerical workers detested this task, which resulted in a large pile of donations waiting to be sorted out. As I commenced the detective work, I figured that although this was a task that no one else in the unit wanted, at least I was able to do a job for them that did not require any training.

Much later on in the fieldwork, the clerical workers told me that they had really asked me to do the detective task to test if I was too stuck-up, academically speaking, to do their kind of work. Since I was an academic, they revealed that their prejudices about me had been that I was "*an academic snob*", who did not respect the kind of work that was carried out in the clerical unit. However, my commitment to do the detective task created a lot of goodwill around my character because the clerical workers interpreted it as a demonstration of my interests in and respect for their work.

The whole experience helped me to establish relationships with staff and management in the clerical unit that were based on trustworthiness and reliability. From this they began to talk to me about "*problem situations*" in the organisation (although not calling them conflicts).

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However, the experience led to more than getting people to talk to me about problem situations. In my interactions with the clerical workers, their constructions of me relied mainly on my educational background of being an academic. To them 'academics' represented a world distinct from their own and a world where everyone looked down upon manual, routine work like much of the clerical work. The commitment act however, humanised me as researcher because it signalled my willingness to learn about them and their work.

Through the process of gaining access to information I developed an understanding of how the clerical group viewed everyone else in NGO Plus, since everyone else were, in fact, academics! Although only expressed covertly, this conflict was of central importance in the organisation because it originated from a clerical position of feeling like "*the underdogs*", which clearly contradicted the organisation's self-image of being an egalitarian organisation, where everyone and everyone's contribution was taken to be equal.

"We don't have conflicts but frictions" – learning about emic categories of conflict

Besides helping me to build up trust in the organisation, the participant observations revealed conflict as a pervasive aspect of the work that was carried out in NGO Plus, particularly related to how the organisation's mission of social change overseas was best put to life. During hallway and office chats, staff members talked openly about their frustrations with management and how they felt that the three departments of NGO Plus were "*not collaborating but doing their separate thing*", yet during interviews, they would deny any experiences of conflict at work. In some interviews, staff members first denied conflict but later on said that it was not uncommon to have "*friction between people when they worked together*". When asked about these discrepancies, a manager said that they disliked describing tensions, discords and clashes between people as conflict but much preferred to regard such matters as "*frictions*".

I embarked on unravelling how 'frictions' were different from 'conflict'. To aid me, I used the information from my observations, which had revealed a particularly tense relationship between one staff member (June) and the rest of the staff in that department. In interviews, I asked different staff members whether their difficult experiences with June constituted conflict or friction. A staff responded:

> "*Hmm, well June is always in opposition to all of us here, but I don't know if that's a conflict. It's been ongoing with her; you always know that if you ask her about anything you'll get a negative response. Is that a conflict? (…) Sometimes I*

find myself walking on eggshells trying to find the right timing to ask her about something. That can feel like a conflict, but it's not a conflict that blows up. It's more like frictions between us..."

The quote shows the multiple meanings that were built into those two words. While the staff member uses an explosion-metaphor for conflict, she uses a friction-metaphor to describe the situation with June. The friction-metaphor essentially derives from management's portrayal of the organisation as machinery: "*Everyone's contribution is equally important for the NGO Plus machinery to function properly*", the Secretary-General says. This understanding of the organisation as machinery envisions that it is in the workings and movements of that machinery that heat, or frictions, may arise.

As I further unpacked the meaning of 'frictions' and how this differed from 'conflict' it turned out to be what opened the door to understanding the cues of culture that constructed conflict in this organisation. In NGO Plus jargon, the word 'frictions' replaced 'conflict', because 'conflict' had a very negative ontological status. As the explosion-metaphor symbolises, the notion of 'conflict' was heavily associated with violence and war, and not least, loss of control. This understanding of 'conflict' reflected their reality of working in post-war countries where conflict has serious human and material consequences. Accordingly, staff and management did not recognise as 'conflict' situations of disagreements occurring in the organisation itself. 'Frictions' on the other hand were much more harmless. Staff and management perceived 'frictions' as something they could work around in daily working life and that were more tractable, and therefore, much more acceptable. Essentially, the term 'frictions' downplayed differences between people in social interactions, and displayed organisational assumptions that unity is desirable if overseas operations were to live up to the mission of social change.

These experiences underscored an important and characteristic feature of the process of 'getting in': access often has to be negotiated culturally with the people 'on the floor' and this happens in the process of building relationships in the field and by paying attention to the words that they use to explain things. As we get access to central emic categories in the field they may pose a contrast to our theoretical constructs. However, it is through this contrast that we are able to understand an organisation's culture and how that culture shapes organisational practices.

Analysing events

As the data recounted demonstrates, formal organisational perceptions of conflict may differ from those of the researcher. The categories of everyday life that become formalised into scripts and routines for organisations do not usually derive from research-related practice, except where they meet some regulatory requirement, as in equal employment and anti-discrimination legislation. Researchers deploy concepts of organisational conflict primarily as an analytical category. But what is the process that determines how the conflict researcher categorises specific social events as being conflict, and distinguishes between conflict and other related phenomena?

"Crying is also a weapon" – is it conflict or is it bullying?

In the fundraising department, a particularly intense 'situation' was occurring between the staff and the department manager. While this situation worsened considerably during the two years of fieldwork, categorising it as conflict never proved to be a straightforward case. The situation started six months before the fieldwork, when the organisation recruited its new department manager from its pool of fundraisers. From the beginning there was aversion among the fundraisers towards their new superior. Although only voicing their criticisms reluctantly, several fundraisers expressed concern that the department would benefit more from a manager recruited from the outside. Gradually the fundraisers' concern with their new superior shifted and the main issue became the perceived absence of the supervisor, visible both physically and strategically. Physically, the manager's office was often empty and when she was in there, her door was closed, which her staff felt signalled that she did not have time for them. Strategically, the manager did not make sufficient efforts to prioritise departmental tasks and goal achievement. Unable to see a clear strategy for the department, the staff did not know how to reach the ambitious targets set for the department's fundraising activities. Staff's behaviours began to manifest in complaining and gossiping about the manager behind her back.

Two and a half years into her position as manager and an ever-worsening situation, the manager attempted to resolve the situation by suggesting a restructuring of the department into four teams, all of which would have their own team coordinator who would be responsible for providing leadership and direction to team members. The manager expected this new structure to "*lift the burden of leadership in the department*" so that she could continue prioritising the non-leadership tasks that she saw as crucial for the organisation's future existence. The

fundraisers however, did not see the new structure as an opportunity to provide the much asked for leadership to the department but, rather, saw it as an attempt to cheat them into doing the manager's job.

In a department meeting, the manager tried to appeal to her staff's more personal motives for being in nonprofit work by saying, "*We all work for social change but if we don't have the spirit to fight for change within our own organisation how can we believe that changes can be made out in the world?*" But the fundraisers were not seduced. Instead they addressed the manager's absence by lecturing her about leadership: "*Leadership is a daily occurrence that is about daily contact with staff.*" "*An open door shows that you care about your staff.*" "*You can't do leadership through emails and text messages*", the fundraisers choired. They demanded that the manager revealed the real intentions behind the new structure but the manager refused that there had ever been a hidden agenda. Not convinced by the manager's explanations, the fundraisers continued their guesswork about "*the real intentions*" behind the new plan. Eventually the manager broke down and left the room in tears. In the wake of the department meeting, one of the fundraisers summed up the situation by saying that "*crying is also a weapon*". From previous episodes the fundraiser has learned that the manager will return, "*and when she does she will be a bitch to work for. As I see it, what we have to do now is brace ourselves for her comeback, - because trust me that will happen.*"

In empirical studies, it may be difficult to determine whether a situation is really a conflict situation or something else. This matters greatly for several reasons, which I will discuss below. But first I describe how I considered analysis of the situation in the fundraising department as being something between a conflict situation and a bullying situation. To clarify the rather unclear connection between these two constructs, I consulted the bullying literature. Accordingly, bullying can be conceptualised in terms of escalated conflict situations (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper, 2003; Hoel, Rayner and Cooper, 1999; Keashly and Nowell, 2003; Zapf and Gross, 2001). The situation in the fundraising department seemed similar to bullying due to its continuous escalation and protraction, the nature of the staff's stigmatising behaviours, and the character it displayed of group action against an individual. Over the two-year period in which the fieldwork took place, the situation dispersed into a more diffuse set of dissatisfied significations. From primarily being about a lack of strategy resulting in the staff not feeling that they got the help they needed to prioritise and reach fundraising targets, it also spread to be about the manager's personal leadership style, which the staff felt displayed the manager's lack of care for her staff and essentially made her unfit to be a manager.

There was an analytical issue, however: it was unclear when a situation should no longer be categorised as conflict because it had transformed into bullying. The bullying literature theoretically examines how bullying differentiates from conflict by pointing to the role of an unequal power structure as key in distinguishing bullying from situations of conflict (Keashly and Nowell, 2003; Zapf and Gross, 2001). Although the situation in the fundraising department appeared to be bullying, it was clear that the manager often behaved in ways that contributed considerably to the worsening of the situation. This showed evidence of a negotiating rather than an unequal power structure in the relationship between staff and manager.

I therefore ended up analysing the relationship between staff and manager as a protracted conflict but my attempt to make sense of this empirical situation was not an objective, unbiased act. As I iteratively switched between the two constructs of conflict and bullying to make sense of a rather explosive situation, I became not only analyst but also judge of what was going on. While this dilemma appeared to be a moral one, it is in fact also political in character, simply because it poses the 'whose side am I on' question (cf. Becker, 1967; Gouldner, 1973) relating to the division between staff and management in this organisation. As argued by Becker (1967), it simply is not possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies and the question is therefore not "*whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on*" (p. 239). Accordingly, we are left with the question of whether taking sides means that some degree of distortion is introduced into our work that must be taken into account before our work can be used.

As I decided that the situation was a protracted conflict and not bullying, I ended up siding with the staff in this particular relationship. Given my awareness that I had taken this point of view, I had to make sure that my research met the standards of good scientific work. I therefore pushed myself into looking more carefully at my data, thoroughly investigating the situation that was going on in this department. As I have mentioned, the manager behaved in ways that contributed substantially to the worsening of the situation. She for example legitimised her absence by indicating that she did not have sufficient time for leadership of staff due to other, more important, tasks like management of external fundraising relations, leadership training, and development of the leadership team. She moreover reduced the problem to an issue of the span of control by arguing that one can only effectively manage seven staff members, and since there were fifteen staff members in her department she concluded that "*the math simply do not add up*". From the longitudinal character of my research, I often sensed the frustration among the fundraisers that if they did not raise enough funds the consequences would be

layoffs. But they found themselves to be in a limbo because the manager did not make the necessary decisions for the department to do its fundraising job well. At the same time, she did not accept her staff interfering in strategic decision making and would use such situations to display her powers: "*She bulldozes us to get what she wants*" one of the fundraisers noted. Another said: "*There are situations where she told me that it was my decision, but then when I took it, it wasn't mine at all.*"

It was exactly because of this limbo situation that I felt more aligned with the fundraisers than with the manager. I sympathised with their struggles to keep the organisation above waters and to keep their jobs. While this stance confirms the political nature of the research act it is also consistent with major traditions in sociological research where the researcher sides with the underdogs (cf. Becker, 1967). However, in this particular situation it was not my political preferences that made me side with the fundraisers in this department. It was the simple fact that I was unwilling to see my work used in ways that could worsen their situation (cf. Finch, 1984).

I was very aware that representing the situation as bullying could feed back into organisational knowledge and undermine the fundraisers' interests. Specifically I was concerned that management would use my research to gain the upper hand in its conflicting relationship with its staff. While this risk of double hermeneutics (Giddens, 1987) is present in most research, it forced me to consider the unanticipated consequences that my work could have. More importantly, I was pressed into looking closely at my own role in this department, which I might not otherwise have done. In the process, I reflected upon how I wanted to manage those powers that had been invested in me by sheer of being the researcher. By alluding to the micro-politics of fieldwork relations, I sided with the staff in this situation aware that this meant an intellectual as well as an emotional commitment to promoting their interests. Indeed, this displays how knowledge is produced from the researcher's social interactions with those whom she studies. But as argued by both Becker (1967) and Finch (1984), recognising the fundamentally political nature of both data and theory means that the researcher has a great responsibility to be open about her procedures and her conclusions and use theoretical and methodological resources to avoid that our unavoidable personal and political sympathies do not render research results invalid.

Conducting ethical research

Problems, dilemmas or challenges that indeed may arise in the course of doing research about conflict in organisations are ethical in nature. Despite this, the ethical dimensions of researching organisational conflict are rarely discussed within organisational conflict research literature. This is somewhat strange given that conflict is a very sensitive issue in many organisations (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). The ethical dimension moreover raises the question of how the researcher can practice confidentiality and anonymity in research. I rely on a definition of ethics as being the rules, principles, values, and ideals of a group of people (Bayer, Lawrence, Jennings and Steinbock, 2007), in this case researchers. Most professions have their own well-defined 'codes of research ethics' or 'guidelines for ethical practices in research', with an overlapping emphasis on four concerns: 'do no harm', 'get informed consent', 'protect privacy' and 'avoid deception' (see e.g. Christians, 2005; Diener and Crandall, 1978). Such conventional ethical frameworks however, do not prevent ethical dilemmas from arising, and they seem less helpful in supporting the researcher in her day-to-day decision making on ethical issues and in her coping with ethical dilemmas.

"I don't want her to know" – how the ethical dimension of conflict research shapes conflict theory

Particularly in qualitative studies, the researcher may detect a vibe of something going on that may be difficult to pursue due to ethical considerations. During fieldwork, I did participant observations in a programme coordinating team. During a team meeting, I sensed something going on between Karen and Deborah, two of five team members participating in the meeting. In the meeting, while Deborah is constantly talking and throwing ideas and suggestions on the table, Karen – Deborah's everyday working partner – is quiet, only hesitantly giving her opinions often in a standoffish way. Working hard to come up with good ideas, Deborah shows no offense with Karen's reserved attitude, nor do the other team members show signs of unease.

A couple of days later in an interview, Deborah talked about her tense relationship with Karen and how she often feels misunderstood by Karen and that she finds it really difficult that Karen smiles when disagreeing with Deborah about something. To Deborah this is downright confusing. When the interview is finished I ask if she's okay with me talking to Karen about their working relationship, but she immediately says no and that she doesn't want to make an issue out of nothing. Now downplaying their tensions and saying that the whole thing will pass,

she makes it clear that she doesn't want Karen to know that she has been talking to me about their relationship.

Deborah's restriction on my pursuit of different views in this particular conflict relationship raised an ethical dilemma: how could I approach one side of a conflict relationship when I already knew a lot about their problems because I had previously talked to 'the other side'? I could not disregard the sensitive nature of conflict and that people often would talk about private feelings and stances in addressing what was important for them. Occasionally secrets emerged through the everyday conversations of participant observations and formal interviews. How secrets are treated, both analytically and textually, bring to light the power relation between the researcher and those who are studied in the field (Lovell, 2007). While secrecy emerged through intimacy in the interview situation described above, Deborah did not want to risk leaking of her secret about her tensions with Karen. Deborah knew that what she had communicated would eventually find its way into my writings. Still she made the restriction that I did not talk to Karen about the same issues because she felt that she would be identified, first by Karen, and later by everyone else in the organisation, because their relationship would be easy to recognise in my writings. She therefore demanded that the secret went no further.

This particular situation made me realise that by asking interviewees if they would be okay if I talked to 'the other side' in their conflict relationships, they would get fearful that I potentially would pass sensitive information to the 'other side' in conflict relationships. It had never been my intention to divulge anyone's secrets, but by involving the interviewee in the question of whom else I talked to, I signalled nonconfidentiality, which was very counterproductive to my process of building up trust in the organisation.

As a result, I refrained from sharing with anyone in NGO Plus whom I was and was not interviewing. More importantly, I didn't ask interviewees directly about specific problem relationships that they were experiencing at work. Instead I would let them decide themselves whether they wanted to share their feelings and views of a difficult working relationship. In practice that meant that sometimes one side in a conflict relationship would share a lot of details and intimate feelings about the relationship, while the other side wouldn't mention it at all. The ethical obligations that I had acquired towards the research participants forced me to accept that the research participants sometimes would limit access to dynamics of conflict.

Moreover, I began to reflect upon how I could protect the identity of research participants in my writings. Given that I still strived to talk to all sides in conflict, I wanted to apply an ethical framework to the question of representation in conflict in my writings: what

knowledge could I pass on in my writings and how could I work with representations in conflict? As the details of my ethical obligations impinged on me, I abandoned my original idea of displaying the dynamics of conflict by presenting dyadic participants' competing verbal representations. Instead I sought to understand the dynamics of conflict by investigating how conflict was recognised and interpreted collectively in the organisation. To put it simply, I structured my analysis around themes of interpretations in conflict rather than around dyads. Rather than analysing specific conflict relationships, I would use elements from various relationships to exemplify emergent conceptualisations of conflict.

The change in how I decided to work with representations in conflict signified a major shift in my approach to studying conflict, which literally changed my position on conflict. Instead of viewing conflict as an interpersonal phenomenon, I viewed it as a social phenomenon that was given definition and shape by its emergent conceptualisations within the organisation. Epistemologically speaking, my position changed from reflecting positivist assumptions about conflict to committing to a more interpretative view of conflict, emphasising the configurations of meaning in conflict and how meaning and action interact in practices of conflict handling.

"It would really mean a lot to me if you could tell her that this is not okay" – getting in too deep?

Unforeseen consequences that our research may produce may also be related to our influence on the setting in which our studies take place. A researcher's presence in organisations can never be a neutral experience especially in qualitative studies because the researcher tends to produce some kind of bond with research participants. In conflict studies, a researcher's presence is not supposed to have an impact on those conflicts that are going on in the organisation. Nevertheless, researchers doing long-time fieldwork in organisations run the risk of finding themselves involved in the political struggles and conflicts of those who are studied.

A situation arose during the fieldwork, where the manager of the fundraising department went against one of our agreements. It was just before the launch of the five-days conflict management training, in which two thirds of the organisation was to participate. A couple of participants were not able to participate all five days that the training lasted and the manager therefore saw this as an opportunity to get more of her fundraisers to participate in the last two days of the training. However, when she asked me if staffs could participate only in the last two days of the training, I explicitly said no because the study's research design also encompassed interviewing staff members that had not been part of the training. Due to the tense situation in

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the fundraising department, I did not want to divulge to her whom I was and was not interviewing, and thus I feared that I would end up with no interviewees that had not been part of the training.

However, in an interview with one of the fundraisers, I learned that the manager had gone ahead and ordered her staff to participate in the last two days of the training against my will:

> Fundraiser: *I also wanted to ask you about something, because today she said that those of us who are not participating in the training had to participate the last two days of the training because there are places available.*
>
> Me: *But she already asked me about that and I said no.*
>
> Fundraiser: *Yeah, and to be honest, I really don't want to participate, but I feel that she's pressuring me. It would really mean a lot to me if you could tell her that I can't participate, - if you could show her that this is your territory and tell her that this is not okay.*
>
> Me: *I must say I don't think that you should participate.*
>
> Fundraiser: *Yeah, - but I really don't want to tell her that because I know that she'll get angry.*
>
> Me: *Okay I'll go and talk to her.*

In the interview, I was taken by surprise: not only had the manger gone ahead and done what I explicitly told her not to do, but one of my research participants was directly asking me to intervene in her relationship with the manager. As I felt that I could not ignore what was going on, the boundaries between the research that I was doing and my sense of personal identity as the researcher began to blur. My involvement resulted in a confrontation with the manager, which was indeed an unpleasant experience. As I left her office, I felt that my professional stance had taken a blow. I had not been able to maintain my professional identity as a researcher as I was arguing with the manager, and some of the things she said, I took personally: 'Why couldn't I not just let them use the free spaces on the last two days of the training as they wished to?' I felt very much in the wrong and blamed myself for the escalation of the situation and to make matters worse, I felt ashamed that I did not let them use the free spaces.

My decision to describe the situation in detail in my field notes definitely sprang more from a need to cathartically deal with my feelings than from a realisation that this was prime data material. Later on, as I was analysing my field notes, I realised that the argument with the

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manager had given me a first-hand experience of conflict dynamics in this organisation. In our confrontation, I had refused to compromise my research design and had referred to our initial agreement. The manager had responded by framing the situation as being about what was best for the organisation and had indirectly questioned my moral character because I stood in the way of allowing them to pursue what, according to management, was best for them.

As I had attained some distance to the encounter, I saw that the whole experience displayed how management often framed situations involving personal differences as being about organisational mission, and in such situations staff were expected to yield as the organisational mission always had top priority. Staff members who did not accept this simply made themselves vulnerable to strategic organisational changes. The account shows the strength of the physical feelings engendered by fieldwork experiences and the importance of working with those feelings to gain understanding of field experiences. I used the argument with the manager to enrich my understanding of conflict in this setting, because it was through the very embodied experience of arguing with the manager that I felt and understood how situations of disagreements were framed and commonly dealt with in this organisation.

Discussion and contribution

Starting off from the central role of sensemaking as a research activity, I have tried to meet Weick's (1995b) call to explicitly describe the process of theorising by presenting empirical narratives that display my critical reflections of research experiences and how those experiences influenced my construction of knowledge about conflict.

I have shown how I established trust to get access to information about conflict through the mundanity of the participant observations and the serendipity of my engagement in a commitment act in the clerical unit. As a result, staff would voice frustrations and dissatisfactions in front of me, although not calling it conflict but frictions. The unpacking of the meanings that was constituted by the term 'frictions' (cf. Becker, 1993) furthermore explained important cues of culture and the taboo surrounding conflict in this organisation.

From doing longitudinal field research I developed sympathies for the fundraisers' precarious work situation. Analysing the strained relationship between the fundraisers and their manager I had to recognise the political nature of my conclusion because it raised the 'whose side am I on' question. Since I was unwilling to see my work used in ways that could worsen the

fundraisers' work situation I sided with the fundraisers. Using the words of Peshkin (1985), "*my subjectivity narrows what I see and shapes what I make of what I see*" (p. 278) and thereby impacted the direction that my analysis of this particular relationship took.

My obligation to conduct my research ethically meant that some conflicts were not possible to capture, let alone report, and that I changed my position on conflict to embrace a social view of what conflict is. Thus, the ethical dimension permeated the research process and impinged on the quality of information I received and directly shaped the direction that my theorising on conflict took. Although committing formally to ethical standards, I call for more discussion about how we cope with ethics in the practice of doing research and its implications for theorising. Moreover, my awkward encounter with the manager constitutes what Barley (1990) terms "*the underbelly of long-term participant observation*" (p. 240) in that it both involves the researcher's influence on the setting as well as the effects that part of the research act has on the researcher. While the argument with the manager felt very inappropriate, I mean, as noticed by Abma (2000) empirical case studies of conflictual processes in qualitative research are very rare, I nevertheless used the experience to enrich my understanding of conflict in the setting. This accords such encounters and the physical feelings in the body that they engender a more prominent role in the research enterprise.

Surprisingly, the access implications of this argument were in many ways similar to those of a commitment act and in line with the detective task that had helped me establish trust in the clerical unit. From the argument with the manager I suddenly shared a space with the fundraisers; I experienced, like them, how the manager would change her mind in matters that was of great consequence for my work. But more importantly, similar to the situation in the clerical unit where none of the clerical workers wanted to do the detective task, none of the fundraisers dared to stand up against the manager in fear of losing their jobs. In both departments I chose to do what the staff did not and it was this willingness to endure the same discomfort that these people were experiencing that acted as an important catalyst for their construction of me as being one of them and less as someone who wanted information. As a consequence, access involved the free flow of information about not only the conflict between the fundraisers and the manager but also conflicts that occurred amongst the fundraisers.

The article constitutes a contribution in that it reveals fundamental aspects of the process of doing research: the way that we organise and make sense of research experiences shape our process of theorising and construction of knowledge. By openly describing my process of theorising, I provide support for others as they turn to the literature to prepare themselves for the

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variety of experiences they are likely to encounter when doing qualitative research. But just as important, I improve the quality of my own research because I am reflexive in relation to relational aspects of the research practice and how knowledge is a relational product.

It can, however, be problematic to acknowledge these profound relational aspects of knowledge production because they undermine the regulative ideal of objectivist thinking. Because, how can we be expected to create scientific knowledge if we are not detached from and in control of the research process? This impression management nevertheless escapes the issue of how social researchers' theorising of informants' socially constructed worlds are not caused by "*immaculate perception*" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 73) but are themselves socially constructed interpretations (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). By opening up the stories behind an insight, such as those described in this paper, we can appreciate the relational dimension of the theorising process. This article has shown that as we turn our attention to the way we organise and make sense of dilemmas and awkward moments while reflecting upon our values and feelings, these acts of reflexivity will create greater degree of thoroughness in our research and add to, not devalue, the knowledge we produce.

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Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how meaning and action interact in processes of conflict handling when conflict is understood as an everyday organisational phenomenon that may occur when people meet in social interactions. This perspective on conflict situates conflict contextually as a social, dynamic phenomenon, emphasising the topography of conflict rather than the conflict typologies. My emphasis on the topography of conflict means that my study of conflict is exercised in different complex settings where the meaning of conflict is enacted. Consequently, I have explored conflict in three different contexts: conflict research literature, the nonprofit organisation of NGO Plus, and my own research context.

My study contributes to two under-studied dimensions of conflict at work: First, my examination of the dominant assumptions of the theoretical domain of organisational conflict revealed how different factions within conflict research conceptualise conflict. Second, through my empirical studies I show how sensemaking plays a critical role in the way staff and management experience and act out conflicts at work. Additionally, the study displays and reflects upon how my own grappling with the research experience shaped my process of theorizing about conflict.

In this chapter, I summarise the main contribution of this study, draw out its implication for the theoretical field of organisational conflict, and discuss perspectives for future research.

The contribution

In this thesis, I set out to investigate three different questions from a sensemaking perspective:

1) How is conflict conceptualised in conflict research literature?

2) How do staff and management experience and act out conflicts in the nonprofit organisation of NGO Plus and how does changing conflict sensemaking affect conflicts at work?

3) What is my process of theorizing in conflict research?

I will explicate my findings and reflect upon these questions one by one.

How is conflict conceptualised in conflict research literature?

To answer the first research question, I reviewed conflict research literature in two stages where I focused on shifts and positions respectively. In chapter 1, I showed that knowledge about conflict in organisations can be organised via the three major shifts that have occurred within the field of conflict research; that is,

- the shift from viewing conflict as dysfunctional to viewing it as constructive,
- the shift from focusing on what should be done in conflict to focusing on what is done in conflict,
- and the shift from viewing conflict as dyadic interactions to viewing it as an intra-organisational phenomenon.

In chapter 2, I further examined the literature looking for central positions on the phenomenon of conflict. I worked from the assumption that conflict research is never isolated from epistemological commitments and although these are rarely openly displayed within the literature, they are a key feature of how conflict researchers make conflict intelligible. I found three distinct positions on conflict:

- conflict as overt behaviour
- conflict as an outcome
- conflict as a social construction.

Merging the shifts with the positions enables further theoretical insight into the domain of organisational conflict.

Similar to the historical conflict literature, early works on conflict viewed conflict as dysfunctional and often depicted it as part of a conflict-cooperation dichotomy. Accordingly,

conflict was conceptualised as overt behaviour because it was visible in the breakdown of the relationship and in one party's deliberate interference with the goals of the other party, which would result in the blocking of cooperative dynamics. The shift to viewing conflict as constructive has emphasised that conflicts can result in positive dynamics and positive consequences for organisations. This shift has spurred conflict research to focus on how to reduce those conflicts that are bad for organisations and stimulate productive conflicts. The theoretical underpinnings of this shift bear witness to the widespread conceptualisation of conflict as an outcome within the domain of organisational conflict.

Similarly, normative research about what should be done in conflict assumes conflict to include a blend of cooperative and competitive motives. Although cooperative or competitive interests each yield different processes of conflict handling, the goal of this faction of research is to make the outcome of conflict productive; it is not to eliminate all conflicts, which reveals theoretical underpinnings of conflict as an outcome. The shift to focus on what *is* done in conflict has carried over the functionalist view that conflict must be doing some 'good' somewhere. Accordingly, it is just a matter of getting the strategy for personal conflict management right for conflict to result in productive outcomes.

A majority of conflict research explores conflict as an interpersonal phenomenon and assumes that this level of analysis represents all organisational conflict. Theoretical underpinnings of this area of research give rise to the view that, if managed correctly, conflict can be used to the organisation's advantage. The shift to view conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon emphasised two important aspects of conflict: its embeddedness in the context of social relationships and the making of meaning that is attached to it. Accordingly, within this shift conflict is conceptualised as a social construction because by itself it is meaningless; it is given shape and definition only when disputants take action. In table 3, I display an overview of how the distinct positions on conflict relate to the three shifts that have occurred in the domain of conflict research.

	SHIFTS FROM	TO
	Research views conflict as dysfunctional	Research views conflict as constructive
POSITION ON CONFLICT	Conflict as overt behaviour	Conflict as an outcome
	Research focuses on what should be done in conflict	Research focuses on what is done in conflict
POSITION ON CONFLICT	Conflict as an outcome	Conflict as an outcome
	Research views conflict as dyadic interactions	Research views conflict as an intra-organisational phenomenon
POSITION ON CONFLICT	Conflict as an outcome	Conflict as a social construction

Table 3: Shifts and Positions in conflict research

The special feature of this way of reviewing and examining the literature provides insight into the context and dynamics of conflict research. While I on a personal level agree with Coser's (1956) argument that conflict may provide the impetus for positive developments and change, my examination of conflict research literature clearly reveals that much of modern conflict research is put into the world primarily to aid organisations and conflict professionals at the expense of conceptual developments. For example, the majority of modern conflict research works from the established categories of the conflict typology frameworks and is directed towards the mantra of reducing those conflicts that are bad for the organisation and stimulating those conflicts that benefit the organisation. But this area of conflict research have not investigated the conceptual interconnections between task and relationship elements in conflict.

As I stepped out of the established categories of the conflict typology frameworks within which the majority of conflict research is undertaken and examined the theoretical domain of organisational conflict from a sensemaking perspective, I found three distinct ways that conflict is conceptualised in the field, despite the fact that the majority of conflict research do not discuss their conceptual assumptions of what conflict is. The topography of conflict which is displayed in this thesis represents my research into conflict research typologies as sensemaking and empirical processes of conflict as enactments. Thus, the topography of conflict takes off from my epistemological commitment to view conflict as a social construction. In the section below about the theoretical implications of a sensemaking perspective on conflict, I explain how the

theoretical contribution of the topography of conflict adds to a sophistication of this position on conflict.

How do staff and management experience and act out conflicts in the nonprofit organisation of NGO Plus and how does changing conflict sensemaking affect conflicts at work?

The second research question relates to my empirical analyses of how conflicts are constructed, enacted, and changed at NGO Plus. In chapter 6, I showed that staff and management draw on competing perceptual frameworks when explaining conflict. These frameworks act as lenses through which staff and management interpret conflict dynamics and it is through these frameworks that staff and management construct what the conflicts are about and decides how to deal with them. Processes of conflict management can be traced to perceptual frameworks, which are guided by institutionalised meanings constituting organisational ideology and identification among staff and management. As I analysed the performative effects of these frameworks, I showed that these dynamics foster a nonconfrontational approach to handling conflict at NGO Plus consistent with its organisational ideology of egalitarianism and striving towards organisational unity. Thus, the study calls attention to the embeddedness of conflict in the organisational cultural system and broader societal structures. As further shown by the study, implication of these dynamics are that conflict often occurs as interlocking events across different organisational levels. I conclude that understanding conflict means to understand (1) competing perceptual frameworks, (2) the embeddedness of conflict, and (3) conflict as interlocking events.

In chapter 7, I showed that attempts to change conflict sensemaking can be accomplished through changes in style of dialogue and thinking about 'the other'. The chapter showed that by changing the conflict sensemaking, conflict often change and take different forms. This was particularly evident in those conflicts where conflict sensemaking changed for several individuals, and highlights the social aspect of sensemaking activities. Additionally, the chapter showed that in some conflicts, changing the conflict sensemaking was not enough to change conflict. This was particularly evident in conflicts that were shaped by institutional structures beyond the organisation's controls sphere, and highlights the interlocking aspect of conflict events. In addition to changes in conflict sensemaking, such conflict also required institutional changes. I conclude that (1) changing the conflict sensemaking often change conflict, and that (2) conflict shaped by institutional structures also required institutional changes.

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From these findings, I have showed that sensemaking frameworks provide an advantageous approach to understanding conflict at work because it reveals constructions of meaning in conflict at several levels of analysis and moreover engage the cultural context that influences those constructions of meaning. By focusing particularly on the context and the dynamics of conflict, this approach helps explain why conflict take the form they do.

What is my process of theorizing in conflict research?

The third research question concerning my process of theorizing in conflict research relates to my own sensemaking of research experiences and how this shaped my construction of knowledge about conflict. In chapter 3, I described how field experiences made me change my epistemological commitments from reflecting positivist assumptions about conflict to committing to a more interpretative view of conflict. This meant that my perspective on conflict changed and instead of approaching conflict as 'something' in itself, I focused on the configuration of meaning in conflict and the interaction of meaning and action in practices of conflict handling. Thus, these field experiences are what initiated my interpretative approach to studying conflict and my focus on sensemaking in conflict.

In chapter 8, in terms of the interpretative approach to studying conflict I turned back the notion of interpretation that I have used in analysing conflict onto myself to take a critical look at my own process of theorizing in the research process. I show that as I turned my attention to the way I organised and made sense of dilemmas and awkward moments arising throughout the research process, these acts of reflexivity created greater degree of thoroughness in my research. From the narratives about getting access to information about conflicts in the field, making sense of – or deciding – which stories from the field are conflict stories, and dealing with ethical dilemmas in the process of doing research about conflict it became clear that the way that I organised and made sense of these research experiences shaped my process of theorizing. And that I, in the role of a sensemaker, actively generated representations of what reality of conflict is. While such knowledge is a relational product because what goes on in the actual research context shape the construction of knowledge, it has also been shaped by the review process in the three journals to which I have submitted the articles. This means that three different theoretical domains of knowledge; that is, the conflict research field, the nonprofit organisations research field, and the qualitative research field, each in their own way made an impact on my construction of knowledge about conflict.

I conclude that my research into conflict is an iterative, dynamic process that takes place in the interface between my world of being the researcher and the worlds of the researched and in negotiation with different theoretical domains of knowledge. It is the dynamics of theorizing in and between all of these research contexts that have added to the knowledge that I have produced about conflict in this thesis.

Theoretical implications of a sensemaking perspective on conflict

So what can we take away from this study and its findings? Focusing explicitly on the sensemaking activities in explaining conflict at work, this study contributes to the faction within conflict research that uses an interpretative epistemology (e.g. Bartunek et al., 1992; Collier, 2009; Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Morrill, 1995; Putnam, 2004). Scholars within this faction have argued that conflicts are a part of an organisation's social fabric. But what does it really mean that conflicts are part of the social fabric of an organisation? To answer this question, the topography of conflict reveals important theoretical insights about conflict:

- If we want insight into why people act and think the way they do in conflict and into what are meaningful ways for them to address conflict, then the **sensemaking frameworks** that are constructed and enacted by particular organisational groups are revealing. It is through sensemaking frameworks that people interpret conflict dynamics and construct what the conflict is about.

- However, conflict handling is not only about sensemaking frameworks; it is very much also about the **cultural and structural context** in which those sensemaking frameworks are constructed and enacted. Essentially this means that conflict handling is intertwined with various aspects of organisational functioning because the particular contextual space in which the conflicts are embedded play an important role in fostering, creating, and maintaining those conflicts (which in turn influence these cultures and structures).

- Moreover, conflict often occurs as **interlocking events** across different organisational levels and areas. This means that events happening in one areas of the organisation shape

the occurrence of conflict at another area of the organisation. It is through actions that connect actors that the interlocking takes place.

I confirm my position on conflict as a social construction, but these theoretical insights about conflict constitute my additions to this position's theoretical assumptions and concepts. As displayed in table 4, I emphasise that the theoretical concepts of sensemaking, frameworks, enactment, and interlocking are useful concepts when trying to understand conflict at work. Thus, my contribution adds to the sophistication of the position on conflict as a social construction existing within conflict research.

From these theoretical insights it becomes clear that a sensemaking perspective on conflict emphasises that conflict is about differences, which often result from different views of reality. These world-views grow out of a patchwork of cultural imprints on individuals and groups, which are shaped by numerous factors. As shown in chapter 6-8, conflict that characterises relations between different occupational groups may arise from fundamental differences in how each group members sees his or her position and relationship to others in the organisation. Thus, these differences are ingrained in the organisational system and intertwined with the broader culture in which that organisation operates.

POSITIONS OF CONFLICT	THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS	OBJECTIVES	MAIN CONCEPTS	SOURCES
CONFLICT AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION	Conflict is omnipresent. Conflict is shaped by the definition that observers give to it. Conflict is embedded in human interaction. Conflict is part of the social fabric in organisations. Conflicts are processes that are not necessarily visible, acknowledged and verbalized. **My additions:** People make sense of conflict through particular frameworks and enact conflict in accordance with those frameworks. The structural and cultural context in which the conflict handling occurs shape conflict sensemaking and enactment (which in turn influence these structures and cultures). Conflict often occurs as interlocking events.	Descriptive: To explore and understand the social dynamics of conflict. Implication of this is that we may learn how to intervene and deal with conflict.	Meaning Cultural context Structural context Embeddedness Experience **My additions:** Sensemaking Framework Enactment Interlocking	Barley, 1991; Bartunek et al., 1992; Brummans et al., 2008; Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Dubinskas, 1992; Felstiner et al., 1980; Friedman, 1992; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Gray et al., 2007; Knapp et al., 1988; Kolb & McGinn, 2009; Kolb, 2008; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Kusztal, 2002; Martin, 1992; Mather & Yngvesson, 1980; Morrill, 1989; Nader & Todd, 1978; Putnam, 2004; Sheppard, 1992; Van Maanen, 1992; Volkema et al., 1996. **My additions:** Mikkelsen, 2012a; Mikkelsen, 2012b; Mikkelsen, 2012c

Table 4: A final position on conflict

I began this thesis by criticizing that the majority of conflict research uses laboratory studies and survey instruments as the main methodologies for researching conflict in organisations. I joined the critics who argue that laboratory studies overlook the important role that social context and social process play in shaping the form that conflict takes. I also joined those critics who argue that survey instruments overlook the importance of dynamics over time and disregard conflict interaction between people in organisations manifested by for example social cues such as body language.

Sheppard (1992) argues that organisational conflict research tends to separate the strands of conflict analysis and focuses only on a single level of analysis. Rarely do studies or theories entail more than one level of analysis. He views much of conflict research to be trapped within a single level of analysis. By contrast, the application of a sensemaking perspective on conflict situates conflict contextually as a social, dynamic phenomenon and expands a focus on organisational conflict to the overall organisation, while maintaining a focus on the ways that conflict plays out between individuals. By displaying micro processes of the ways that meaning and action interact in conflict handling, I not only showed what actually happens in real life conflict in one particular organisation, but I also showed how these dynamics are embedded in the organisation's ideological foundation and the broader societal culture in which the organisation operates. Additionally, the interlocking characteristic of conflict means that conflict arising between two members of the same team may be interconnected with events that take place outside the relationship level of analysis.

Rather than focusing solely on either micro or macro aspects of conflict, this thesis has shown that conflict analysis can take place in the situational mechanisms between micro and macro levels of analysis. Thus, a sensemaking perspective on conflict entails analysing conflict at several levels of analysis because it displays complex interconnections between individual and interpersonal conflict handling and the structural and culturally negotiated context in which these conflicts occur.

In the editorial of a recent issue in the journal of *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, Evert Van de Vliert (2010) – an experienced conflict researcher – argued that emphasis in conflict research has always been on the much studied fruits of conflict rather than the roots of conflict. Many conflict studies have in different ways focused on the effects that conflict has on the workplace and how these effects can be reduced, controlled, managed, separated, or stimulated.

By investigating how sensemaking plays a critical role in the way conflicts are experienced and acted out, this study contributes to the much less studied roots of conflict. Examining how people engage in sensemaking activities by drawing on frameworks to derive meaning in conflict, expose cultural cues of that particular organisational setting which can explain why conflicts arise in the first place and why they take the form the do. Furthermore, perceiving conflict as interlocking events presents a more dynamic understanding of conflict, which places conflict handling at the heart of organisational functioning. This view is remarkably different from the dominant view of conflict as dyadic interactions that has long been present in conflict research literature and on which much conflict theory is built.

Organisations often over-simplify and over-individualise conflict. Moreover, conflicts at work are often isolated as problems of interpersonal differences and incompatibility that individuals must get over. Additionally conflicts are regarded as special events, dissociated from the everyday activities of working life. However, insights generated by this study suggest that understanding the sensemaking activities that go on in conflict situations and how frameworks are used to ascribe meaning to and act on conflict may help practitioners to address conflict at work. As Weick argues, it is important to focus on the content of meaning because by understanding what people draw upon to construct reality, we gain insight into how we can understand and change behaviours: "*an important implication of sensemaking is that, to change a group, one must change what is says and what its words mean*" (1995a, p. 108). For the practitioner-oriented field of conflict management this means to tone down the standardised models for resolving conflict and try to gain awareness of the different sensemaking frameworks of conflict that are represented in organisations and work at changing those frameworks.

Perspectives for future research

As any other piece of research this study has its limitations. However, instead of outlining what I should have done differently, I will make some suggestions for future research, which can assert the quality of work presented in this thesis. A sensemaking perspective on conflict situates conflict contextually as a social, dynamic phenomenon. From this, an image of necessary future research emerges.

Given that this study involved only one organisational site in a particular organisational setting, a similar study in other organisational contexts would strengthen this study's thesis significantly. For example, how do staff and management in other nonprofits address conflict? What do conflict dynamics look like in organisations that are as different as possible from NGO Plus? More specifically, what are the emic terms that staff and management in other occupational sectors specifically marked by profit, such as the financial sector, use when addressing conflict? And how does this relate to the overall organisational purpose? While the advantages of doing in-depth case studies are that such research presents a nuanced and more dynamic understanding of conflict, further investigations across occupational sectors would specify the generalizability of the theoretical contribution made in this thesis.

The thesis focused specifically on the dynamics of conflict by investigating how meaning and action interact in processes of conflict handling. Future research should additionally focus on the emotional aspects of conflict and explore interactions between emotions and sensemaking activities in conflict. Such studies would contribute to knowledge about the emotional dynamics in conflict at work. Additionally, such studies would contribute to current research into how emotions and sensemaking activities interact. Further research into staff and management's enacted sensemaking in conflict at work would gain from working from the ethnomethodological epistemological position from the beginning of the research process and further empirically document the actual mechanisms by which social order of how to address conflict is accomplished in everyday conflict handling.

On a final note, I would very much like to see future conflict research engage itself more explicitly in the ethical aspects of doing research about organisational conflict. Researching conflict often involves difficult and unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research. In chapter 8, I described how the ethical dimension of doing research about conflict shaped my process of theorizing about conflict. From the sharing of these experiences, I see an important contribution by learning about how other researchers deal with the sensitivity surrounding conflict whilst researching it. Such explicit explorations of ethical notions in conflict research would further our knowledge about how ethical practice in conflict research can be achieved, and contribute substantially to this underdeveloped dimension of conflict research.

Abstract

This study is about everyday conflicts that occur at work; how meaning and action interact in processes of conflict handling in organisational conflicts that arise naturally in every arena of daily life when people meet in social interactions. I approach the phenomenon of conflict by exploring those social processes of organisational *sensemaking* that arise when conflict occurs in a nonprofit organisation, my own processes of *sensemaking* of the research process about conflict, and conflict research literature's *sensemaking* of the concept of conflict.

Weick argues that "[t]*he basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs*" (1993, p. 653). Accordingly, sensemaking is conceptualised as a process of social construction where individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues, or signals from their environments. The term can also be applied to the craft of research as sensemaking, in which researchers as sensemakers actively analyse the empirical material and generate representations of how reality is (Weick, 1989). Accordingly, in this study, I basically aim to understand conflict at work and understand research about conflict at work; that is, how conflict, as a social phenomenon, plays out in organisational cultures and group dynamics, and how conflict is conceptualised in conflict research literature. The study examines the following research questions from a sensemaking perspective:

1) How is conflict conceptualized in conflict research literature?
2) How do staff and management experience and act out conflicts in the nonprofit organisation of NGO Plus and how does changing conflict sensemaking affect conflicts at work?
3) What is my process of theorizing in conflict research?

To answer the first question, I reviewed conflict research literature by focusing on the three main shifts which have characterised knowledge about conflict in organisations; that is, the shift from viewing conflict as dysfunctional to viewing it as constructive, from focusing on what should be done in conflict to focusing on what is done in conflict, and from viewing conflict as dyadic interactions to viewing it as an

intra-organisational phenomenon. I then went further into the literature and examined central positions on what conflict is and found three distinct positions on conflict: conflict as *overt behaviour*, conflict as *an outcome*, and conflict as a *social construction*. Merging the shifts with the positions reveals that much of modern conflict research is put into the world primarily to aid organisations and conflict professional at the expense of conceptual developments.

Given that my own position on conflict is that of conflict as a social construction, the second and the third research questions build upon the learning from reviewing conflict research literature and examining theoretical assumptions about conflict.

The second research question relates to my empirical analyses of how conflicts are constructed and enacted at NGO Plus. The field study employed ethnographic methods of observations and interviews and had a longitudinal research design. I gathered the empirical material in three periods of fieldwork, which ran over a two-year period from June 2008 to September 2010, amounting to six months of full time fieldwork.

My findings show that staff and management experience and act out conflicts in accordance with certain sensemaking frameworks, which are guided by institutionalised meanings constituting organisational ideology and identification among staff and management. As I analysed the performative effects of these frameworks, I showed that these dynamics foster a nonconfrontational approach to handling conflict at NGO Plus consistent with its organisational ideology of egalitarianism and striving towards organisational unity. Thus, the study calls attention to the embeddedness of conflict in the organisational cultural system and broader societal structures. As further shown by the study, implication of these dynamics are that conflict often occurs as interlocking events across different organisational levels.

The study moreover shows that as I turned my attention to the way I organised and made sense of dilemmas and awkward moments arising throughout the research process, these acts of reflexivity created greater degree of thoroughness in my research and added to the knowledge that I was producing about conflict. Thus, my conclusion on the third research question is that I, in the role of a sensemaker, actively generate representations of what reality of conflict is and that such knowledge is a

relational product because it has been constructed in the interface between my world of being the researcher and the worlds of the researched.

From these findings, I conclude that a sensemaking perspective on conflict displays micro processes of the ways that meaning and action interact in conflict handling, which provides an understanding of what actually happens in real life conflicts in organisations. Studying sensemaking frameworks provides an advantageous approach to understanding conflict at work because it reveals constructions of meaning in conflict at the collective level of the organisation and moreover engage the cultural context that influences those constructions of meaning. Thereby this approach helps explain why conflicts take the form they do.

Accordingly, the thesis contribute to conflict theory by adding theoretical assumptions about conflict which suggest that people make sense of conflict through particular frameworks and enact conflict in accordance with those frameworks; that the structural and cultural context in which the conflict handling occurs shape conflict sensemaking and enactment (which in turn influence these structures and cultures); and that conflict often occurs as interlocking events. Thus, the contribution of the thesis adds to the sophistication of the position on conflict as a social construction existing within conflict research.

Dansk resumé

Denne afhandling undersøger hverdagskonflikter, der opstår på arbejdspladsen, når medarbejdere mødes i social interaktion. Afhandlingens fokus er på samspillet mellem aktørernes meningstilskrivning og handling i håndteringen af konflikter. Konfliktforskningslitteraturen kritiseres for primært at undersøge konflikter og konflikthåndtering ud fra allerede etablerede kategorier og derudfra at opstille normative forskrifter for effektiv konflikthåndtering. I stedet argumenterer denne afhandling for, at det er samspillet mellem meningstilskrivning og handling i konflikthåndtering, der er centralt for udviklingen af forståelsen af konflikter. Afhandlingen fokuserer på, hvorfor konflikter udspiller sig som de gør, og hvordan vi kan gå til dem.

Med Karl Weick's teori om *Sensemaking* som afhandlingens teoretiske standpunkt, undersøger jeg konflikt som fænomen i tre forskellige sammenhænge: konfliktforskningslitteraturen, nonprofit organisationen NGO Plus og min egen forskningsproces.

Det første forskningsspørgsmål, som afhandlingen søger at besvare, handler om, hvordan konflikt konceptualiseres i konfliktforskningslitteraturen. Generelt begrebsliggøres konflikt på tre forskellige måder: Som *synlig adfærd*, som *et udfald*, og som *en social konstruktion*. Undersøgelsen af forskningslitteratren viser, at moderne konfliktforskning primært fokuserer på at hjælpe organisationer og praktikere med at håndtere og løse konflikter, på bekostning af den begrebsmæssige udvikling indenfor feltet. Denne mangel på begrebsmæssig udvikling imødekommer afhandlingen gennem et etnografisk feltstudie, der bidrager til den teoretiske konceptualisering af konflikter.

Det næste forskningsspørgsmål som afhandlingen søger at besvare er, hvordan medarbejdere og ledere i nonprofit organisationen NGO Plus oplever og håndterer konflikter i deres arbejde, og hvordan dette ændres, når de får undervisning og træning i konflikthåndtering. Med et sensemaking perspektiv placerer den empiriske undersøgelse sig i den del af konfliktforskningslitteraturen, der konceptualiserer konflikt som en social konstruktion. For at undersøge konflikter i NGO Plus anvendte jeg en etnografisk forskningsmetode bestående af deltagerobservationer, dybdegående enkeltinterviews og fokusgruppeinterviews med medarbejdere og ledere.

Afhandlingens empiriske analyser situerer konflikt kontekstuelt, som et socialt, dynamisk fænomen. Analyserne viser således, at ønsker vi at forstå, hvorfor folk handler og tænker som de gør i konflikter, er det nødvendigt at undersøge de fortolkningsrammer, som aktørerne trækker på for at forstå konflikterne. Disse fortolkningsrammer fungerer som optikker, hvorigennem medarbejderne og ledelsen fortolker konfliktepisoder og dermed konstruerer, hvad konflikterne handler om. Afhandlingen viser dog, at for at forstå konflikter er det ikke nok kun at fokusere på fortolkningsrammer. Fokus skal også omfatte de kontekstuelle sammenhænge, strukturelle såvel som sociale, hvori fortolkningsrammerne konstrueres og anvendes. Derudover viser afhandlingen, at konflikter griber ind i hinanden på tværs af forskellige organisatoriske niveauer. Grundlæggende betyder det, at en konflikt, der udspiller sig på ét organisatorisk niveau, kan være med til at forme forekomsten af konflikter på et andet organisatorisk niveau.

I forhold til undervisning og træning i konflikthåndtering viser afhandlingen, at sådanne forløb kan ændre konflikter ved, at parterne bliver mere reflekterede og får større selverkendelse i forhold til deres kommunikationsmåder. Konkret betyder dette, at flere af deltagerne i undersøgelsen fik en anden forståelse for de konflikter, de oplevede på deres arbejde. Træningsforløbet havde sit primære fokus på anvisninger til den personlige håndtering af konflikter, hvorfor dets primære påvirkning er sket på individ- og gruppeniveau. Kun begrænset påvirkning kunne spores på det organisatoriske niveau.

Det sidste forskningsspørgsmål, som afhandlingen søger at besvare, handler om, hvordan min teoretiseringsproces om konflikter udspillede sig i forskningsprocessen. Forskerens erkendelsesproces i forskningen er ofte nedtonet i konfliktforskning. Dette er på trods af at det indenfor konfliktforskning er særlig vigtigt at forholde sig kritisk til, hvordan det er muligt at opnå adgang til medarbejderes viden om og erfaring med konflikter, og hvordan man kan forholde sig til etiske dilemmaer, der opstår undervejs i forskningsprocessen. Refleksion over begge disse elementer i forskningsprocessen er vigtig fordi de påvirker den viden, som forskningen skaber.

Spørgsmålene om adgang og etik er aktuelle, fordi konflikter i mange organisationer er noget, man har svært ved at håndtere, endsige at tale om. Som forsker må man være opmærksom på, at man selv er med til at generere det materiale, som man baserer sine analyser på, hvormed forskeren tilskrives en subjektiv rolle i

forskningsprocessen.

Afhandlingen konkluderer, at hvis vi ønsker at forstå de konflikter, der udspiller sig på arbejdspladsen, er vi nødt til at forstå, hvordan konflikter konceptualiseres og fremstilles lokalt i organisationen. Ofte overforenkles og overindividualiseres konflikter på arbejdspladsen. De bliver anskuet som isolerede problemer, der handler om, at individer skal komme over deres forskeligheder og uforeneligheder. Men som Weick hævder, er det vigtigt at fokusere på meningstilskrivningen, fordi vi herigennem opnår indsigt i, hvordan man kan forstå og ændre praksis.

For ledelser og praktikere, der arbejder med at håndtere og løse konflikter, betyder dette, at nedtone brugen af standardiserede modeller for konfliktløsning. I stedet kan de med fordel arbejde for at få indsigt i de konkrete fortolkningsrammer, som der trækkes på i organisationen for at forklare konflikter, og arbejde målrettet for at ændre disse fortolkningsrammer.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

Interview questions used in round 1

1) Educational background and length of employment
2) Tasks and responsibilities
3) Opinions about community and collaborations
4) Opinions about management

Interview questions used in round 2

Value of work
1) How do you thrive with your work? What is important for you in your work?

Social community and collaborations
2) What is the working community like here? In the department? In the organisation?
3) How do you get along with your co-workers?
4) What do you experience the atmosphere in the department like?
5) Do you think that roles and responsibilities are clear in your department?
6) How does your department work with the rest of the organisation?
7) What is the collaboration like between your department and the other departments?

Conflicts and conflict management
8) Conflicts in your department, what are they typically about?
9) Tell me about a conflict situation
10) How do you experience conflicts that arise?
11) How do you typically deal with conflicts that arise?
12) How do these situations affect the image you have of yourself?
13) Do you think that there are organisational element that contribute to conflicts?
14) What do you expect to gain from the training?

Questions to management:
15) What do you do when a staff member comes to you for help in a conflict situation?
16) What do you expect that your department can gain from the training?

Interview questions used in round 3

1) What do you think about the training?
2) Is there anything that stands out?
3) What do you think about the structure of the training
4) Is there anything from the training that has made you think differently about conflict situations?
5) Can you give me an example
6) What do you think about the group performance during the training?
7) What do you think about the trainer's performance?

Focus Group with Participants in training:
1) Are there any elements from the training that you find useful?
2) How do you think that you can use those elements?
3) Do you think that there are any circumstances at NGO Plus that will prohibit you from using those elements when at work?
4) Why do you think that NGO Plus wanted its staff and management to participate in conflict management training?

Focus Group with Non-Participants:
1) Why do you think that NGO Plus wanted its staff and management to participate in conflict management training?
2) Are the any issues in the organisation on which you think that the training can make an impact?
3) What have you heard about the training?

Interview questions used in round 4

1) How is it going with those collaborative problems that you described to me last year? (Notice their use of words)
2) Do you experience any changes in that situation?
3) What do you remember from the training?
4) Has it had an influence on the way you and your co-workers experience and deal with conflicts?
5) Do you think that the training has had any impact on those collaborative problems that you just described?
6) What did you gain from the training?

Focus Group with Participants in training:
1) Are there any issues in NGO Plus that you think have changed since the training?
2) Are there any issues in NGO Plus that have not been changed since the training?
3) Do you think that perceptions of conflict in NGO Plus have been changed?
4) What should have been different for the organisation to gain more from the training?

Focus Group with Non-Participants:
1) Last year you all talked about how conflict at NGO Plus was always swept under the carpet. How do you think that conflict is addressed at NGO Plus today?
2) Have noticed any changes in the way co-workers and managers address and deal with conflict?

Appendix B: Interviewing patterns

	NAME	OCCUPATIONAL POSITION	INTERVIEW 1 August 2008	INTERVIEW 2 February-March 2009	INTERVIEW 3 April 2009	INTERVIEW 4 June-August 2010
1.	Peter	General secretary	SI			
2.	John	Clerical manager	SI	SI		
3.	Hilary	Clerical worker	SI	SI	SI	SI
4.	Alice	Clerical worker	SI	SI	SI	SI
5.	June	Clerical worker	SI		FG-NP	N/A
6.	Carolyn	Clerical accountant	SI			
7.	David	Clerical accountant	SI			
8.	Jane	Clerical worker	SI		FG-P	FG-P
9.	Laura	Clerical worker	SI			
10.	Maria	Clerical worker	SI			
11.	Fran	Fundraising manager	SI			SI
12.	Deborah	Fundraiser	SI	SI	SI	SI
13.	Karen	Fundraiser	SI	SI	SI	SI
14.	Lisa	Fundraiser	SI	SI		
15.	Sarah	Fundraiser	SI			
16.	George	Fundraiser	SI		FG-NP	FG-NP
17.	Paul	Fundraiser	SI			
18.	Sandra	Fundraiser	SI			
19.	Joanne	Fundraiser	SI	SI	FG-NP	FG-NP
20.	Ruth	Fundraiser	SI			
21.	Mary	Programme manager	SI	SI	SI	SI
22.	Frank	Programme worker	SI			
23.	Steve	Programme worker	SI	SI	SI	SI
24.	Stewart	Programme worker	SI			
25.	Martha	Programme worker	SI		FG-P	FG-P
26.	Linda	Programme worker	SI			
27.	Helen	Programme worker	SI		FG-P	FG-P
28.	Catherine	Programme worker	SI			
29.	Evelyn	Programme worker	SI		FG-NP	FG-NP
30.	Joan	Clerical worker	SI			

SI = Single Interview
FG-P = Focus Group with Participants in training
FG-NP = Focus Group with Non-Participants

30. Ole Hinz
*Den effektive forandringsleder: pilot,
pædagog eller politiker?
Et studie i arbejdslederes meningstil-
skrivninger i forbindelse med vellykket
gennemførelse af ledelsesinitierede
forandringsprojekter*

31. Kjell-Åge Gotvassli
*Et praksisbasert perspektiv på dynami-
ske
læringsnettverk i toppidretten*
Norsk ph.d., ej til salg gennem
Samfundslitteratur

32. Henriette Langstrup Nielsen
*Linking Healthcare
An inquiry into the changing perfor-
mances of web-based technology for
asthma monitoring*

33. Karin Tweddell Levinsen
*Virtuel Uddannelsespraksis
Master i IKT og Læring – et casestudie
i hvordan proaktiv proceshåndtering
kan forbedre praksis i virtuelle lærings-
miljøer*

34. Anika Liversage
*Finding a Path
Labour Market Life Stories of
Immigrant Professionals*

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1. verdenskrig*

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