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Systemic-Level Influences on Organizational Conflict Processes:
An Empirical Review, Inventory and New Directions

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Abstract

Today, there is a considerable body of research on interpersonal and team level conflict in organizations, providing important insights that guide further research and practice. What is less clear however, is the extent to which higher-level systemic factors in organizations affect the probabilities of conflicts occurring in the first place, and the likelihood that they will escalate into more destructive dynamics when they do. While empirical findings on the effects of systemic variables on conflict dynamics in organizations are present, they lack coherence. To address this, we conducted a review of empirical studies on systemic level organization processes and conflict and employed a comprehensive organizational framework, the Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change, to frame the findings. Next, we translated these findings into an organizational conflict inventory for identifying and assessing relevant processes in organizations. This article presents our review and inventory, and concludes with a discussion of emerging trends for studying and working with systemic conflict at multiple levels within organizations.

Introduction

Today, organizational scholars contend that conflict brings little but pain to organizations (De Dreu, 2008). Conflicts can distract workers, derail and occasionally destroy opportunities and relationships, waste time and lessen productivity, and impair teamwork and morale (Coleman & Ferguson, 2014). Prolonged conflicts are often associated with increased incidents of counterproductive work behaviors like theft and sabotage, as well as bullying (Ayoko, Callan & Hartel, 2003). When employees are bullied, they often suffer from psychological and physical symptoms similar to those of soldiers returning from overseas warfare - including nightmares, anxiety and other physical illnesses (Williams, 2011). Overall, research suggests that approximately 60-80% of organizational difficulties are the result of strained relationships at work, rather than motivation or skills deficits (Dana, 2005; Kreisman, 2002). Clearly, unaddressed conflict processes can be a significant drain on organizational resources and outcomes.

This is not to suggest that all conflict in organizations is destructive. Conflicts, for example, that result from differences over the content of the task at hand are not always destructive (DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus & Doty, 2013). In fact, these are basic, inevitable and even desirable conflicts that, when navigated effectively, result in more creative and innovative outcomes (de Wit, Greer & Jehn, 2012; Tjosvold, 2008; Todorova, Bear & Weingart, 2014). However, it is when conflicts become personal, damaging relationships and derailing cohesion and coordination among members that conflicts in organizations become destructive (DeChurch et al., 2013; de Wit et al., 2012).

A great deal of research has explored interpersonal and team level conflict in organizations (e.g. De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 1993), providing

important insights for practice. However, what is much less clear from this literature is the role of higher-level systemic processes in influencing the probabilities of conflicts occurring in the first place, and the extent to which, when conflicts do occur, they escalate into more destructive dynamics. In other words, questions remain regarding the extent to which systemic-level aspects of organizational processes – such as culture, decision-making structures, policies and procedures, leadership styles, and others – contribute to lower levels of interpersonal and team-level conflict processes.

Scholarship has identified a variety of organizational-level variables that are associated with lower level conflict processes. For example, factors such as the nature of the external environment (e.g. Duncan, 1972; Grissom, 2010; Wayne & Rubinstein, 1992), type of organization (e.g. Boyne, 2002; Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Guerra, Martinez, Munduate, & Medina, 2005; Harvey & Evans, 1994), cross-cutting structures and cultural complexity (e.g. Jehn, Chadwick & Thatcher, 1997; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Sawyer, Houlette, & Yeagley, 2006; also see Varshney, 2001), task-reward interdependence structures (e.g. De Dreu & Van Vainen, 2001; Langfred, 2007; Tjosvold, 1986; Wageman, 1995), social structures (e.g. Nelson, 1989), decision-making structures (e.g. Amason, 1996; Schwenk, 1990), and organization culture (Gelfand, Leslie, Keller & De Dreu, 2012; Labianca, Brass & Gray, 1998) are just some of the multitude of empirical findings highlighting systemic-level influences on interpersonal and team-level conflict dynamics in organizations.

However, this body of literature represents something of an embarrassment of riches. Currently, these findings lack clarity and coherence, which poses a challenge for managers attempting to draw practical lessons from the research. The purpose of the current paper is to address this limitation in three ways. First, a comprehensive review of published empirical

research on organizational conflict was conducted and incorporated into a prominent model of organizational processes, the Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change. This review and categorization of findings allowed for the identification of strengths and gaps in the literature. Second, these empirical findings were then translated into a series questions designed to guide organizational-level inquiries – both for research and practice – into systemic-level influences on conflict processes. Finally, the review helped to identify emerging trends in the field that are likely to shape our systemic understanding of organizational conflict in the future.

Systemic Conflict Processes in Organizations

A substantial amount of research has investigated work conflict at the interpersonal and team levels (see De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 1993). This research reflects an understanding that most conflicts at work, although frustrating, are benign, easily resolved, or even useful in terms of clarifying problems and preferences. These conflicts have relatively clear boundaries that delineate what they are and are not about, who they concern and who they do not, and when and where it is appropriate to engage in them. Thus, most conflicts can be addressed through standard methods of discussion, negotiation, mediation or other constructive forms of problem solving.

However, even though interpersonal hostilities (e.g., between two peers) may be observable and addressable at this level, they can often be the result of processes at higher levels (team and department affiliations, organization culture norms, decision-making structures, formal policies, etc.). These higher-level processes do not directly lead to the formation of destructive conflict processes but instead, increase the likelihood of these types of conflicts

occurring in the first place. Thus, attempting to resolve manifest conflicts in organizations can seem much like the popular arcade game "Whack-A-Mole," with destructive conflict episodes seeming to be resolved only to reappear somewhere else. While there is very little research examining organizational conflict processes from this perspective, there is a considerable amount of research examining multi-level processes in organizations more broadly.

Multilevel Organization Theory and Research

Multi-level approaches to organizational theory, assessment and change have been proliferating for almost two decades (i.e., Aguilera, Rupp, Williams & Ganapathi, 2007; Avolio & Bass, 1995; Gittell & Weiss, 2003; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Ostroff & Bowen, 2000; Zohar & Luria, 2005). Recent research on organizational conflict management has also begun to embrace this approach (Gelfand, et al, 2012; Gelfand, 2008; Gobeli, Koenig & Bechinger, 1998; Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008; Oetzel, Dhar & Kirschbaum, 2007), paying particular attention to the mechanisms responsible for cross-level effects (e.g. processes at higher organization levels that influence lower levels of interpersonal and team-level dynamics). This work builds on prior research and theory attempting to move the field out of focusing predominantly on interpersonal and team-level approaches to understanding conflict and conflict management in organization contexts.

For example, early work by Pondy (1967) focused on synthesizing the relationships between structural and personality variables, breaking conflicts down into conflict episodes composed of 5 stages: 1) antecedent conditions, 2) latent conflict, 3) perceived conflict, 4) manifest conflict, and 5) the conflict aftermath. The antecedent conditions serve as the core of Pondy's model of conflict focusing on competition over scarce resources, the structure of the

organization, and the channels through which the entities in the organization coordinate their efforts. Similarly, Thomas's structural model (1976; 1992) focused on the ways in which the structure of an organization determines conflict behavior through a combination of individual predispositions, interpersonal social pressures, organization incentive structures, and rules and procedures. Implied in this model was the assumption that organization conflict must be understood at multiple levels of analysis, and within the overall organization structure.

Interestingly, while Pondy's (1967) earlier model presented conflicts as anomalies in an otherwise cooperative system, this view was later reversed in favor of a model of organizations as systems functioning to perpetuate conflicts. From this perspective, Pondy (1992) asserts that it is not so much about minimizing the likelihood of conflicts occurring, but instead maximizing "…the right conflict episodes, with the right conflicting parties, over the right issues, operating under the right ground-rules." (p. 260). Implied in this is the need for an increased emphasis on examining and modifying organizational processes at higher levels in order to achieve more desirable conflict outcomes at lower levels of organization functioning.

More recently, De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) have asserted that conflicts are an inevitable part of an organization's structure, suggesting that organization conflict can not only be broken down into individual, group, and organization levels of analysis, but –drawing from the open systems perspective (Katz & Khan, 1978) – must also be examined in terms of the cultural contexts (the community, institutional, and national levels) in which the organization operates. They also suggest that while conflict is inevitable in organization structures, and that there will surely be outcomes based on this conflict, conflict management in organizations serves as a "critical moderator" (p. 30) between these inevitable conflicts and the course of their outcomes. In other words, a combined focus on the organization structure as well as the conflict

management system is critical for influencing, in the long term, whether conflicts in an organization will take a more constructive, rather than a destructive course.

Systemic Level Influences on Conflict Processes

Conceptualizing conflict processes at multiple levels of organization functioning is not new. However, a tension often exists between viewing organization conflict systemically and employing more reductionist and atomistic approaches when conducting organizational conflict research. The reductionist perspective becomes especially problematic with regards to informing the practice of organizational conflict management, considering the range of organizational influences on conflict processes and outcomes that are possible.

For example, many if not most, interpersonal conflicts that arise in organizations will be resolved naturally between the parties or with assistance of a third party such as a supervisor, colleague, or a member of the internal conflict resolution system (Coleman, 2011). Conflicts in and between teams are likely to take a similar course. However, when conflicts seem to occur frequently, or are resolved in one instance only to reappear somewhere else, there may be a need to examine broader systemic level influences on these processes in order to determine the extent to which they may be contributing to these dynamics. Unfortunately, organizational scholars and practitioners, attempting to identify and address these higher-level processes in organizations, are currently left with very little guidance in the literature. Our review aims to address this concern. We attempt to fill this research-practice gap by first providing a broad overview of empirical research at multiple levels of organizational processes relating conflict dynamics at lower levels, and then translating our review into a basic conflict inventory to serve organizational conflict management practice.

The Literature Review

In this section, we summarize our review of empirical studies on the effects of systemic level organization processes on conflict processes at lower levels, organized through the heuristic of the Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change (Burke & Litwin, 1992).

The Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change

The Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change is a classic model that provides a systemic framework for both understanding an organization's structure and performance as well as how to foster change in the organization (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Burke, 2011). It provides a general framework for describing how each component of an organization influences the other components, which in turn aids in an understanding of how to plan and conduct broad systemic change. Burke and Litwin developed this model by drawing on their many years of experience as practitioners of organization development and change, and by synthesizing multiple empirical models and studies that provided support for the factors and interrelationships among the factors presented in the model (Burke & Litwin, 1992).

The model proposes twelve organizational factors that are important for understanding any organization system. Figure 1 offers a diagram of the model. Each factor is shown in relation to the others, with arrows describing the relationships between the factors. Burke and Litwin propose that changes to one or multiple factors will inevitably result in subsequent changes across other factors in the system.

Figure 1: The Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change

THE BURKE-LITWIN MODEL - ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE & CHANGE
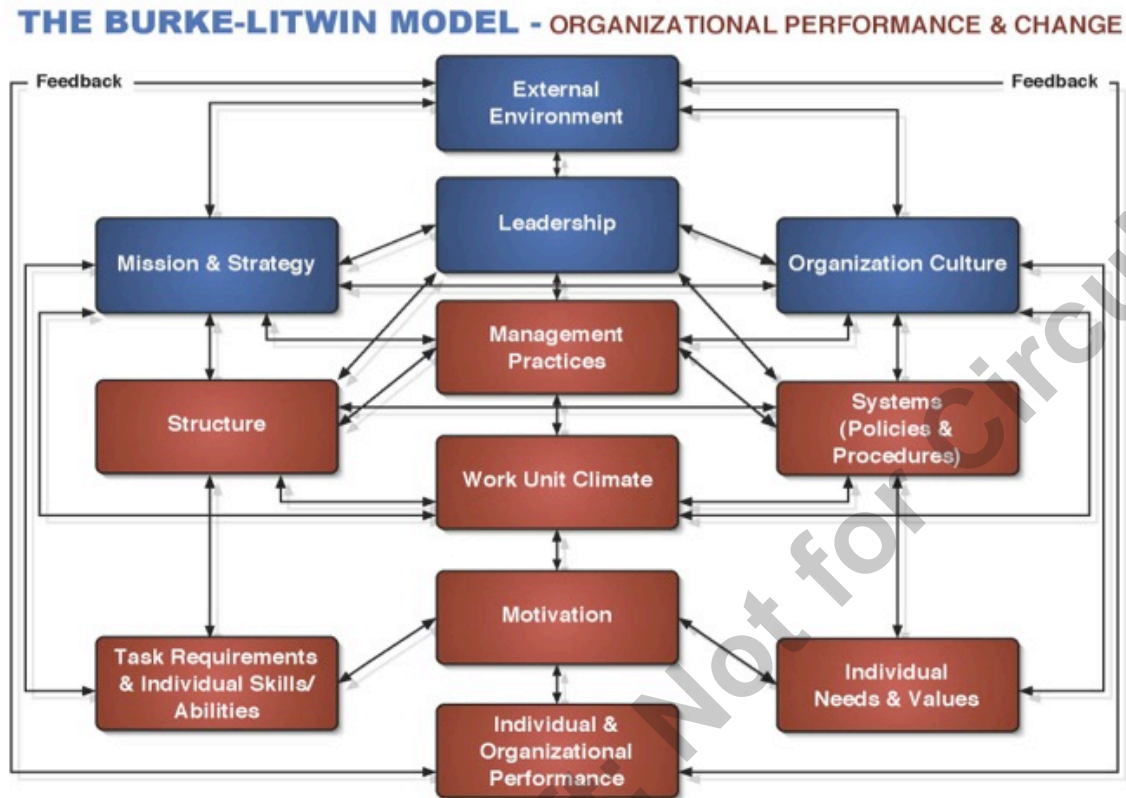
The model distinguishes between two categories of organizational dynamics: transformational and transactional. The four uppermost factors in the model as shown in Figure 2 are *transformational* in nature (i.e. external environment, mission and strategy, leadership, and organizational culture), which develop and change as a function of an interaction with the environment and adoption of new attitudes and behaviors by members of the organization. The remaining *transactional* factors (i.e. management practices, structure, policies and procedures, work unit climate, task requirements and individual skills/abilities, motivation, individual needs and values, and performance) are concerned with processes that occur at the level of interaction and reciprocity between organization members. Change at the transformational level will have a much stronger impact on organization processes as compared to change at the transactional level.

However, at the same time, transformational change is much more difficult, requiring either a prolonged sustained effort, or a significant perturbation or shock to the organization system. Transactional changes, by comparison can be more readily achieved, but will not have as strong an impact across the system.

Review of Empirical Findings

In what follows, we summarize current empirical findings describing influences of systemic level organizational processes on conflict dynamics, organized by the top eight factors of the Burke-Litwin model (i.e. external environment, mission and strategy, leadership, organizational culture, management practices, structure, policies and procedures, and work unit climate). We focused on these eight elements because they represent the systemic level factors that in turn impact the downstream individual factors (motivation, skills, needs, values and performance). Below, we briefly define the systemic factors based on the original model, and then present the relevant findings identified in the literature for each factor.

External Environment: This refers to *those factors outside of the organization that can influence organizational performance, and includes forces such as economic conditions, customer behavior, government regulations, changing technologies, and politics and national culture* (Burke, 1992, 2011). Our review revealed very little research investigating the effects of external environmental factors on organization conflict processes. However, three aspects of the external environment emerged that are worth further exploration: the environmental dynamics in which the organization is situated, the national-cultural-community context in which the organization is based, and the type of organization (e.g. for-profit, not-for-profit, etc.).

First, there is some evidence to suggest that management teams operating in environments that are complex versus simple (in terms of the number of environmental factors to consider), dynamic versus static (in terms of how often external considerations change), and more or less competitive experience more uncertainty in decision making (Dess & Beard, 1984; Kreiser & Marino, 2002; Sharfman & Dean, 1991). The presence of *slack* (a cushion of resources that an organization can use to adapt to changes in external pressures) may influence decision-makers to allocate greater support for cooperative solutions (Wayne & Rubinstein, 1992).[1] When there is insufficient resource slack, the result can be an internal process of increased formalization and centralization, which, in turn, can result in more rigid problem solving and more conflict (Wieresma & Bantel, 1993). Overall, these findings suggest that environmental uncertainty can influence conflict processes in organizations, especially when the organization lacks sufficient resources for coping under environmental strain.

Second, more broadly, the national culture in which the organization is embedded can have an impact on how conflicts manifest in the organization. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that there are clearer mechanisms for ensuring internal cooperation and more formalized processes for conflict resolution in cultures high in uncertainty avoidance (Garrett, Buisson, & Yap, 2006). Additionally, individuals in cultures that are generally more individualistic tend use more dominating conflict management styles, while those in collectivistic cultures tend to either be more avoidant and compromising, or more integrative and problem-solving (Holt & DeVore, 2005). However, research findings in the individualism-collectivism literature are mixed, warranting caution when attempting to draw broader conclusions based on local cultural generalizations (Kim & Coleman, working paper). At the community level, what is happening in the local environment

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[1] Interestingly, as trends in the global economy and other environmental factors change (i.e. more volatility), one study identified signals that union-management relations are shifting to approaches that are more interest-based (Friedman, Hunter & Chen, 2008).

can critically influence conflict in the organization. For example, higher incidents of violent crime in the community surrounding the organization are strongly related to increased workplace aggression (Dietz, Robinson, Folger, Baron & Schulz, 2003).

Finally, the type of organization seems to matter with regards to the impact of environmental factors on internal organization process, primarily due to the nature of the interface of the organization with the environment. One study compared public organizations, which by nature, involve less competition and profit-centered goals and are bounded more by legal and political agendas which tend to change frequently, with private organizations which are much less constrained, and found that individuals in public organizations perceived significantly higher levels of task and relationship conflict than those in private (i.e. for profit) organizations (Guerra et al., 2005). Additional findings comparing not-for-profit and for-profit organizations suggest that those working in the not-for-profit sector tend to have more constructive views of conflict and decision-making. Considerations in these organizations, as compared to for-profit settings, involve less competitive pressure (Boyne, 2002), and individuals tend to be motivated more by intrinsic rewards (Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007), viewing conflicts as opportunities for higher-quality decisions (Schwenk, 1990).

Leadership: *Leadership provides an overall organizational direction for employees, through persuasion, influence, or serving as behavioral role models for employees* (Burke, 2011). It involves vision, influence, rewarding people, and providing opportunities to learn new skills. As leaders are highly visible in the organization, their behavior can model more or less appropriate ways of handling conflict, which can influence the organization's conflict culture (Gelfand et al., 2012). Additionally, general leadership styles as well as comfort with and

approach towards conflicts are crucial here (Hepworth & Towler, 2004). Finally, research also suggests links between how conflict is managed within top leadership teams and organizational performance (Amason, 1996; Voss, Cable & Voss, 2006).

There is compelling evidence to suggest that the way leaders model conflict management in the day-to-day operations of the organization can influence conflict management norms across the organization (Gelfand et al., 2012). A recent study found that when leaders rely primarily on collaborative, avoidant, or dominating conflict management behaviors, the cultural norms of handling conflict reflected this style (see *Organizational Culture* below; Gelfand et al., 2012). So, for example when leaders adopted more cooperative conflict management styles, unit members tended to endorse more constructive conflict norms. However, when leaders employed more dominating or avoidant styles, their units tended to exhibit more destructive conflict dynamics. It is also likely that leaders' personality traits and leadership styles shape these conflict tendencies and corresponding cultures more broadly. As an example, studies on need for closure find that leaders who are high in this trait often encourage avoidant conflict cultures, given their preference for predictability and consensus over diverse opinions or dissenting views (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).

Moving beyond conflict management styles to leadership styles more broadly, there is some evidence to suggest that employees who work for more charismatic leaders experience less workplace aggression (Hepworth & Towler, 2004). Further, when leadership styles are more participative and employee-centered, there tends to be a more positive impact on satisfaction with supervisors as well as increasing unit solidarity, and reduced communication anxiety (Richmond, Wagner, & McCrosky, 1983). This is in contrast to laissez-faire leadership, which tends to be associated with higher levels of workplace stress, bullying at work, psychological

distress, role conflict, role ambiguity, and more conflicts with coworkers (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007).

Additionally, at top leadership levels, significant levels of disagreement between leaders over organizational identity decreased organizational performance more broadly (Voss, Cable, & Voss, 2006). In addition, conflict among top leadership teams, while generally related to improved decision quality at this level, tends to be more disruptive when conflicts become emotional (Amason, 1996), which can then negatively impact organizational performance.

Mission and Strategy: *The mission of an organization is its raison d'être, primary goals and ultimate purpose; the strategy describes how the mission will be accomplished* (Burke, 1992; Burke, 2011). *Vision* is distinguished from mission in that it describes future aspirations of the organization – where it would like to be in the next three to five years. *Mission* describes the organization's current purpose. Understanding an organization's mission and strategy, including espoused values and goals, is important to understanding organization culture and how this ultimately influences workplace interactions and conflicts (Schein, 1983).

Research suggests that the level of complexity of an organization's mission can be related to employee perceptions of constructive versus destructive conflict dynamics in the organization. In a compelling study, Kugler and Brodbeck (2014) found that when organization statements describing vision and mission were low in integrative complexity (i.e. simple and concrete), employees in that organization perceived conflicts to be more competitive and not managed as cooperatively as compared to organizations with statements high in integrative complexity. This finding is consistent with previous studies at the interpersonal level linking low integrative complexity with destructive conflict dynamics (for example see Suedfeld, 2010), and suggests

there may be an opportunity for those tasked with drafting such statements in organizations to make a significant impact on how conflict dynamics unfold.

With regards to organization strategy, there is some evidence from a survey of executives across a number of BusinessWeek 1000 companies that the quality of the market strategies (i.e. formulation, innovativeness, and execution) can influence conflict processes: companies with higher quality strategies experience more functional task-related conflicts and less dysfunctional conflict among decision-makers (Menon, Bharadwaj & Howell, 1996). Another study found that, in the U.S., members of organizations oriented primarily around a strategy requiring moving quickly to secure new markets reported higher levels of conflict than organizations with more reactive market strategies (Dyer & Song, 1997). Additionally, this same study found that organizational strategies concerned more with securing existing market share for products and services, as compared with strategies around securing new markets or mixed strategic approaches, were related to members being more conflict avoidant (Dyer & Song, 1997).

Organizational Culture: *Organizational culture refers to the way an organization does things. It embodies the explicit rules (i.e. codes and policies within an employee manual) as well as the implicit rules (i.e. informal conduct, values or principles that are not discussed) that guide behavior in an organization* (Burke, 1992; Burke, 2011). It is the "pattern of basic assumptions… invented, discovered, or developed by a given group… as it learns to cope with problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (Schein, 1990; p. 111). Conflicts are built into the culture of any organization (Burns, 1978; De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008), and an organization's cultural processes can serve to promote certain types of conflict management strategies in employees. To illustrate, findings from a recent experimental study suggest that even subtle

changes in the complexity of the cultural rules and norms shaping negotiations can lead to significant differences in the constructiveness (high complexity rules) versus destructiveness (low complexity) of outcomes (Chung, Coleman & Gelfand, 2011).

Perhaps most critically relevant to this framework, recent research has provided strong evidence that organizations can develop *conflict cultures* that are collaborative, dominating or avoidant in nature (Gelfand et al., 2012; also see the *Leadership* element above). This research supports earlier theorizing by Gelfand, Leslie and Keller (2008) who conceptualized conflict cultures as "shared norms that specify how conflict should be managed in organizational settings" (p. 139). These conflict management norms can be classified along two dimensions: active versus passive engagement with conflicts, and agreeable (cooperative) versus disagreeable (competitive) approaches to conflict (Gelfand et al., 2008; see also Deutsch, 1973; 2014; Van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huismans, 1995). Under this framework, a more ideal norm of collaborative conflict is represented when employees in the organization engage with conflicts in both an active (i.e. engaged) and agreeable (cooperative) manner. In contrast, dominating cultures are also active, but employees engage with conflicts in a disagreeable or competitive manner. Finally, in avoidant cultures, there are more agreeable interactions around conflicts but this is in service to a norm of remaining passive when conflicts emerge. Interested readers are encouraged to refer Gelfand et al. (2008) for a more comprehensive overview of this framework.

Additional research suggests further cultural influences on conflict processes. For example, a firm's status as private or public can impact how organizational culture can influence conflict outcomes. A culture oriented around tasks has been found to reduce the negative impact of task-related conflicts (i.e. conflicts over the content of the work being done, including resource allocation, procedures, relevant information, etc.) in private firms, while a more socio-

emotionally oriented organizational culture has this effect in public organizations (Guerra, et al., 2005). The authors suggest that this difference is primarily attributable to the fact that private organizations, by nature, have much more goal-oriented cultures than public organizations. In other words, while task-related conflicts are inevitable in any organization (DeDreu & Gelfand, 2008), there is some evidence to suggest that the public or private nature of the organization can influence conflict processes through higher-level cultural norms.

Finally, how culture influences the nature of daily social interactions across organization units seems to be important as well. One study suggests that a cultural norm of more social interaction in an organization across groups increases the likelihood that conflicts will have more innovative outcomes (De Clercq, Thongpapanl, & Dimov, 2009). In other words, a culture that encourages social interaction and trust building across functional units heightens constructive conflict and innovation. Further research suggests the opposite situation has detrimental effects on organization conflict processes. When there is a prevalent culture of intergroup conflict, the widespread perceptions of intergroup conflict among employees results in negative relationships across groups as well as lower intragroup cohesiveness (Labianca et al., 1998).

Management Practices: *Management practices refer to the courses of action and behaviors that managers undertake daily* (Burke, 2011). This includes defining roles and tasks, and setting objectives so that organizational resources can be used efficiently to execute the organization's strategy (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Zaleznik, 1977). Management practices, which can vary considerably across countries, economic conditions and firms, are an integral part of an organization's processes and have been found to have a significant effect on organizational conflict dynamics. Relevant research in this area suggests three primary

considerations of managerial influence: fairness, emotions and trust.

First, with regards to fairness, findings indicate that perceived procedural fairness of management was important in promoting constructive conflict resolution, especially among those with a high need for cognitive closure (Giacomantonio, Pierro & Kruglanski, 2011). Information gathered about management fairness, such as the degree to which fairness is shown in decision-making processes, is especially relevant to employees high in the need for closure because it allows them to conserve energy otherwise required to gather and process other conflict-related information. Additionally, while avoidant management responses to conflict may have some positive effects on team performance because attention remains on the task (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001), there is evidence that this may also lead to perceptions of injustice (Chen & Tjosvold, 2002). Conversely, more cooperative approaches to conflict positively impact perceptions of justice (Chen & Tjosvold, 2002).

Equally important is the ability of managers to manage emotions in the workplace, as this facilitates awareness, acceptance and problem solving skills (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). The ability to manage emotions has been found to be negatively associated with conflict avoidance – individuals with a high ability to manage emotions were more likely to address conflicts, possibly because they were more comfortable dealing with the emotions arising from a confrontation (Sherman, 2009). Additionally, individuals high in ability to manage emotions are more likely to collaborate with others (Sherman, 2009). These findings suggest that emotional awareness and related skills training would help managers enhance collaboration and decrease conflict avoidance in their teams.

Finally, trust is another key factor in the role of management in organization conflicts. At the level of management teams, task conflict improves decision-making in teams with higher

levels of intragroup trust, while lower levels of trust can result in task conflicts escalating to more pernicious relationship conflicts (Simons & Peterson, 2000), which can result in a more destructive impact on team relations. Additionally, with regards to trust between managers and employees, when there is higher trust, managers tend to demonstrate more integrating conflict management styles, which in turn, encourage more positive work attitudes from employees (Chan, Huang & Ng, 2008).

Structure: *This refers to the arrangement of functions and employees into units and levels of responsibility, decision-making authority, communication and working relationships to ensure effective implementation of the organization's mission and strategy* (Burke, 2011). Antecedents to manifest conflict can often emerge from an organization's structure. Generally, according to Gelfand and colleagues (2008), collaborative conflict cultures are likely to be found in organizations with less centralized structures. This is because power is spread across organizational levels, empowering employees to deal with conflict and make decisions. In contrast, passive-aggressive conflict dynamics tend to emerge in bureaucratic organizations with high levels of centralization (Gelfand et al., 2008).

Research in for-profit contexts supports this assertion, finding that higher levels of centralization are related to more destructive conflict processes (Barclay, 1991; Menon et al., 1996). However there is evidence that too little centralization can also negatively impact conflict dynamics. For example, one study found that work teams structured to rotate leadership among members experienced less conflict than teams where leadership was allowed to emerge naturally (Erez, Lepine, & Elms, 2002). If conflicts arose within the teams were leadership was emergent, as compared to the teams that rotated leadership, members were less likely to engage constructively

with the inevitable disputes that arose. Similar findings come from research on self-managing teams, which suggests that, when in conflict, they tend to self-organize in maladaptive ways by decreasing the autonomy of individual members, while at the same time decreasing task interdependence between members – thereby further escalating the dynamic (Langfred, 2007). Finally, more broadly, there is evidence to suggestion that when organization structures promote high task interdependence, there is increased cooperative conflict management (Somech, Desivilya, & Lidogoster, 2009).

Lastly, there is some evidence to suggest that communication structures across organization units have important influences on conflict dynamics. Results from two studies suggest that increased barriers to communication between departments are related to higher levels of destructive conflict (Barclay, 1991; Menon et al., 1996). This relates to research examining how social network structures – whether formal or informal – can influence the degree of organizational conflict. In this research, it was found that low conflict organizations either have: 1) a higher number of strong intergroup ties, 2) consistent, homogeneous groups connected by strong ties, 3) one dominant group that mediates all other groups, or 4) a hierarchy that links groups serially and provides order (Nelson, 1989).

Systems (Policies & Procedures): *Systems are standardized policies and procedures designed to support and facilitate the work of organizational members. They include control systems for managing information, performance appraisals, goals, budgeting, rewards, and personnel allocation* (Burke, 2011). Some research has found that organizations with less rigid policies and procedures tend to encourage more collaborative conflict dynamics, whereas increased formalization tend to promote more passive-aggressive processes (Gelfand et al., 2008). However,

other research does not fully support this assertion. Results from two studies of for-profit organizations suggest that formalization tends to reduce destructive conflict processes (Barclay, 1991; Menon et al., 1996). There is a caveat to this in that having an overly bureaucratic system can result in frustration as employees feel they lack autonomy, leading to increased conflict between departments (Pinto, Pinto, & Prescott, 1993). The key seems to be to find an adequate balance of formalization: bureaucratic rules and procedures that clearly outline departmental responsibilities and provide structured and predictable ways to interact with other departments – especially for cross-departmental activities – which can mitigate potential conflicts (Gelfand et al., 2008). What this research suggests is that formalization processes can go too far, creating unintended consequences in the form of increasing, rather than decreasing, the probabilities for the emergence of destructive conflicts.

Research also suggests that reward systems in organizations can significantly impact organizational conflict. Incentive systems that reward departments for their achieving their own goals versus wider organizational goals, may result in conflicts of interest as motivations shift to addressing intra-department needs and goals over broader organization goals (Barclay, 1991). Generally, organizations with more collaborative processes tend to have reward structures based on cooperative goals, while individualistic reward systems tend to encourage more dominating conflict processes, especially when coupled with low formalization and decentralization (Gelfand et al., 2008).

Overall, having appropriate levels of formalization and properly oriented reward systems can foster cooperation and allow for more open-minded discussions, which can empower employees to view conflict as a means of probing problems, devising creative solutions, strengthening relationships, and learning from their experiences (Tjosvold, 2008).

Work-Unit Climate*: This refers to the collective perceptions, impressions, feelings and expectations of members in work teams, and includes perceived recognition of performance, involvement in decision-making processes, fair treatment and support within the work unit, and perceptions of how well the unit works with other units* (Burke, 1992; Burke, 2011). Climate differs from organizational culture as it occurs at the work-unit level and is mainly linked to the transactional level of human behavior, i.e. daily interactions and exchanges at work (Burke & Litwin, 1992). In other words, organization members conduct their daily work in functional units and teams, and as such, regardless of higher-level processes (such as organization culture), climates at the unit level can have a strong impact on individual conflict processes.

While an organization's culture influences conflict outcomes as part of the larger organization structure with more widespread effects, individual work units or teams can develop independent climates for constructive or destructive conflict outcomes. For instance, self-managing teams that adopt more cooperative conflict management styles tend to have more conflict efficacy among members (i.e., greater confidence in their ability to overcome conflicts), resulting in higher team performance than teams with more competitive approaches (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000). Cooperative and open social processes, as well as overall positive sentiments regarding the group, are associated with less destructive conflict dynamics (Jehn, Rispens & Thatcher, 2010). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that greater "team spirit" or a sense of connection and belonging with a team or department is related to more functional and constructive conflict processes (Menon et al., 1996; Somech et al., 2009). Finally, some research suggests that creative team climate variables such as member involvement,

playfulness, support for new ideas and risk taking, trust and openness, and debate are all related to lower levels of destructive conflict processes (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010).

With regard to the demographic makeup of teams, there is evidence that information sharing is enhanced, decision-making is improved and within-group divisions are weakened when groups have crosscut diversity structures (i.e. consisting of members across racial and job-function subgroups; Sawyer et al., 2006). However, research suggests this is a nuanced consideration. For example, groups with more demographic differences (e.g. race, gender, tenure) tend to have more relationship and emotional conflict (i.e. more destructive), while those with informational differences (e.g. educational background) tend to have more task-focused conflict (i.e. more constructive; Jehn et al., 1997; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Where diversity seems to be most detrimental is around differences in values, ideas of respect for others and norms for handling conflict, with research suggesting that teams composed of individuals with similar values, high trust and mutual respect, and functional norms for handling conflict have the most constructive conflict profiles (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

The above summary and synthesis of the literature provides an overview of empirical research findings describing relationships between higher-level organizational processes and conflict outcomes at lower levels of organization functioning. We believe that by organizing the findings within the Burke-Litwin organizational framework, we are offering a parsimonious structure to begin to evaluate existing organization processes and to apply findings where appropriate. Additionally, it is our hope that reviewing the research in this way will provide a foundation for further research in this area. By highlighting emerging themes in the research, it is easier to gain an understanding of limitations and gaps, inspiring further research. In the

following section, we explore, at the practical level, how the insights gained from this empirical review might be incorporated into practice.

Implications for Practice: The Systemic Organizational Conflict Inventory

The original purpose of the Burke-Litwin model was to provide a conceptual framework for assessing organization processes at multiple levels in order to assess contributions to performance and guide systemic change initiatives. In order to distill the empirical findings for practical use, we offer the following inventory of questions to guide exploration and assessment of systemic influences on organizational conflict processes. The inventory is provided in Table 1.
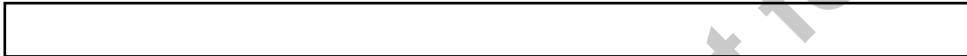
Table 1: Systemic Organizational Conflict Inventory

Burke-Litwin Factor	Related Assessment Question
External Environment	• How volatile is the market or organizational environment? • What are the conflict-relevant national-cultural influences on the organization? • How stable and secure is the local community surrounding the organization?
Leadership	• What are more prominent conflict management styles of the more visible organizational leaders – dominant, collaborative, avoidant? • How charismatic are the organization leaders? • To what extent does leadership employ more participative approaches to decision making?
	•
Mission and Strategy	• To what extent do the mission and vision of the organization demonstrate higher levels of integrative complexity? • What types of market strategies is the organization pursuing (i.e. formulation, innovativeness, and execution)? • To what extent does the organizations' strategy emphasize a strong need to capture new markets?
Organizational Culture	• To what extent can the nature of the conflict culture of the organization be characterized as collaborative, dominating or avoidant? • Is the organization private, public, or not-for-profit? Is the culture

	appropriate for this context? • Does the organization demonstrate a norm of social interaction that encourages or discourages social interaction and trust building across functional units?
Management Practices	• Are middle managers and direct supervisors behaving in ways that demonstrate a sufficient concern for fairness and justice? • Do middle managers and direct supervisors demonstrate sufficient social-emotional competencies? • Are middle managers and direct supervisors considered trustworthy?
Structure	• To what degree is the degree of centralization of organization decision-making structures or bureaucracy impacting conflict dynamics in the organization? Is there too much or too little? • To what extent do the organization structures promote high task and reward interdependence among employees? • To what degree do the channels of communication across the organization evidence: 1) a higher number of strong intergroup ties, 2) consistent, homogeneous groups connected by strong ties, 3) one dominant group that mediates all other groups, or 4) a hierarchy that links groups serially and provides order?
Systems	• To what extent are the policies and procedures of the organization either too rigid or insufficiently formal? • To what degree do the incentive systems reward departments for their achieving their own (sub)goals versus wider organizational goals? • Are reward and incentive systems individually oriented or oriented around broader team and organizational goals?
Work-Unit Climate	• Do teams demonstrate cooperative conflict styles with more open social processes? • Is there a sufficient level of team spirit, with higher levels of member involvement, trust and openness, and sufficient support for risk-taking and debate? • Are team diversity structures sufficient based on the overall demographic and functional composition of the organization?

This series of questions is by no means offered as comprehensive, but rather as suggestive of the types of questions leaders, managers and consultants might explore, given the empirical findings summarized in our review. We suggest that they be used to supplement other modes of exploration, diagnosis and assessment while engaging in an organizational conflict assessment.

Data collection in organizations aimed at addressing these questions can take many forms including interviews (across multiple levels), focus groups, observations, examination of human resource and conflict management systems records, and media and industry reports. Additionally, some of these questions may be better, or at least more easily, explored by surveying organization member perceptions. Surveys allow for a broader assessment of the organization, and can provide unique insights both in terms of meta-level perceptions, and when organized based on department, unit and/or team level placement, can highlight "hotspots" for more targeted inquiry.

Implications for Practice: Surveying Conflict Indicators

Finally, in order to facilitate a multi-method approach, we scanned the literature to identify existing survey measures that could be used to assess each of the eight factors summarized above, based on perceptions of organization members. As with overall inventory presented in Table 1, the survey instrument we offer here is designed to be as comprehensive as possible, while containing a minimal number of questions so as to not reduce response rates. Table 2 provides a listing of the measures identified. Items and directions for each of the measures listed are published in the source provided, making it possible for interested readers to incorporate these measures into an organization inquiry process without having to generate new survey measures. Additionally, using existing survey measures also provides the added benefit for researchers to be able to link ongoing field research to other findings, which we hope will facilitate the development of more robust theoretical models over time.

Table 2: Potential Scales for Measuring Systemic Conflict Indicators

B-L Element	Source	Scale	Subscale	Items
External Environment	Waldman, Ramirez, House and Puranam (2001)	Perceived Environmental Uncertainty Scale	Perceived Environmental Uncertainty	13-16
Leadership	Gelfand et al (2012)	Leader Conflict Behaviors Scale	Collaborative	1-4
			Dominating	5-7
			Avoidant	8-11
	Patterson et al. (2005)	Organizational Climate Measure©	Involvement	1-6
Mission & Strategy	Pandey & Wright, 2006	[No Title]	Org Goal Ambiguity	4-6
	Kim & Lee (2005)	Work Attitudes Toward NHSAs (Nonprofit Human Services Agency)	Mission Attachment	1-4
	Patterson et al. (2005)	Organizational Climate Measure©	Innovation & Flexibility	39-44
			Outward Focus	45-49
Organizational Culture	Gelfand et al. (2012)	Conflict Cultures Scale	Collaborative	1-4
			Dominating	5-9
			Avoidant	10-13
	Patterson et al. (2005)	Organizational Climate Measure©	Integration	6-10
	Hempel, Zhang and Tjosvold, (2009)	Cooperative between-teams conflict management		1-5
		Competitive between-teams conflict management		1-4
	Jaworski & Kohli (1993)	Interdepartmental Conflict		1-7
		Interdepartmental Connectedness		1-7
Management Practices	Bishop and Scott (2006)	[No Title]	Satisfaction with Supervision	1-4
	Tsui, Pearce, Porter and Tripoli (1997)	[No Title]	Supervisory Support	1-7
Structure	Miller and Salkind (2002)	Hage and Aiken Formalization Inventory	Formalization/ Job Codification	1-5
			Formalization/ Specificity of Job Descriptions	10-14
	Pandey and Wright (2006)	[No Title]	Centralization	1-3
	Patterson et al. (2005)	Organizational Climate Measure©	Autonomy	1-5
Systems/ Policies/	Patterson et al. (2005)	Organizational Climate Measure©	Formalization	30-34

Procedures	Tsui et al. (1997)	[No Title]	Perceived Fairness	1-16
Work Unit Climate	Hempel, Zhang & Tjosvold, (2009)	Cooperative within-team conflict management		1-5
		Competitive within-team conflict management		1-4
	Tsui et al. (1997)	[No Title]	Trust in Co-Workers	1-5
	Bishop & Scott (2000)	[No Title]	Task Interdependence	1-4

New Organizational Conflict Frontiers: Cross-Level Mechanisms and Nonlinear Dynamics

While we believe we have provided a unique and valuable contribution to the

organization conflict and multi-level process literature, it is important to point out that this

review also highlights certain limitations to existing understandings of organization conflict

processes that require further theoretical development and research . This limitation centers on

the nature of multi-level conflict processes, and the recognition that these processes are

developed and maintained by top-down, middle-out and bottom-up processes. While our review

has focused essentially on top-down processes, in practice, multiple types of cross-level

interactions must be considered.

For example, the concept of nested organizational structures implies that all micro

phenomena (such as individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) are *embedded* in their broader

contexts and are either directly or indirectly influenced by aspects of their context (Mueller &

Lawler, 1999). Similarly, most macro phenomena (like dysfunctional organizational cultures) are

thought to *emerge* through the interaction of lower-level elements (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

Over time, certain patterns (at any level) may become *automatized*, thus influencing thoughts,

feelings, and behaviors without the effects of either higher or lower level elements (Carver &
Scheier, 2002).

Further, top-down, middle-out and bottom-up forces may operate in tandem to influence
phenomena at different stages of development of an organization (Carver & Scheier, 2002). For
instance, the level of destructiveness of an organization's conflict culture is more likely to be
based on bottom-up emergent processes (individually determined through social interactions)
either early on in its development or when the system is undergoing radical change (such as after
unforeseen or unprecedented crises). At these points, the system has weaker, less stable norms
and so individual-level sense making and lower-level social interactions are more likely to have a
greater impact on the trajectory of events (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Over time, however, as
hostilities and negative attitudes become legitimized and institutionalized by group leaders (as in
statements of policy), norms for destructive conflict may begin to reside more prominently at
higher levels in the system. When these attitudes become normative and part of the selection and
socialization of new employees (through shared beliefs, myths, and ideologies), they begin to
rise to the level of "truths". Thus, at any point in the progression of a conflict culture in an
organization, its primary source of destructiveness may be located at a higher (policies), lower
(current attitudes and emotions), or automatic (unquestioned ideologies) level.

Finally, Kozlowski and Klein (2000) contend that phenomena at lower-levels tend to
have more rapid dynamics than both higher-level and emergent phenomena. Thus, it tends to be
easier to stimulate and view conflict transmission and change in lower-level elements. Bottom-
up emergent processes require individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors to combine through
social interaction, which requires a much longer time scale. Thus, although individual-level
interventions such as conflict resolution trainings and bias awareness courses can affect

individual transformation swiftly, they will require much more time to impact a systemic conflict culture, than, say, targeting a change in leadership or policy at higher levels.

Conclusion

While a large body of theory and research has been devoted to understanding the genesis, maintenance and resolution of organization conflict, most of these efforts have not been able to incorporate the requisite level of complexity that is necessary for fully understanding organization conflict processes at multiple levels simultaneously. It is understandable, for practical reasons, that complexity is often neglected in favor of simplicity in order to generate theory, produce research, and determine courses of action in practice. What we have provided here serves a starting point for introducing more complexity into existing research and practice in organizational conflict, by providing a comprehensive review of empirical research specifically focusing on the influence of higher-level organization process on conflict dynamics at lower levels – a perspective currently lacking in the organizational conflict literature. By focusing our review within the organization elements identified by the Burke-Litwin model, our aim has been to structure the review in a way that grounds the findings within a broader, systemically based, theoretical framework.

Although there is broad empirical support for this approach in the literature, there is much work to be done. The Burke-Litwin model, while well established among organization change practitioners, has not been tested with regards to addressing organizational conflict processes. Further research is needed that takes a systemic-level framework into the field, contributing to further refinements and improvements of existing models. Additionally, while we have offered resources to examine influences on conflict processes in organizations at multiple

levels, at this stage we are unable to provide an overall assessment tool for gaining a better understanding of each the factors in the model simultaneously. The field would benefit greatly from the development of such an assessment tool. Our hope, in putting forth this proposal, is that researchers and practitioners alike will identify with, and find value in, this framework and will use it to further understandings of how to recognize and address complex conflict dynamics in organizations.

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