

# 10

## PERSPECTIVES ON WORKGROUP CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION

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Workgroups are the basic building blocks of today's organizations. They are the units in which the work of organization—planning, design, development, operations, production, distribution, sales, service delivery, human resources, and so on—is done. Conflict in workgroups is of interest in both its positive and negative aspects. The negative aspect of conflict in workgroups is the disruption it causes, which has the potential to break down workgroups, reduce performance, and make members dissatisfied and unhappy. This must be weighed against the positive aspects of conflict, the new ideas and procedures it often introduces or sparks, the stronger workgroup and increased trust and capabilities that result from successfully navigating a difficult conflict, and the increased participation and voice that well-managed conflicts afford members.

In conducting this review, we were surprised by the wide range of disciplines and the generations of scholars who have investigated this subject. We were also struck by the way several research traditions have pursued their particular

agendas largely in isolation from each other. In sorting through the various pockets of research on workgroup conflict, we discerned three broad lines of work that this review attempts to articulate and discuss: instrumental, developmental, and political perspectives. Examining workgroup conflict from this integrative framework can help researchers to understand different points of view and increase theoretical interplay among perspectives. Such a framework can benefit practice by broadening our understanding of conflict and its effect on group processes and by suggesting novel approaches to management of workgroup conflict. This chapter begins by defining workgroup conflict before briefly introducing each of the three perspectives. Then, the chapter examines research in each of the perspectives across a range of disciplines. Finally, we attempt to show lines of intersection and potential for future research.

### Defining Workgroups

A workgroup is a set of three or more people who carry out common tasks in an organization.

## 268 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

This definition highlights several important features of workgroups that we will briefly discuss by way of introduction.

First, the nature of their work has a strong influence on the goals, structure, and processes of workgroups (Argote & McGrath, 1993). Characteristics of work that influence the occurrence and impact of conflict include (a) term of the group—whether the group is formed for a temporary project such as a task force or for an ongoing, recurring task such as an inspection and repair team in a factory; (b) goal congruence—degree of agreement on goals of the group and standards by which its work should be evaluated; (c) means congruence—degree of agreement on how the work should be done; and (d) task interdependence—the degree to which the task requires members to coordinate their activities. Disagreement on goals and/or means is a major source of conflict in workgroups, and effective management of such conflicts is generally presumed in the literature to increase group effectiveness (e.g., Amason, 1996; de Dreu & Weingart, 2003). As we will see below, when conflict occurs in workgroups, the higher the level of task interdependence, the more serious the potential effects of conflict on the group and the less groups are able to avoid or suppress conflict. Short-term workgroups are more likely to be able to suppress or avoid confronting the conflict than long-term workgroups.

Workgroups vary considerably in terms of size. Three is the minimum size considered to be a group in this review, but typical sizes of workgroups vary widely: Amason (1996) reported an average size of about 6 in his sample; Lovelace, Shapiro, and Weingart (2001) and Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, and Gibson (2004) averaged 10; Panteli's (2004) virtual teams averaged 25; and one virtual team studied by Ngwenyama (1998) had 79 members.

Members of workgroups use a number of different communication channels. Most research has focused on groups that interact primarily face to face. A number of recent studies, however, have focused on virtual teams that interact via phone, e-mail, instant messaging, text- and video-conferencing, and various other types of specialized groupware. Members of virtual teams are typically dispersed across different locations, with subgroups of members co-located. The

dynamics of conflict in virtual teams are somewhat different from those in co-located teams that meet mostly face to face.

Workgroups differ in significant ways from the experimental groups commonly studied in conflict research. Members of workgroups are more likely to have vested interests in the group than are members of lab groups. Laboratory groups are artificial constructions of the researcher, while workgroups originate as an outgrowth of organizational needs, and their *raison d'être* is grounded in consequential work and significant purpose. Most laboratory groups have no or limited history, while many workgroups have considerable history and traditions. Finally, members of most workgroups have an expectation of future interaction and experience real consequences from their behavior in the group, while members of most laboratory groups know that their time in their group is limited (even if they are not sure when the group will terminate) and that most consequences of their behavior will not stay with them once they leave the lab. For these reasons, research on workgroup conflict provides a useful reference point for the more numerous laboratory studies of conflict. It enables us to make judgments regarding the extent to which experimental findings hold in the "real world" and suggests important new questions to be explored in more controlled environments.

This review includes only studies of actual workgroups situated in private and public organizations. It does not include studies of workgroups concocted in the lab or student groups engaged in class projects.

### PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICT IN WORKGROUPS

Three scholarly traditions on workgroup conflict can be distinguished. Each advances a particular view of the nature of conflict in workgroups, the sources or causes of workgroup conflict, and the effects of conflict on group outcomes. The perspectives also differ in terms of whether they focus on public or private aspects of conflict and on whether they regard conflict as primarily based on rational or nonrational grounds (Kolb & Putnam, 1992).

The *instrumental* perspective views workgroup conflict in terms of its effects on group performance and related outcomes. This leads to a distinction between productive and destructive conflict that is fundamental to this perspective. Productive conflict originates in disagreements concerning the goals of the group (ends), how the group should go about its work (means), or over the content of the work itself. If properly managed, productive conflict promotes the group's ability to do its work effectively. Destructive conflict, which breaks down the group's capacity to work effectively, originates from relational problems among members and from members' individualistic agendas. While productive conflict deals with the group's work, destructive conflict centers on non-work aspects. Productive conflict interaction focuses on substantive issues and has as its goal a resolution of the conflict that removes blocks to group effectiveness, preserves and strengthens the group system, and meets members' individual needs. In destructive conflict interaction, on the other hand, parties are preoccupied with defeating one another and are focused on personalities and grudges.

This distinction between productive and destructive conflict runs deep in the literature on conflict in natural settings and can be traced to the thoughts of Louis Coser (1956) and Morton Deutsch (1983). More recently, Jehn (1995) distinguished task and relational conflict along these lines and presented evidence that task conflict had positive impacts on group performance, while relational conflict had negative impacts.

The instrumental perspective focuses primarily on what Kolb and Putnam (1992) termed public conflict, conflicts that are overt and visible and that have the potential to involve open confrontation among parties. It favors direct confrontation of conflicts and presumes that conflicts can be broken into issues that can then be addressed through open discussion and negotiation.

The instrumental perspective is predisposed to a rational orientation toward conflict that views conflict as a "conscious, premeditated activity guided by individual decision and choice" and "underscores the planning of maneuvers and the making of strategic choices in managing disputes" (Kolb & Putnam, 1992, p. 20). Rationality provides another ground on

which productive and destructive conflicts are distinguished. For the instrumental perspective, a productive conflict is one that is dealt with through rational analysis of issues, interests, and options with the goal of attaining a resolution that satisfies members' interests as well as the master interest, group performance. In contrast, destructive conflict is viewed as nonrational or irrational. Destructive conflict does not take the needs of the group as a whole or of others into account. It sidetracks the group's attention from its instrumental goals and onto the conflict itself and fans members' emotional fires so that they can no longer conduct themselves in a civil or rational manner.

The second tradition, the *developmental* perspective, views conflict as a natural part of workgroup development. Conflict is treated as a phase or key juncture in a group's lifecycle that, properly handled, offers an opportunity for growth to the group and its members. According to the developmental perspective, conflicts arise due to commonly experienced challenges or dilemmas that members must address as they try to build an effective group. The developmental perspective, too, distinguishes constructive and destructive conflicts, but on quite different grounds from the instrumental perspective. For the developmental perspective, conflict is productive if it surfaces the problems associated with group challenges and dilemmas and enables the group to resolve them and move to a higher stage of development. Hence the productivity of a developmental conflict depends on how it is handled, which determines whether the group and its members will grow or will remain "stuck" in a conflicted state that prevents them from reaching their potential. While the development theory of productive approaches to managing group conflict includes confronting the issues, such confrontations are often neither rational nor non-emotional. The developmental perspective emphasizes the importance of surfacing feelings along with issues, on the assumption that only by dealing with both can progress truly be made.

Research in the developmental perspective does not focus on group performance, but rather on the progress of the group as a functioning entity and the growth of individual members as a result of participating in the group. An implicit

## 270 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

assumption is that group and individual member growth are necessary conditions for positive outcomes in terms of performance, member satisfaction, and group maintenance. Whereas for the instrumental perspective the encompassing organization is a source of goals and performance demands, in the developmental perspective the broader organization is a source of problems regarding group identity and serves as a stimulus to which the group reacts as it works through problems. In some phases, members unify in opposition to perceived external enemies, which may be other groups, managers, or employees outside the group. In reacting to these external threats, the group develops its own identity and understanding of itself. It may project its own problems and fears onto external groups and individuals, embodying them as symbols or representatives of its problems. Coming to terms with or defeating these external threats enables the group to advance.

The developmental perspective privileges what Kolb and Putnam (1992) termed private conflict, conflicts that are covert and hidden, often dealt with initially by avoidance. Growth occurs through making the private public (at least within the purview of the group) and coming to terms with surfaced tensions or conflicts. In the same vein, the developmental perspective focuses on nonrational aspects of conflict. Conflicts are about needs and overcoming problems that would seem irrational and potentially counterproductive to the instrumental perspective. Conflict is more visceral in the developmental perspective than in the instrumental view.

The *political* perspective views conflict as a struggle for power in the workgroup. In some cases this struggle is conceived in terms of one social group versus another within and across workgroups, for example union versus management. In other cases the struggle is conceived in individual terms as the efforts of some individuals to control the group and of others to overcome the tyranny of a strong leader or to win consideration of minority viewpoints. The political perspective acknowledges that many conflicts in workgroups take the form of conflicts over goals and over means for reaching goals. However, it views these as covers for deeper, more fundamental conflicts over power in the group. When the dominant person or subgroup

wins, its power is affirmed and even strengthened and its dominance reproduced. When a challenging person or subgroup wins, there is a possibility that the power of the dominant will be undermined to some extent and space for other voices created. The political perspective defines productive conflict as that which surfaces and challenges dominance and that which enables alternative voices or points of view from those of the dominant group or person to be aired. A conflict that is resolved in a perfectly productive manner, according to the instrumental perspective, may well be regarded as very unproductive or even destructive from the political point of view if it reaffirms or strengthens group domination and disconfirms alternative viewpoints. For most political theorists, a good resolution is one in which all sides are accorded voice, and power is either balanced or does not enter into the equation.

The distinction between dominating and less powerful subgroups or individuals often derives from existing social categorizations. For instance, older members may dominate younger, one ethnic group may dominate a different one, one profession may dominate several others (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005). Dominance structures may also evolve in the group itself, however, independent of external social categories. There is a tendency in political studies of workgroups to valorize the less powerful groups at the expense of the dominating ones. Feminist studies of groups, for example, tend to presume that women's ways of handling conflict are superior to those of men and are suppressed by male domination of groups at the expense of collaboration and integrative approaches (e.g., Meyers et al., 2005). This is natural, since the dominant groups' and individuals' ideas and approaches are openly expressed, and so it is important to argue for the validity of the ideas and approaches of the less powerful. However, political theorists divide as to whether they consider the less powerful group superior to the dominant group or individual.

The political view is that conflict management first and foremost revolves around power. Hence, understanding workgroup conflict involves understanding how power dynamics play out within groups. A long tradition analyzes power in terms of the bases of power and the influence

strategies and tactics these bases support (Barge & Keyton, 1994). Political approaches also look past these surface maneuvers to the deeper processes underlying them, processes in which certain positions are given presumption over others and thereby affect the effectiveness of various strategies and tactics. In a workgroup in which a single manager has traditionally made all the final decisions, rational argument will not be a particularly effective influence tactic, while appeal to previous decisions may. A workgroup that frames decisions as problems to solve will give rational argument greater weight, while appeal to previous decisions may be disparaged as uncreative. Framings are not arbitrary: They are determined by who holds power in the group. The dominant group will tend to favor framings that play to its strengths (reason or authority, in the two examples) and that sustain its legitimacy. Resistance by the less powerful group often takes the form of advocating different framings that support other types of influence. The political perspective attempts to "see past" surface appearances to the more fundamental dynamics operating within the power structures of workgroups, which are often hidden.

The political perspective focuses on private conflict, in Kolb and Putnam's (1992) terminology. It conceives of workgroup conflict as a struggle over deeper, often hidden, layers of the group, of which members are often not aware and, if aware, reluctant to acknowledge. Unlike the developmental perspective, however, the political perspective views conflict as a rational process in which different groups or individuals attempt to realize their interests. The political perspective assumes that groups and individuals can come to know their interests and can pursue them rationally. The political view of interests differs from the problems dealt with in the developmental perspective, which are often contradictory and paradoxical. The political perspective, while taking a rational approach, also acknowledges that ideologies may prevent individuals and groups from recognizing their true interests, influencing them instead to adopt and serve the interests of the dominant group. Critical analysis and education may be required to help individuals and groups become aware of their true interests. Like the developmental perspective, the political perspective often displays

an emancipatory motive in that it seeks to help individuals and groups (both dominant and less powerful) grow past their preconceptions. In this case the goal is not personal growth, but development of influence skills, (sometimes) redistribution of power, and the creation of processes that ensure that all points of view can be voiced and have influence in the group.

For the most part, the instrumental, developmental, and political perspectives have developed independently of one another. Studies in the three perspectives tend to focus on different types of questions, use different designs, and appear in different journals. As a result, while each perspective obviously has insights that would be valuable to the other two, they have followed parallel paths with remarkably little dialogue or influence across perspectives. The following review summarizes and analyzes research in each perspective separately, and the final section considers possible relationships, debates, and points of cross-fertilization.

#### RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT WITHIN THE INSTRUMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Studies in this perspective have been concerned primarily with conflict-outcome relationships that contribute to organizational effectiveness. They have emphasized outcomes such as group performance, member satisfaction with the group, intent to remain in the organization, and building group capabilities to perform well in the future. Most studies have gone beyond simple conflict-outcome hypotheses to study moderators of this relationship such as task or diversity, or mediators such as conflict management style and communication processes. A major theme through these studies is that the effects of conflict on outcomes depend on how conflict is managed by the workgroup. This section illustrates the instrumental perspective by reviewing antecedents of conflict, impacts on group outcomes, conflict and diversity, and conflict in virtual teams. The section concludes by reflecting on this perspective.

*Antecedents of conflict.* A number of studies provide evidence on antecedents of conflict in workgroups. Amason and Sapienza (1997)



## 272 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

found a positive association between team size and level of conflict. Stewart and Barrick (2000) reported that degree of interdependence among members was associated positively with conflict. Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin (1999) found that workgroups with routine tasks had higher levels of conflict than those with nonroutine tasks. Diversity among members also promotes conflict. Level of workgroup conflict has been found to be associated positively with diversity in terms of functional department (Lovelace et al., 2001; Pelled et al., 1999), knowledge base (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), social category such as race, gender, culture, and ethnicity (Ayoko, Hartel, & Callan, 2002; Garcia-Prieto, Bellard, & Schneider, 2003; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled et al., 1999), and values (Jehn et al., 1999). On the darker side, Glomb and Liao (2003) found that members of group home health care teams were more likely to be aggressive if they were aggressed against. The overall level of aggression in the workgroup predicted the likelihood that individual members would engage in aggressive behavior. Glomb and Liao explained this as a function of an exchange process. Finally, Pelled et al. (1999) found that longevity of a workgroup was associated negatively with level of conflict.

*Impacts of conflict on workgroup outcomes.* Stimulated by Jehn's (1995) influential report, a number of recent studies have focused on the effects of conflict on workgroup outcomes. These studies demonstrate the direct effects of various types of conflict on outcomes as well as the influence of moderator variables on conflict and outcomes, moderators such as task type, internal structure, members' attitudes, and group norms. Jehn (1995) studied 79 workgroups and 26 management teams in a large freight transportation firm and found that task and relationship conflict had different associations with group outcomes. She found that both types of conflict had negative associations with member satisfaction and intent to remain with the firm, but that task conflict had a positive (slightly curvilinear) association with group performance, while relationship conflict had no significant association with performance. While task conflict had no association with members' expressed liking for one another, relationship

conflict had a significant negative association. Jehn also reported that the degree to which conflicts were resolved had a positive association with satisfaction, liking, and intent to remain with the organization. Together, these results suggest that properly managed task conflict could improve group performance while avoiding negative outcomes. Relationship conflict, on the other hand, had primarily negative impacts on workgroups, and the implication was that it should be avoided as much as possible. These results were largely replicated in a follow-up analysis (Jehn, 1997).

Several subsequent studies provide more evidence about the association of conflict with workgroup outcomes. In a study of 47 manufacturing teams, Stewart and Barrick (2000) found that the level of conflict in these teams was negatively associated with performance as rated by supervisors. Pelled et al. (1999) studied 45 process improvement teams in the electronics industry and found a positive association between task conflict and performance as rated by supervisors, but no relationship between emotional conflict and performance. A study of 43 cross-functional product development teams in the electronics industry by Lovelace et al. (2001) found that for their entire sample task disagreement was related negatively to innovativeness as rated by managers. Yet for teams that dealt with disagreements collaboratively and in which members felt free to express doubts, task disagreement was associated positively with innovativeness. This relationship did not hold for groups that met disagreement with contentious communication and whose members did not feel free to express doubts about the project. Amason (1996) studied 53 top management teams in the food processing and furniture industries and found positive associations between level of (task-related) cognitive conflict and perceived decision quality, consensus, degree of understanding of other members' positions, and affective acceptance of other members. Affective (relationship) conflict was correlated negatively with decision quality and affective acceptance of other members.

Studies have also examined the relationship between task and relational conflict. Amason and Sapienza (1997) found strong associations between affective and cognitive conflict

in a study of 48 top management teams, as did Pelled et al. (1999). Simons and Peterson (2000) also reported a positive association between task and relationship conflict in their study of 91 top managers in the hotel industry. Trust moderated this relationship: For teams that had developed high levels of trust, the relationship of task and relationship conflict was nonsignificant, while it was positive for teams with lower levels of trust. A meta-analysis by de Dreu and Weingart (2003) found a mean correlation between task and relationship conflict of .54. They also found that when the task-relationship conflict correlation was high, task conflict had a more negative association with performance than when it was low.

In an attempt to sort out the results on conflict and group performance, de Dreu and Weingart (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 studies through 2001. They found that overall both task and relationship conflict had an average correlation of  $-.22$  with group performance and more substantial negative correlations with member satisfaction. As with all meta-analyses, the results give an overall assessment of effect sizes, but are hardly the final word, since they may gloss over results of specific studies that show particularly strong effects or striking insights. De Dreu and Weingart also found several moderator variables.

Several variables have been found to moderate or influence the impacts of conflict on performance. One is the nature of the group's task. Jehn (1995) found that task conflict had a positive effect on the performance of groups performing nonroutine tasks and negative effects on the performance of groups with routine tasks. She interpreted this as evidence that task conflict enhances critical evaluation of ideas, which is important to groups with nonroutine tasks. De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found that the negative effects of both task and relational conflict on performance were stronger for teams engaged in high uncertainty tasks such as decision making than in teams engaged in low uncertainty tasks such as production. Moreover, relationship conflict was more damaging than task conflict in teams with high uncertainty tasks than in those with low uncertainty tasks.

Internal structure of the group also moderates the conflict-performance relationship. Jehn (1995) found that for highly interdependent

groups (a structure suited for groups with nonroutine work), the positive effects of task conflict and the negative effects of relationship conflict were heightened. Janssen, van de Vliert, and Veenstra (1999) had 102 managers recall decisions involving conflict in their management teams. They found that in teams with high levels of interdependence in goal achievement, high levels of task and personal conflict were related positively to the level of integrative behavior, which in turn was associated positively with quality and acceptance of the group decision.

Dooley and Fryxell (1999) suggested that members' attitudes toward their groups moderate the relationship of conflict to performance. Their study of 86 strategic decision-making teams in hospitals unveiled a positive relationship between dissent and decision quality in teams whose members had high levels of loyalty and commitment and who attributed competence to one another. Teams whose members had low levels of loyalty and commitment and did not perceive other members to be competent exhibited a negative association between dissent and decision quality.

Norms regarding communication and conflict management also influence the impacts of conflict on group effectiveness. Jehn (1995, 1997) found that the positive effect of task conflict and the negative effects of relationship conflict were stronger in groups with norms favoring openness than in those that did not have such norms. She also reported that groups with norms favoring avoidance of conflict did not exhibit the negative effects of relationship conflict on satisfaction and liking. Stewart and Barrick (2000) found that level of conflict and quality of communication predicted group performance, suggesting that teams with open communication systems handled differences more effectively than teams that were less open. Lovelace et al. (2001) interpreted the results of their study (summarized above) to suggest that collaborative rather than contentious communication in response to disagreements is "one way to signal norms about the consequences of disagreement and dissent" (p. 782). Of interest, they found no correlation between collaborative communication and freedom to express doubts in their new product teams, implying that some

## 274 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

groups collaborate to confront issues while others do so to avoid conflict.

Other studies have also examined the role of group norms as a moderator of the effects of conflict on performance, focusing specifically on open, cooperative communication. Amason and Sapienza (1997) found a positive association between openness and degree of cognitive conflict in top management teams. Their research also sheds lights on norms related to teamwork: They found a negative association between mutuality—the degree to which members feel joint responsibility and share goals—and affective conflict. Teams with high mutuality and openness had the lowest levels of affective conflict. Alper, Tjosvold, and Law (2000) classified 61 self-managed teams from the production department of an electronic manufacturer into those that took a cooperative approach to conflict—characterized by an emphasis on understanding all points of view, orientation to joint benefit, and finding a solution acceptable to everyone—and those that took a competitive approach—characterized by a win-lose orientation and use of pressure and intimidation. Groups adopting a cooperative approach had higher levels of “conflict efficacy”—a belief that the team could manage conflict effectively—than competitive groups. In turn, groups with a cooperative approach received higher ratings of effectiveness from supervisors than those with a competitive approach. Milton and Westphal (2005) found that workgroups in which members expressed high levels of confirmation for each other experienced less conflict and more cooperation. Kuhn and Poole (2000) studied 10 quality improvement teams from a government agency and a large corporation. They found that teams that developed norms favoring integrative conflict management made more effective decisions than those that developed norms favoring competition or avoidance of conflict. Perhaps the most famous study of norms related to conflict and group performance is Janis’s (1982) research on groupthink. The groupthink syndrome is based on norms that value consensus above all else. It is reinforced by a number of group interaction patterns, including bolstering the preferred alternative, undercutting those who raise objections, assuming the group is infallible, and yielding to the leader.

Regarding norms for dealing with conflict, Tjosvold’s (1993; Tjosvold, Wedley, & Field, 1986) extensive research on constructive controversy provides a holistic model of openness in workgroups. The theory of constructive controversy posits that group performance is directly dependent on open confrontation of issues and critical discussion of different points of view on a problem or decision. In constructive controversy parties discuss differences cooperatively, consider opposing views without bias, and attempt to achieve full understanding of other members’ points of view. They work for mutual benefit and try to integrate others’ views and ideas. Tjosvold et al. (1986) found that while simply involving members in decisions did not necessarily improve decision making, the degree to which groups engaged in constructive controversy was associated with effective decision making, accounting for more than 40% of the variance in decision effectiveness. Alper, Tjosvold, and Law (1998) found that self-managed teams that engaged in constructive controversy were more effective than those that did not. One difficulty with the concept of constructive controversy is that it is quite complex and as a result it is difficult to determine which particular aspects of the construct are responsible for group performance.

To summarize the studies on conflict and workgroup outcomes, there is clear evidence that conflict affects outcomes. While studies fairly consistently find a negative relationship between relationship or emotional conflict and outcomes, the record for task conflict is mixed, with some studies finding positive and some negative impacts. The impacts of process conflict have received much less attention, so it is difficult to draw clear conclusions. There is a good deal of evidence that how workgroups deal with conflict affects outcomes, and the studies reviewed here suggest that the best approach is to confront the conflict openly and promote open, cooperative communication concerning issues and options—exactly the advice given by most conflict management texts (e.g., Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005; Wilmot & Wilmot, 2001). This is comforting for those who have used the normatively based concepts in these texts but, as we will see below, may also be cause for concern.



*Diversity and workgroup conflict.* A large body of research is concerned with diversity in workgroups, and a major theme is diversity and conflict. As noted previously, diversity is a common source of conflict in workgroups, and most reviews of diversity in teams make reference to conflict or potential conflict (e.g., Larkey, 1996). In workgroup research, diversity has been conceptualized both in terms of observable characteristics such as gender, age, and race and also in terms of underlying characteristics such as beliefs, perspectives, values, functional specialty, profession, and experience (Oetzel, 2002). This review will trace the literature that explores all of these characteristics, describe how identity might be related to group diversity, and finally, consider how diversity can be practically managed.

Several studies have considered the effects of different types of diversity on workgroup conflict. Pelled et al. (1999; Pelled, 1996) studied the effects of diversity in terms of functional background, job tenure, race, gender, and age on task and emotional conflict in 45 process improvement teams from the electronics divisions of three major corporations. They found that functional diversity was related positively to task conflict and that task conflict was positively associated with group performance as rated by the team's manager. Racial and job tenure diversity were associated positively with emotional conflict, while age diversity was related negatively to emotional conflict. There was no association between emotional conflict and performance.

In a study of 90 workgroups from a moving company, Jehn et al. (1999) found that informational diversity (differences in the knowledge bases and perspectives members bring to the group) was associated positively with level of task conflict and objective team performance based on records of productivity kept by the firm. Moreover, task conflict mediated the relationship between informational diversity and performance, which suggests that conflict develops due to diversity and in turn affects performance. Social category diversity in terms of age and gender was related positively to level of relationship conflict and perceived performance, but unrelated to objective team performance. Relationship conflict mediated the association of

social category diversity and perceived performance, which again suggests that diversity gives rise to conflict, which in turn affects performance. Social category diversity also was associated positively with members' satisfaction with the team, intent to remain with the company, and organizational commitment. All three associations were mediated by level of relational conflict. Value diversity in terms of differences in member opinion of what the goal of the workgroup should be was related positively to task, relationship, and process conflict and related negatively to objective and subjective performance and to group efficiency as rated by managers. The relationships between value diversity and performance were mediated by relationship conflict. Value diversity also was related negatively to members' satisfaction with the team, intent to remain with the firm, and organizational commitment. These relationships were mediated by both relationship and process conflict.

Pelled et al. (1999) found that task moderated the impact of diversity on conflict. There was a positive association between conflict and the interaction of functional diversity and task routineness, suggesting that functional diversity was more likely to trigger task conflicts when tasks were routine than when they were nonroutine. The interaction of task routineness with racial diversity and tenure diversity had significant negative associations with emotional conflict, suggesting that racial and tenure diversity are less likely to trigger emotional conflict in groups with routine tasks than in groups with nonroutine tasks. Pelled et al. also reported that longevity of group moderated the effects of diversity on conflict. As groups exist for longer periods of time, there is a weaker association between diversity and both task and emotional conflict.

Garcia-Prieto et al. (2003) advanced a comprehensive model of diversity, conflict, and emotion in teams. They centered their analysis on members' experience of diversity in terms of subjective perceptions of diverse social identities in teams. They argued that conflicts stemming from diversity arise when members identify with different social categories that are perceived to be in opposition to one another. Garcia-Prieto et al. identified several factors that influence whether social identities that

## 276 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

underlie diversity-related conflicts become salient. When social identity becomes salient it may influence members' cognitive appraisal of issues related to which goals are important in the situation, who is to blame for the conflict, who has control or power in the group, and which norms are perceived as important. When social identities are salient, the goals of the in-group are favored over those of other groups or personal goals, and positive events are attributed to the in-group while other groups are blamed for negative events. Amount of control or power that the in-group is perceived to have tends to be influenced by the ratio of in-group to out-group members in the workgroup and also the relative status of the in-group in relation to out-groups. Finally, when social identity is salient, people tend to conform to the norms of the in-group.

According to Garcia-Prieto et al. (2003), these four dynamics will tend to intensify conflict and make it more detrimental to group functioning when members perceive significant differences between in-group and out-group goals and interests. When goals and interests of the groups are perceived to be compatible, conflict is less likely, though the four dynamics present communication problems that may feed conflict. Conflict is least likely to occur, or to be detrimental when it does occur, when personal identity is more salient to group members than social identity or when members identify primarily with the workgroup and not with other social groups.

Several studies provide insights concerning how to manage conflicts effectively in diverse groups. Ayoko et al. (2002) observed and interviewed members of six workgroups that experienced conflicts ranging from 4 to 9 months in duration. Participants reported that more than 50% of the conflicts in their groups were rooted in cultural differences. Ayoko et al. found that the groups that handled conflict productively used discourse management strategies such as explanation and checking of own and others, talking about differences, and focusing "on the problem and not the people." Negative outcomes were related to "being loud, swearing, making threats, verbal aggression, domineering behaviors, criticism, lack of communication, and overtly paying attention to accent" (p. 177). Simons, Pelled, and Smith (1999) studied 57 top

management teams in the electronics industry and found that diversity in perceptions of environmental uncertainty and education level interacted with level of debate in the teams to affect performance of the team positively. Debate led to comprehensive consideration of the issues, which in turn improved team performance.

Von Glinow, Shapiro, and Brett (2004) offered a sobering argument regarding handling emotional conflicts due to cultural diversity. They argued that talk is not always appropriate for the management of conflict in diverse teams. Diversity of contextualization of comments and absence of word equivalents undermines effective communication, with the result that the conflict may be framed in ways that prevent constructive resolution. Moreover, cultures differ widely in their valuation of talk as a means of handling problems. Trying to talk about conflicts or differences to members of cultures that do not value talk as a means of addressing conflict may be counterproductive. Von Glinow et al. (2004) suggested that substitutes for talk such as shared activities and the use of pictures or images may be more appropriate ways to address cultural differences.

Overall, the studies on diversity and conflict suggest that diversity in terms of characteristics directly related to the work of the group, such as informational diversity and functional diversity, promote task conflict and may increase group performance. On the other hand, diversity in terms of characteristics more distally related to the group's work—racial, age, gender, value, and job tenure diversity—is associated with relational and emotional conflict and may have negative effects on performance if not managed effectively. The ultimate effects of diversity on performance, however, also depend on how the group deals with conflict. The framing of conflicts in terms of work rather than personal differences is associated with positive outcomes. Debate and confrontation of task-related aspects of conflicts are associated positively with performance and other outcomes. This, in turn, suggests that the nature of the group's work will influence impacts of diversity on workgroup conflict. Pelled et al.'s finding on the interaction of task routineness with conflict provides an interesting suggestion that deserves further investigation.

*Conflict in virtual teams.* Virtual teams are becoming increasingly common in knowledge-based work such as information system development, product development, and engineering design. Virtual teams (VTs) are geographically dispersed workgroups that are often composed of several co-located subgroups with different interests, work practices, and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, conflict is likely to occur in VTs. Several empirical studies have shown that VTs experience higher degrees of conflict than traditional teams (Armstrong & Cole, 1995; Cramton, 2001; Hinds & Mortensen, 2004). This section reviews conflict emergence in VTs, how such conflict may in turn affect group processes, and finally how research on conflict and VTs relates to outcome and diversity research.

Cramton (2001) explained the emergence of conflict in virtual teams as a function of inability to develop mutual understanding and shared knowledge. Members of VTs do not have access to shared local contexts, and this gives rise to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and, subsequently, misattributions. Differences in schedules, human errors, and different technologies caused problems such as delays in responding to messages. These resulted in tension among remote partners since members tended to make relatively negative attributions regarding others' behavior. A member who did not answer e-mails, for instance, was assumed to be uncommitted to the team, and the possibility that there was a technical problem or the member was out of town was not considered. Armstrong and Cole (1995) found that team members sited in different locations labeled other members "them" versus "us." They commented, "site cultures seemed comparable to national cultures as sources of misunderstandings and conflicts" (p. 198). Other studies suggest that behavior that increases uncertainty, such as not answering e-mails or not meeting deadlines, fosters negative perceptions (Fernandez, 2004).

Research on social identity processes in computer-mediated communication (Abrams et al., 2005) suggests that computer-mediated communication may accentuate tendencies to react to others based on the social groups they belong to rather than considering them as individuals. This may result in stereotyping and

other reactions that polarize VTs. However, some studies of international VTs (Bhappu, Griffith, & Northcraft, 1997; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) suggest that the lack of nonverbal cues, fewer language errors in written messages, and the absence of accents in e-mail and other leaner communication media may foster perceptions of increased similarity among VT members and render cultural differences that might provoke social identity processes less salient.

There is also evidence that computer-mediated communication employed by many VTs may not be as conducive to consensus building and conflict resolution as face-to-face communication (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). As DeSanctis and Monge (1999) concluded, "About the only consistent finding in the empirical literature with regard to task and media is that [the tasks of] thinking convergently, resolving conflict, or reaching consensus [are] better done face-to-face than electronically" (p. 697). Conflicts in virtual contexts may be confronted as readily as in face-to-face situations, which negatively impacts the process of conflict management. Although conflicts simmer below the surface, it is often more difficult to bring them out into the open.

With regard to conflict styles, Montoya-Weiss, Massey, and Song (2001) found that competitive and collaborative conflict styles had positive effects on VT performance, whereas avoidance and compromise had negative effects. They posited that competition will not elicit negative reactions from other members of VTs, because it is perceived to be an attempt to participate actively and shape the discussion. An accommodative conflict style was not related to performance. In an insightful study that compared VTs and traditional co-located teams, Hinds and Mortensen (2004) found that while conflict was higher in VTs overall than in traditional teams, in VTs in which there were higher levels of spontaneous, informal communication and in which it was easy to coordinate work, the level of conflict was no greater than in traditional teams. This suggests that as VTs develop relationships and work out procedures over time, they will improve their conflict management capabilities. Some of the communication technologies utilized by VTs incorporate features for structuring group processes, and these may help VTs surface and manage conflict.

## 278 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

There are both similarities and differences between findings on conflict in VTs and those in the other two lines of research discussed in the instrumental perspective. Research on VTs strongly recapitulates two themes from research on co-located workgroups: diversity as an important source of workgroup conflict, and how the group handles the conflict influences whether it has positive or negative impacts on group outcomes. Research also indicates that conflict in VTs is driven by some of the same dynamics as in co-located groups, particularly social identity and attribution processes, but that these effects are heightened in VTs compared to co-located groups. VTs face unique challenges in managing conflict due to their channels of communication. Lean media such as e-mail, computer conferencing, and chat that are currently used by most VTs may exacerbate conflict and render conflict management more difficult than it would be in co-located workgroups.

*Reflections on instrumental research on workgroup conflict and communication.* Research in the instrumental perspective has advanced and substantiated a large amount of normative and case-based research that posited that a certain style of managing conflict—marked by open communication, confrontation of the issues, recognition that conflict can be useful, participatory decision making, and confidence that the conflict can be resolved in an integrative fashion—promotes positive group outcomes. The still open question of whether certain types of conflict are more likely to lead to positive outcomes also taps a deep-seated normative strand in conflict research that posits that emotional, non-rational conflict is destructive, while substantive, rational conflict is constructive. Instrumental research on conflict is useful because it puts to the test prescriptions long held by the conflict and dispute resolution communities.

The general confirmation of these prescriptions, however, raises a troubling issue. The normative position on conflict management has been taught to several generations of employees, starting with Blake and Mouton's (1964) classic formulation of conflict styles. The research designs of most instrumental studies of workgroups have relied primarily on self-reported attitudes and behaviors. Members of teams are

asked to report their conflict behaviors and assess outcomes; managers of teams are asked to report outcomes. This raises the possibility that implicit theories about how "effective" groups handle conflict have influenced subject responses. Subjects who perceive their groups as doing well (often based on feedback from the managers who are rating team performance) may exhibit selective recall such that they remember behaviors consistent with the normative perspectives they have been taught more than behaviors inconsistent with them. Their reports of team conflict handling styles may thus be biased such that they report confrontive and open styles when they believe their team is effective and less confrontive and negative styles when they believe the team is ineffective. In short, it may be that theories of effective conflict management are reshaping data so that they are consistent with the normative theories, thus creating a self-fulfilling research design. The same may be said for studies identifying impacts of task versus relational conflicts, because the differences between them, too, have been covered in conflict management workshops and books since the days of Blake and Mouton.

Studies that observe group behavior and relate it to objective or subjective outcomes offer one way to determine whether this is, in fact, occurring. The few studies that have taken this approach (e.g., Kuhn & Poole, 2000) offer encouraging replications of the questionnaire-based studies. There is a need for more research in this area that is based on direct observation and analysis of group interaction.

A second caveat for instrumental research is that almost all studies have been cross-sectional in nature. As a result, they cannot establish causality with respect to associations among variables measuring conflict, outcomes, and mediating and moderating factors. It seems logical that behavior would be prior to outcomes, and hence that we can presume conflict management processes precede outcomes. It may also be the case that positive outcomes promote confidence in the group and therefore enable it to confront issues better than if previous outcomes were less positive. The reverse relationship may hold true for negative outcomes. Without longitudinal designs, it is impossible to determine the direction of causality. Hence,

results of much of the recent instrumental research may be best considered tentative.

Finally, we might note a major gap in current instrumental research. While instrumental studies clearly indicate productive routes for dealing with task-oriented conflict, they are less definitive on what is to be done with emotion-based or relational conflicts. In view of the inevitability of such conflicts, more knowledge is needed about how best to cope with them. It is also important to realize that the distinction between the three types of conflict may be somewhat arbitrary. Janssen et al. (1999) call the separation somewhat artificial since task conflict tends to breed relational conflict and process conflict can cause both types. Some answers to these issues are suggested by research in the developmental and political perspectives.

#### RESEARCH ON WORKGROUP CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

In contrast to the instrumental point of view, the developmental perspective sees conflict not in relation to group performance, but in relation to group progress. Two positions on group development see that progress as either movement from one stage of a life cycle to the next or movement between poles of an opposition, a paradox. Our review of the developmental perspective focuses on these two areas.

*Long-term group development and conflict.* A long tradition of research has observed the functions of conflict in long-term group development. In one of the most famous formulations, Tuckman (1965) postulated that groups pass through stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing. LaCoursiere (1980) and later Wheelan (2005) summarized studies of group development in a basic five-stage model:

*Stage 1: Dependency and Inclusion.* In this stage, sometimes called orientation, the group members are trying to reduce their uncertainty about what the group will be like and their place in the group. Members are very concerned with being included in the group. They are “testing the waters with regard to initial attempts to get to know each other

and to determine what the rules, roles, and structures of the group will be” (Wheelan, 2005, p. 16). They tend to be dependent on the leader for structure and guidance in this phase. If this phase is accomplished effectively, members will have a sense of the emerging structure of the group and will feel loyalty and attraction to the group.

*Stage 2: Counterdependency and Fight.* Once members feel they have their feet on the ground, so to speak, a stage characterized by conflict occurs. The conflict may be between a member(s) and the leader, as members seek to exert control in a situation they now are fairly comfortable in, or among members, as members seek to sort out what the direction of the group should be and establish a status structure. In this stage conflict functions to clarify the directions of the group and surfaces differences among members that could impede the group later on if not addressed at this stage. If the conflicts in this phase are managed effectively, trust increases among members and the group becomes clearer on its direction.

*Stage 3: Trust and Structure.* Once the conflict stage has been traversed, the members of the group feel more secure with the group and each other and begin to develop structure for their work. They define roles and work out plans and procedures. If this stage is effectively accomplished, the group will lay the foundation for effective work.

*Stage 4: Work.* In this stage the goals are “(1) get the job done well, (2) remain cohesive while engaging in task-related conflicts, and (3) maintain high performance over the long haul” (Wheelan, 2005, p. 18). Important to effective work are open communication, awareness of time and schedule, and prudent use of resources. If this stage is effectively accomplished, the group will carry out a great deal of work and build its own ability to work.

*Stage 5: Termination.* In this stage the group sometimes comes to an end, sometimes makes a transition to a different project or task, and sometimes deals with the departure of some members. The termination stage deals with transitions out of the group formed during the previous four stages. To manage this transition effectively, members must work through the meaning of their experiences and come to terms with their feelings about



## 280 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

their fellow members and the group. Often a period of ritualistic mourning occurs, and in many cases members begin to distance themselves from the group and other members.

The various stages present the group and its members with problems they must resolve: how to deal with dependence on others; what degree of independence of member action is allowed; the purpose and direction of the group; control and power issues; organizing the group for effective work; maintaining an effective, creative work process; meeting members' individual needs; and coming to terms with the end of an important experience. If the group works through the problem effectively, it will develop and members will grow, both as group members and personally. Then the group moves on to confront its next problem in the developing sequence. If the group avoids dealing with these issues or does not address them effectively, the group may remain "stuck" in a stage and not be able to develop further. Even if the group continues to develop, the unsolved problems will come back to haunt it. A group that runs into difficulties is likely to regress to an earlier stage at some later time.

Conflict is a critical part of the developmental process. Not only does it constitute a key stage of group development, but conflict is also likely to occur in other stages as well, as members try to work through the problem(s) they encounter. Franz and Jin (1999) found that conflict was cyclical in that new conflicts would develop, be resolved, and the group would continue until the next conflict occurred. Regarding the nature of those conflicts, Franz and Jin suggested that at approximately the midpoint of group meetings, members would shift from more competitive behaviors to more collaborative efforts, a variation on Gersick's (1991) punctuated equilibrium model.

From a developmental perspective, effective conflict management depends on dealing with current issues. While constructive controversy, as described by the instrumental perspective, is one workable approach, competition and decision by a leader or oligarchy may also be effective in resolving issues (Gibbard, Hartman, & Mann, 1974). An effective outcome is one that members are satisfied with and that puts the issue to rest.

Unlike the instrumental perspective, the developmental perspective regards emotion as a necessary and potentially beneficial part of conflict. Conflict stems from existential needs and therefore inherently arouses emotions. Dealing with conflict effectively requires members to acknowledge and work through their emotional reactions to the group and to each other. Only if the group members successfully come to terms with their needs and express their emotions will a group be effective in the instrumental sense.

Much of the research behind models like Wheelan's has been conducted on educational, training, and therapy groups. Wheelan (2005) summarizes several studies that have found this pattern of long-term development in workgroups (e.g., Obert, 1983; Wheelan et al., 1994).

*Tensions and conflict in workgroup development.* Smith and Berg (1987) advanced a different view of the role of conflict in workgroup development. They argued that rather than following a set developmental sequence, groups develop through addressing inherent paradoxes that confront them. These paradoxes consist of "coexisting opposites"—contradictory and conflicting emotions, thoughts, and actions—that exist in groups. Smith and Berg defined three sets of paradoxes: (a) paradoxes of belonging, which represent coexisting opposites around group and individual identity, involvement, individuality, and boundaries; (b) paradoxes of engaging, which feature coexisting opposites concerned with disclosure, trust, and intimacy; and (c) paradoxes of speaking, concerned with the tensions among authority, dependency, creativity, and courage to disagree in groups. These paradoxes represent problems that continuously face groups, and groups tend to cycle within paradoxes and between them. The paradoxes are sources of conflict for groups, and groups manage conflicts through managing the paradoxes. In terms of how groups can deal effectively with paradoxes, Smith and Berg argued that attempting to eliminate the paradoxes is likely to result in the group getting stuck. Instead the group should live within the paradoxes, work to understand them and the conflicts they produce, and find links between conflicting forces and issues. Finding these links enables the group to move forward both in terms of its own effectiveness and in terms of building a stronger group.

Group dialectics is a stream of research branching off from Smith and Berg's dynamic of tensions in group development. Kramer (2004) conducted an ethnographic study of a community theatre group, arguing that group dialectics would differ from dyadic relationships because of the goal-directed nature of groups and because of group size. Kramer found four global dialectics present in his data: commitment levels to the group, ordered versus emergent group activities, inclusion versus exclusion and group boundaries, and norms for acceptable versus unacceptable behavior. In this model, a group would deal with conflict by using "a range of choices from explicitly communicating about them, such as venting or discussion, to communicating implicitly or choosing not to communicate about them through avoidance or minimization" (Kramer, 2004, p. 328).

The developmental perspective views conflict as a useful and inherent part of group life. Properly managed, conflicts can help groups resolve critical issues and become more effective. The conflicts the developmental perspective is concerned with exist at a deeper and more fundamental level than those discussed in the instrumental perspective. While some developmental models, such as Wheelan's, propose that these conflicts can be resolved, others, such as Smith and Berg's, imply that conflicts will always be with groups, continuously presenting new tensions that must be dealt with (see also Bion, 1959).

*Reflections on developmental research on workgroup conflict and communication.* As in the instrumental perspective, research in the developmental perspective can be questioned on the grounds that normative theory may be shaping study results. The various models of long-term development, such as Wheelan's, are normative in the sense that they present an ideal sequence of phases that—traversed properly—will result in a growth experience for both group and members. Most evidence for these models comes from interpretive case studies and from longitudinal studies that measure behavior that would be expected in the phases. By presuming patterns are present, these studies may be smoothing over other aspects of these groups that run counter to the proposed developmental

sequences. The strong presumption that there are orderly patterns of longitudinal development raises questions about the openness of this research to rejecting the null hypothesis. More studies that consciously set out to test the null are needed.

The tight connection between process and outcomes in these models also raises questions. If a group progresses through the phases in the order posited, the assumption is that it is solving the primary problems posed in the phases as it develops. If, on the other, a group "loops back" to earlier phases, the assumption is that it is regressing to previous problems that were not solved adequately. There is, then, a tendency to circular reasoning between sequence and outcome in the application of these models. It is important to assess or measure adequacy of problem solving independently of progress through phases to rigorously assess developmental models.

The developmental perspective provides a useful complement to the instrumental approach. Its long-term view of workgroups that focuses on their health has the potential to provide a useful frame for shorter-term instrumental conflict management processes.

#### RESEARCH ON WORKGROUP CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Research in the political perspective regards workgroups as "contested terrain" in which individuals and subgroups vie for control of the group. This perspective focuses on power in workgroups and traces how group processes both enact and are influenced by power and the struggle for power. In instrumental studies of workgroups power is typically viewed as a characteristic or behavior of individual group members, particularly the leader. Instrumental studies focus on strategies and tactics that leaders and members use to influence other members, for example compliance-gaining tactics or argumentative strategies. Political studies of workgroup conflict, in contrast, assume that power is rooted in social groups with different interests and different social power bases, such as labor and management, male and female, experienced members and newcomers (note that

## 282 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

these groups represent categories of social identity, as discussed above). In any particular workgroup, representatives of these interest groups constitute the power structure of the workgroup. Subgroups able to mobilize more power determine the goals and direction of the group, how resources are distributed, and the place of other subgroups in the workgroup. While the agendas and goals of the subgroups are in part defined by individuals in the subgroups, they are also powerfully shaped by the general interests of the subgroups as defined in the larger organization or society. These general interests and related conflicts among subgroups are imported into the workgroup and result in the creation of a "microcosm" that reflects more general divisions in organizations and society.

The power of individuals and subgroups is determined by a complex interplay of the resources locally available in the group and power structures in the larger society. Local power resources include the number of members in a subgroup (or the number of allies a powerful member can muster), the bases of power available to members (e.g., expertise, formal authority), and the skills with which members can utilize their coalitions or power bases. However, these local resources are deployed within the ambit of pre-existing social structures that give members of some social categories presumption over others. For example, males are generally accorded greater authority in U.S. society, the efforts of equal rights advocates notwithstanding. The power of males in a workgroup is supported by this presumption of authority, even though it is seldom mentioned explicitly within the group. A long tradition of studies grounded in status expectations theory has shown that status characteristics external to a group carry over into groups and give privileged groups a power base not available to other members (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell, & Wilson, 2005).

While it acknowledges that power is often exerted openly in workgroups, the political perspective also focuses on more subtle, hidden dimensions of power. One of these is issue control, a process through which certain issues are defined as "off limits" (Folger et al., 2005). In most workgroups, for example, the legitimate right of the leader to give orders is never

questioned. That this issue is never raised reinforces the leader's power base. In turn, the leader's power gives him or her the ability to engage in issue control, setting up a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains the leader's dominance. Another aspect of hidden power is using power circumspectly within boundaries of what other members would consider acceptable behavior. Doing so limits challenges and enables power to be exercised smoothly in the course of normal activity, hence keeping its operation disguised within unquestioned activities. A third aspect of hidden power is discipline, the establishment of shared goals and premises among members that channel their behavior in the direction of the interests of the dominant members (or of managers outside the workgroup) (Barker & Cheney, 1994; Sewell, 1998; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Members' identification with the organization leads them to follow its premises and in so doing members exert self-control over themselves, channeling their behavior in ways consistent with the organization's interests.

According to the political perspective, conflicts of interest between different groups are the primary source of workgroup conflict. In many cases, these conflicts are played out through negotiation and alliance building among individuals and subgroups in a pluralistic political process. However, many political conflicts do not surface explicitly due to the operation of hidden power. Indeed, a hallmark of the political perspective is that it highlights the avoidance or lack of conflict as a common response to conflicts of interest. Hidden power functions to suppress or avoid conflict by defining conflicts of interest as off limits or by inculcating premises in group members that prevent conflicts or resolve them in ways consistent with dominant interests. Ironically, the political perspective argues that when conflict surfaces openly it represents a failure of the dominant individual or subgroup, because only when the power structures that normally suppress conflict have broken down or been undermined does conflict come out into the open. The remainder of this section examines control in workgroups, pluralistic examinations of political processes, the political perspective in health care teams, and a normative model for managing political conflicts.

*Control and workgroup conflict.* One active line of research in recent years has focused on control and conflict in workgroups (Sewell, 1998). Traditionally, workgroups have been controlled by management, which sets up the workgroup, establishes its goals, and monitors and evaluates its performance. The agent of management is the appointed team leader (foreperson, line manager), who imports and enforces the motivations of management into the group. Sewell (1998) aptly named this traditional type of arrangement “vertical control”; that is, control from the top down. A different type of control emerges in newer types of workgroups, such as self-managed teams or quality improvement teams. These teams are typically set up with the nominal goal of empowering members, and they are presented as enabling members of the team to determine their own work arrangements and have freedom to innovate. As Barker (1993) noted, however, far from equalizing power among members, these teams tend to develop systems in which members internalize organizational norms and enforce them on other members. This type of control, which Barker (following Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) termed “concertive control” and Sewell (1998) named “horizontal control,” is based on teams’ first negotiating arrangements and norms for attaining organizational goals and then translating them into rules and procedures that enforce member behavior. Because the members of the group willingly adopt the norms and procedures, resistance to them is met with the response “you agreed to this,” which effectively short-circuits the resentment and resistance that often comes in response to rules and procedures imposed by management “from above.” That the power structure is set up to reflect managerial interests is hidden by the apparent self-determination of the team members.

Barker, Melville, and Packanowsky (1993) described the role of concertive control in a conflict among members of a self-managed team in a team-based organization. One member persistently arrived late to work due to problems with child care, and members perceived this as a breach of team norms and an imposition on them. As they talked among themselves and worked out the nature of the offending member’s transgression, members transformed the general guideline “we all need to be at work

at the same time” into the more precise form, “if you are more than five minutes late you will be docked a week’s pay.” This latter rule is clearer and easier to enforce than the more general guideline. It also reflects a more managerial orientation toward workers than the guideline. When the group confronted the late member, they used the rule to deliver an ultimatum, forestalling her attempts to ask for a reasonable accommodation. The other members confronted the latecomer with a solid front and insisted that she conform to the rule. In this action, the members inadvertently subjected themselves to further control, since they now had to conform to the tighter rule. Barker (1993) noted that in this way teams discipline themselves by replacing informal norms with rationalized behavior that serves the greater goals of the organization and its management. The promulgation of rules contributes to the suppression of conflict and enables the dominant group to prevail because members accept them as reasonable and objective. It also serves the interests of management.

Kirby and Krone’s (2002) study of the enforcement of family leave policies in workgroups shows how those not taking leave developed rationalizations that pressured especially fathers, but also mothers, not to take the leaves or to take much shorter leaves than they desired. An undercurrent of conflict pervades these workplaces—conflict that is mostly hidden and serves as a pressuring mechanism. The resulting reluctance to take advantage of legally mandated leave policies serves managerial interests, but the “enforcers” who help realize managerial interests are for the most part worker proxies who believe they are acting in their own interests.

*Pluralistic approaches to workgroup conflict.* A more pluralistic model of politics in workgroup conflict can be found in the work of human relations and industrial organization researchers of the 1940s and 1950s. These scholars documented numerous conflicts between different formal and informal groups in work organizations in rich qualitative studies (Dalton, 1959; Sayles, 1957; Whyte, 1948). One study that epitomizes this tradition is Melville Dalton’s (1959) *Men Who Manage*. Dalton described a complex set of overlapping “struggles” within and among workgroups based on differences between

## 284 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

production and maintenance functions, staff and line, and labor and management. His analysis of these struggles found that they were often conducted via informal cliques that represent alliances based on common interests. Some of these cliques represented a single social category, such as foremen in operations, while others cut across some social categories to unify members around a common interest. The cliques and subgroups commonly struggled with one another using existing organizational rules, procedures, and resources, mobilizing and bending them to their ends.

In an ongoing process of struggle that was much more fluid than the power processes described by research on concertive control or feminist analyses, various individuals and subgroups ebbed and flowed in terms of power over one another in the firms studied by Dalton. The struggles were often conducted via indirect and hidden conflicts that were not evident to superiors or outsiders. Dalton found these conflicts beneficial to the overall organization because they helped it change to resolve operational and human problems. In his words,

Conflict fluctuates around some balance of the constructive and disruptive. Inevitably there must be constructive conflict as responsible officers and close associates work with varying success to adapt parts of the structure to changing conditions and personnel, while others for various reasons resist corrective changes. We are currently so busy hiding conflict that we quake when we must simultaneously deal with it and pretend that it does not exist. (Dalton, 1959, p. 263)

Dalton viewed conflict in terms of power struggles, but had a much more benign attitude toward it than the control researchers.

*Political conflict in health care teams.* Somewhere between the managerial control and pluralistic perspectives on politics falls a large body of work on health care teams in which conflict is a persistent theme. Differences in power and status among different professions—physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists—and within each profession—among different physician specialties and different types of nurses—both foment and are involved

in the management of conflict in health care groups. The complexity of modern medical care forces health care teams to adapt constantly, often leaving room for negotiation of roles and power (Schatzman & Bucher, 1964).

The negotiations in health care teams have their share of conflict. Several factors, including the complex and pressing work, the strong authority position of the physician, and hesitancy to confront professionals outside one's own discipline, encourage avoidance or suppression of conflict (Drinka, 1996; Folger et al., 2005). Sands, Stafford, and McClelland (1990) found that conflict within interdisciplinary teams was expressed both overtly and covertly within a format that required the team to reach consensus in a short period of time. Yet conflict may also occur publicly, especially among those with similar positions in the status hierarchy. In a fascinating study of imaging groups, Simon (1999) analyzed how neurosurgeons and biophysicists jockey for professional prominence in sharp arguments over the interpretation of images. Keith (1991) described how physiologists and orthopedic surgeons contend for leadership in geriatric rehabilitation units.

Negotiations over division of labor in a group can be triggered by resistance of those whose voice was silenced by the ideology, problems with patients, or coalitions of lower status members (Schatzman & Bucher, 1964). Many of these negotiations occur "tacitly" as members work together. Abramson and Mizrahi (1996) reported that social workers (typically a lower power profession) focused more on interaction with physicians, while physicians focused more on competence of social workers, indicating that the higher status of physicians allowed them to judge the competence of social workers while social workers emphasized collaboration. The numerous articles (e.g., Fountain, 1993) advising nurses, social workers, and mental health professionals about how to interact with physicians effectively testify to the importance and potential impact of style differences in health care teams. They also indicate that resistance to the presumption of physician control and advocacy for increased input is an explicit part of the discourse of these professions.

The interdisciplinary team literature in health care emphasizes the need for mutual respect and



power sharing among members of health care groups (e.g., Clark, 1997; Drinka, 1996). However, countervailing forces, including the assertiveness of professions and established status and power structures, tend to lead to the reassertion of physician dominance as teams progress (Freidson, 1970). Feiger and Schmitt (1979) found that even in teams initially committed to interdisciplinary collegiality, status differences reasserted themselves over time.

Another type of exceptional behavior, whistle-blowing, is a sensitive subject in the health care literature. Erde (1982) noted that professional norms require reporting incidents that represent negligence or harm patients, but group norms grounded in collegial decisions about care and in collegial relationships provide disincentives to do so. Erde argued that the ideology of teamwork is often used to suppress dissent and curtail or punish whistle-blowers as “uncommitted” members. The dynamics of team communication surrounding ethically driven behavior such as whistle-blowing offer an important horizon for future research.

Drinka (1996) proposed that the “maturity” of a health care team could be gauged by how it handled conflicts. She found evidence to suggest that the team “survived over time because there were leaders who were willing to try out new ideas and confront conflict” (Drinka, 1991, p. 123). Through dealing with conflict effectively, groups are often able to build stronger relationships among members based on the trust that “things will work out” and the goodwill that constructive behavior generates (Folger et al., 2005).

*A normative model for management of political conflicts.* Brown (1983) offered a broader normative analysis on conflict management from the political perspective. Framing his approach as “managing conflict at organizational interfaces,” Brown delineated several different types of interfaces, which he defined as points of contact between different social categories in organizations: (a) department interfaces, which bring together people from different functional areas who must work together; (b) level interfaces, which bring together people with different ranks in the organizational hierarchy; (c) culture interfaces, which bring together people from different groups such as Black and White

or rich and poor; and (d) organization interfaces, which bring together people from different organizations that have different interests.

Brown’s approach emphasizes the temporal development of linkages between people, often occurring in workgroups, through effective management of differences and conflicts. He posits a curvilinear relationship between conflict intensity and outcomes such that both too little and too much conflict result in negative outcomes, while a moderate level of conflict leads to positive outcomes. Brown (1983) argued, “Conflict management can require intervention to reduce conflict if there is too much or intervention to promote conflict if there is too little” (p. 9). He classifies interventions into four types: redirecting immediate behavior, reallocating relevant resources, reframing perspectives on conflict, and realigning structural forces that underlie the situation. Brown described a number of tactics for carrying out these interventions in the different types of interfaces.

*Reflections on political research on work-group conflict and communication.* Research in the political perspective attempts to illuminate one of the most profound dimensions of work-group conflict—power—and its connection to group communication and interaction. This perspective puts the most weight on communication of the three due to its emphasis on the importance of communicative interaction in influence strategies and tactics and of discourse in the constitution and maintenance of power structures.

It is something of a paradox that research in the political perspective often features conflict in terms of the absence of conflict, that is, the suppression or avoidance of conflict. The dynamics of power, however, dictate that it often can be sustained best if it remains hidden. Once the bases of power are revealed and open for discussion, they are also open to challenge. Research in this tradition thus has to delve into hidden power, trying to discern the power behind a series of influence moves or the deep-seated power structures sustained by a taken-for-granted discourse that must be deconstructed. Though it may accord the most importance to communication of the three perspectives, the political perspective also tends to regard the communication

## 286 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

surrounding power with skepticism, as though it obscures as much as it reveals.

One shortcoming of research in the political perspective is that there are not many studies that connect pluralistic with structural conceptions of power. Pluralists tend to focus more on the surface and look for power in direct interaction (or the lack thereof). Structural views tend to focus more on deeply held, unarticulated, and unexamined premises and attempt to describe how they are communicatively constituted and sustained and how they undergird power in groups and organizations. The research approaches and basic assumptions of the two positions seem to run in different directions. Notwithstanding, the hints in structural studies such as Kirby and Krone (2002) concerning how structural power plays out in the discourse among interest groups and in studies like Dalton's (1959) concerning how positions of privilege are sustained through communicative interaction make us wish there was more articulation between the two positions.

#### TOWARD INTEGRATION AND CROSS-FERTILIZATION

While research in the instrumental, developmental and political perspectives has developed in separate "silos," it is clear that the three perspectives have the potential to inform one another. The contributions each perspective can make to a more complete picture of workgroup conflict can be illuminated by comparing how they address two important questions—How can we best understand and diagnose conflict? How can we manage conflict constructively? We will also consider how synergies among the three perspectives have the potential to provide more satisfying answers to these questions than any of single perspective could by itself.

What is the nature of workgroup conflict? How should we understand and explain it? How can we diagnose it effectively? The three perspectives have different views on how workgroup conflicts typically play out that are colored by their assumptions about the causes of conflict, the role of communication in conflicts, and how best to diagnose conflicts and assess their impacts on workgroups.

The discourse of the instrumental perspective conceptualizes the typical conflict as a breakdown in the normative consensus that culminates in open arguments and clashes. This is reflected in the value instrumental research assigns to open confrontation of issues and conflict resolution and its corresponding negative opinion of avoidance or suppression of conflict. The instrumental perspective views conflict as a (possibly beneficial) departure from the normal ordered and coordinated activities of the workgroup. When conflict does occur, it is how the conflict is brought out and managed that determines whether it has constructive or destructive effects on the group. Both competitive tactics that attempt to force a solution on the group and avoidance of the conflict are likely to lower group performance and satisfaction. An open, confrontational approach that is accepting of different viewpoints, emphasizes open discussion of the problem, and searches for solutions acceptable to all promotes resolution of conflicts that increases team performance and member satisfaction. Though not always easy, diagnosing conflict seems fairly straightforward to those taking an instrumental perspective. They look for disagreements related to the group's work and to relational problems among members. They generally regard such disagreements as rooted in issues that can be stated in clear (and rational) terms. The instrumental perspective assumes that the issues are particular to the workgroup itself and are connected to the specific context of the group. It also takes a short-term view in that conflicts are assumed to have arisen during the group's history and to be resolvable within a fairly short period of time if members are willing to put in the effort.

For scholars in the political perspective, in contrast, conflict typically is hidden and indirect. It is pursued in a power struggle that often uses tactics such as agenda control to disguise the operation of power and the interests involved and redirect attention to issues unrelated to the real underlying conflict. Scholars in this perspective tend to see conflict as the basic state of the group, rather than an interruption of normal operations. Political conflict goes bubbling along in even the most placid and cooperative group and is held in check only by the forces of control and by structures of domination.

In this view, open confrontation is unlikely to resolve conflicts unless it extends beyond surface issues to address power imbalances and to foster open discussion concerning how conflicting interests may be accommodated. Diagnosing conflict requires one to look past surface appearances and discover divergent issues through careful analysis. When uncovered, these issues are often tangled and multi-layered and are usually connected to divisions within the larger organization or society. For this reason, it is difficult to define the issues as though they were discrete, local, encapsulated issues unique to the particular workgroup in question. For the political perspective, issues bring “baggage” with them from outside the group that tends to make them more difficult to address. Political scholars also tend to take a long-term view of conflict, assuming it is grounded in historical events that occurred outside the group and prior to its constitution and that resolving the conflict will take a long time.

For scholars in the developmental perspective, the typical conflict may take many forms, including open hostility, quiet competition, avoidance, accommodation, suppression, and constructive confrontation. Developmental scholars view all these manifestations as rooted in fundamental individual needs and in the “universal” problems or dilemmas groups face. For developmental scholars, the source of individual needs is member personality traits and previous life experiences. Universal problems arise from tensions between the individual and group or between the group and society. Both needs and problems are discussed as though they were “forces of nature” that are going to run their course and that cannot be suppressed or stopped without doing harm to the group and its members. This implies that the best course is to accept them and help the group and its members work through them. From a developmental standpoint, diagnosis of conflicts is a therapeutic undertaking in which we attempt to identify current needs or problems using signs garnered from careful observation of the group. A successful diagnosis depends on distinguishing the meaningful signals of authentic problems and needs from the “noise” in group communication.

The three points of view offer complementary insights into conflicts. The instrumental view

focuses our attention on the immediate give and take of conflict interaction, the surface upon which groups do their work. The political view reminds us that this interaction also reflects and plays a role in constituting the power structure that is brought to bear in conflict tactics and strategies. While the instrumental view sensitizes us to constructive and destructive patterns of conflict interaction, the political standpoint cautions us to consider factors that go beyond the immediate situation when we encounter destructive interaction patterns. The political perspective takes a long-term view that may serve goals such as group capacity building and member need fulfillment especially well, while the instrumental perspective is stronger on performance and immediate group effectiveness.

The developmental view stresses that all conflict, including that based on deep-seated interests, unfolds within an ongoing concern—the workgroup—that is developing according to its own dynamics and facing challenges that may transcend the instrumental or political dimensions. A power struggle or conflict over work means very different things and is influenced by different factors in a group just forming than in a well-established workgroup. The developmental perspective also directs our attention beyond the easy answers that conflict is concerned with immediate group activities and power to the possibility that deep-seated needs and larger aspirations are driving conflict. When this is the case, constructive responses must go beyond addressing work or structure and help the group and its members grow. Together the three perspectives remind us that multiple levels must be considered in understanding workgroup conflict. We must consider conflict as stemming from and affecting the group’s work, as it reflects and shapes the power structures that make the group’s work possible, and as it affects the actualization of members and the health of the group.

Provided with some understanding of the conflict and the factors that drive it, we face another question: How should conflicts be managed? Again, the three perspectives provide diverse advice. Instrumental researchers have advanced many of the most effective models for managing workgroup conflict. A long history of conflict styles research discusses the advantages

## 288 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

and potential problems of various styles and suggests contingencies for selection of different responses (Folger et al., 2005, pp. 214–240). Several normative models for conflict management have also been advanced by instrumental scholars (e.g., Filley, 1975; Tjosvold's, 1993, work on constructive controversy). These approaches advocate dealing with conflict "in the present," that is, on immediate issues that surface during conflict interaction and in response to interventions in the conflict.

Political research has tended to focus more on describing the plight of groups with power issues and how they are controlled than to prescribe how to deal with power. Political scholars often project a sense that existing structures are so deeply embedded that it will be difficult if not impossible to change them or to use the conflict they engender for constructive purposes. This would require shifts in power relations that are often deeply rooted and reinforced by many structures in the group, the larger organization, and society. Resolving political conflicts sometimes seems more a matter of reforming society than handling things within the group. Brown's approach to managing conflict at the interfaces between groups with different interests offers the most practical take we have found on dealing with political conflict, but it is rooted also in the models of the instrumental perspective. Brown's model also tends to regard interests of different groups as "given," and does not deal with how one might undermine existing power structures.

The developmental perspective views the management of conflict as akin to psychological therapy (e.g., Gibbard et al., 1974). Like the psychoanalyst, the scholar or consultant attempts to empower members to improve the group through increasing their awareness of counterproductive interpretations and interactions. The assumption is that awareness is the first step toward change. Once aware, a group (or at least some of its members) is in a position to take the steps necessary to resolve or manage the conflict constructively. The developmental perspective emphasizes the importance of the quasi-therapeutic role. In some cases this role is filled by an outside consultant or mediator, and in others by a prominent member of the group. As occurs in psychological therapy, this person may be a facilitator who helps the group

understand itself and suggests approaches for dealing with the conflict. He or she may also become the object of rejection by the group, which projects the conflict onto the person and learns to deal with it through interacting with him or her. The developmental perspective, like the political perspective, views conflict management as broader than simply dealing with the conflict at hand. Effective conflict management involves fundamental change in the group and in its members. Unlike the political perspective, the developmental perspective views power as just one aspect of the group and, in some cases, not the most important one to address.

Combining the three perspectives has the potential to greatly enhance conflict management. The quasi-therapeutic approach of the developmental perspective offers a useful resource for resolution of political conflicts. As Jürgen Habermas (1975) noted, one useful model for critical analysis of power structures is psychoanalysis. Developmental approaches to conflict management look past the immediate conflict to deeper dynamics of the sort that drive control and domination in groups. The conflict management models advanced by instrumental scholars also have great potential in the management of political and developmental conflicts. It is difficult to deal with deeper issues if the group does not interact constructively and has to cope with outbreaks of contention and competition, and instrumental models of conflict management provide guidance and techniques for achieving civil discussion and comportment in groups. It is also difficult to deal with deeper issues if the group engages in avoidance (Bion, 1959, called this "flight") or if some members are able to keep important issues off the floor. Instrumental approaches such as constructive controversy can help groups to surface issues safely and to manage discussion so that minority voices are heard, thus increasing the probability of a successful diagnosis and change.

That conflict management means more than just handling the immediate conflict, but requires us to go beyond it to change the group and its members, is a useful addition to instrumental models of conflict management. The finding in instrumental research that groups with less open communication climates handle

conflict less effectively implies that longer-term development of the group is important even for surface level conflict management.

The isolated evolution of the instrumental, developmental, and political perspectives on conflict has been beneficial because it has led to clear, well-defined views of conflict. Now the time is ripe to consider integration and cross-fertilization of the three traditions.

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## 290 • ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

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