

On the etiology of conflict cultures

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Abstract

Conflict has long been conceived as a fundamental part of all organizational systems. Yet the literature on conflict is largely divorced from its organizational roots and instead focuses on general processes of conflict management at the individual and small group levels of analysis. To re-establish the organizational basis of conflict, we develop a macro-theory of *conflict cultures*, or shared norms that specify how conflict should be managed in organizational settings. We propose a typology of conflict cultures that draws upon two dimensions – active versus passive conflict management norms and agreeable versus disagreeable conflict management norms – and discuss the etiology of four distinct conflict cultures: *dominating conflict cultures* (active and disagreeable), *collaborative conflict cultures* (active and agreeable), *avoidant conflict cultures* (passive and agreeable), and *passive-aggressive conflict cultures* (passive and disagreeable). We discuss top-down processes (e.g., leadership, organizational structure and rewards, industry, community, and societal factors) and bottom-up processes (e.g., personality, demographics, values and social networks) through which these conflict cultures develop. We explore both positive and negative organizational outcomes associated with each conflict culture, as well as moderators of proposed effects. We conclude with theoretical, practical, and empirical implications of a conflict culture perspective.

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1. Introduction

In their classic work on the social psychology of organizations, [Katz and Kahn \(1978\)](#) observed that “... every aspect of organizational life that creates order and coordination of effort must overcome other tendencies to action, and in that fact lies the potentiality for conflict” (p. 617). Indeed, the subject of conflict is a “constant preoccupation of organizational theories” ([Jaffee, 2008](#)). Every school of organizational thought – from Weber’s bureaucracy and scientific management, to human relations and cooperative systems, to open systems theory, among others – acknowledge the inherent complexities of human organization and conflicts that arise therein. Put simply, conflict in organizations can be seen as a core organizational tension that invariably arises when humans need to manage their mutual interdependencies and are embedded in organizational structures that attempt to constrain and control their behavior ([Jaffee, 2008](#)).

Given these organizational realities, it is perhaps not surprising that a large research industry has developed to understand how to best *manage* conflict in organizations. Theories of conflict management strategies have been advanced (e.g., [Blake & Mouton, 1964](#); [Deutsch, 1949, 1973](#); [Pruitt & Rubin, 1986](#); [Tjosvold, 1991](#); [Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988](#); [Van de Vliert, 1997](#); [Walton & McKersie, 1965](#)); measures of conflict management strategies have been validated (e.g., [De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001](#); [Rahim, 1983](#)); a wide variety of predictors of conflict management strategies have been documented (e.g., *cognition*, [Neale & Bazerman, 1991](#); *personality*, [Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996](#); *roles*, [Putnam & Jones, 1982](#); *social motives*, [De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000](#); and *time pressure*, [De Dreu, 2003](#), among others); and the effects of conflict management strategies on individual and team outcomes have been well illustrated (e.g., [De Church & Marks, 2001](#); [De Dreu, van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004](#)).

Yet a fundamental paradox exists in research on conflict management processes in organizations. Although conflict has long been conceived of as a fundamental part of all organizational *systems* (e.g., Argyris, 1971; Corwin, 1969; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Pondy, 1967; Thomas, 1976; Walton & Dutton, 1969; Walton, Dutton, & Cafferty, 1969), the literature on conflict management has been largely intellectually divorced from its organizational roots and instead focuses on general processes of conflict at the individual and small group level of analysis. Looking at the literature on conflict management, one might ask, what is truly *organizational* about research on conflict management? Undoubtedly, conflict management research examines important behaviors (or is “Big-B” research, using Heath & Sitkin’s, 2001, parlance), and this research has relevance for many contexts, organizational and non-organizational alike. Yet to provide unique insight into conflict management in organizations, understanding the ways in which *features of organizations* constrain or enable how conflict is managed should be an important conceptual territory in the conflict scholarship landscape (for similar arguments, see Brett & Rognes, 1986; Callister et al., 2003; De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; De Dreu et al., 2004; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Kolb & Putnam, 1992). As House, Rousseau, and Thomas-Hunt (1995) noted, “Until general psychological theories are linked to organizational contextual variables they will remain inadequate to explain what goes on in organizations” (p. 77).

In this chapter, we start with the premise that although individuals may have idiosyncratic preferences for different conflict management strategies, organizational contexts provide strong situations (Johns, 2006; O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996) that serve to define what is a socially shared and normative way to manage conflict – what we will refer to as distinct *conflict cultures* – which ultimately minimize individual variation in conflict management strategies. In addition to top-down processes, employees come to share similar attitudes about the normative way to manage conflict through attraction, selection, socialization, and attrition processes (Chatman, 1991; Schneider, 1987) as well as through social interactions and exposure to similar working conditions (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), which further reinforce conflict cultures in organizations. More generally, we seek to expound upon a macro-conflict culture perspective and show how it can complement extant micro-perspectives and together provide a more comprehensive account of conflict management processes *in situ*, in this case, in organizational contexts.

In particular, we advance a theory of conflict cultures, or shared norms that specify how conflict should be managed in organizational settings. We propose a typology of conflict cultures in organizations that draws upon two dimensions – active versus passive conflict management norms and agreeable versus disagreeable conflict management norms – and discuss the etiology of four distinct conflict cultures: *dominating conflict cultures* (active and disagreeable), *collaborative conflict cultures* (active and agreeable), *avoidant conflict cultures* (passive and agreeable), and *passive-aggressive conflict cultures* (passive and disagreeable). We consider how proximal top-down factors such as leadership, organizational structure and rewards, as well as distal top-down factors such as industry, community, and national culture facilitate the development of conflict cultures. We also consider how personality, demographics, networks, and values facilitate the development of conflict cultures through bottom-up processes (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). We speculate on some of the positive and negative organizational outcomes that are associated with each of these conflict cultures. Finally, acknowledging that conflict cultures are not static, we speculate on the ‘levers’ of conflict culture change and ways in which managers might strategically build conflict cultures around important organizational goals.

The conflict cultures paradigm has the potential to expand the theoretical and practical scope of the field. Theoretically, a conflict culture perspective can provide new insights about the psychology of organizing in organizations, or what Heath and Sitkin (2001) refer to as a “Big-O” research in OB. A conflict culture perspective also has the potential to help better situate conflict management more in the mainstream of organizational behavior research. Separated from its organizational roots, conflict research tends to be isolated from other central topics in OB, such as leadership, organizational structure, culture, and organizational change. For example, chapters on organizational behavior in the Annual Review of Psychology have rarely discussed conflict management; likewise, reviews of the negotiation literature have rarely discussed conflict as it relates to organizational processes and performance (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). Accordingly, understanding how conflict cultures are created and sustained through top-down and bottom-up processes, and how they are linked to organizational-level outcomes, will help to integrate the conflict management field with other core organizational behavior topics. More generally, the perspective on conflict management advanced in this chapter adds to a growing multilevel science of organizational behavior. Many phenomena in organizations, whether it is innovation, leadership, or job attitudes, involve multiple levels of analysis, and conflict management should be of no exception.

A conflict culture perspective also has implications for practice. Historically, the impact of conflict management has been examined mostly at the individual and team levels of analysis. To the extent that conflict cultures are related

to organizational outcomes, it begins to show the value of conflict scholarship for top managers. As well, through the identification of specific top-down and bottom-up processes, a conflict culture paradigm invites new diagnostic tools and mechanisms for implementing systematic change in organizations.

The structure of this chapter proceeds as follows. We first discuss the cultural basis of conflict management, advance a typology of conflict cultures, and provide rich descriptions and examples of each conflict culture. We follow with a discussion of top-down and bottom-up processes that facilitate the emergence of each conflict culture. Next, we turn to positive and negative organizational outcomes of conflict cultures and moderators of proposed effects. We conclude with theoretical, practical, and empirical implications of a conflict culture perspective.

2. The cultural basis of conflict management

Despite scholarly debates about the conceptualization and measurement of organizational culture, many agree that organizational culture is shared, is socially constructed, is transmitted across organizational generations, and contains multiple layers (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Mohan, 1993; Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003; Rowlinson & Proctor, 1999; Schein, 1992, 2000). For example, Schein (1992) defined culture as

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 12).

Also critical to many theories of organizational culture is the notion that culture serves a powerful social control function, limits the range of acceptable behavior, and hence, restricts individual differences in organizations (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996).

To date, numerous survey measures of organizational culture have been validated, including the Organizational Culture Inventory (Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000), the Competing Values Framework (Quinn & McGrath, 1985; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983), the Organizational Culture Profile (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991), and the Work Practices Survey (Hofstede et al., 1990), among others. Qualitative studies of culture also abound in the literature (e.g., Brannen & Salk, 2000; Casey, 1999; Schein, 1992). Although these conceptualizations and measures of organizational culture are clearly distinct, many focus on *broad* values, norms, and assumptions as they relate to aspects of organizing. By contrast, we take a more narrow approach that focuses on the *specific* domain of culture pertaining to the management of conflict. More formally, we analyze the antecedents and consequences of distinct conflict cultures, or shared norms and associated values and assumptions that define how conflict should be managed in organizations. By definition, conflict cultures guide organizational members' attitudes and behaviors, and thereby reduce the range of individual variation in strategies used to manage conflict in organizations.¹

Our theory of conflict cultures rests on a number of implicit assumptions. First, we expect that many if not all organizations develop distinct conflict cultures. Conflict is a fundamental phenomenon that arises in all organizations, and it can potentially threaten core organizational processes; thus, the development of norms for its management is critical for organizational functioning. This is consistent with Schein's (1992) observation that norms develop around fundamental problems that need to be managed in any social system (see also Schwartz, 1994, for similar notions). At the same time, although we discuss distinct conflict cultures as uniform and shared by all organizational members for ease of theoretical exposition, we acknowledge that the assumption that a conflict culture is always shared at the organizational-level paints far too simplistic of a picture regarding the processes through which culture emerges. Cultures can be differentiated within an organization such that they are shared within subunits, but differs across subunits (e.g., Martin, 1992; Trice & Morand, 1991). Subcultures may form along horizontal lines such as wards within a hospital (e.g., Lok, Westwood, & Crawford, 2005) or vertical lines such as hierarchical job position (e.g., Kekale, Fecikova, & Kitaigorodskaya, 2004). Given the numerous possible units of culture, issues of unit specification

¹ Conflict in any organization can be latent (perceived and felt) or manifest (on the surface) (Pondy, 1967), and it can arise from a number of sources (e.g., scarce resources and conflicts of interests, social identity and relationship-based conflicts, differences in opinions and beliefs; De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). The existence of conflict is completely separate from how it is managed, or what parties – individuals, groups, or organizations – actually do when conflict exists (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Van de Vliert, 1997). In this chapter, we are concerned with how conflict is managed once it exists either at a latent or manifest level. We return to how the source of the conflict can moderate the impact of conflict cultures on organizational outcomes below.

are beyond the scope of this chapter. For the sake of consistency, we refer to conflict cultures as an organizational-level construct throughout the chapter, yet we concur with Kozlowski and Klein (2000) that “unit specification should be driven by the theory of the phenomena in question. Specification of informal entities that cut across formal boundaries, or that occur within formal units and lead to differentiation, requires careful consideration” (p. 20). We also discuss conflict cultures as if they are relatively static for ease of exposition. Yet, as with any cultural system, top-down and bottom-up processes can cause radical changes in conflict cultures, a point to which we return in the discussion.

Although there has been little research on conflict cultures, there is some indirect support for this phenomenon at the *micro-level* in the literature. For example, research has focused on the competitive versus cooperative nature of group conflict management strategies, differentiating between avoidant, distributive, and integrative group strategies (see also Chen, Liu, & Tjosvold, 2005; De Church & Marks, 2001; De Dreu and Vianen, 2001; Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001; Weingart & Olekalns, 2004). Although few of these studies were grounded in an organizational culture perspective, they indirectly support the notion that conflict management norms develop and constrain individual variation in larger organizational units. Likewise, Jehn and Mannix (2001) discussed the notion that groups vary in the degree to which conflict is managed actively in the open (see also Murnighan & Conlon, 1991). We build upon this perspective by differentiating cultures in which conflict is managed actively versus passively with another orthogonal distinction, the degree to which conflict management norms are agreeable or disagreeable.

A conflict culture perspective also nicely complements and builds upon the extant *macro-level tradition* that does exist in conflict management research. Much of this research has examined organizational dispute resolution systems (ODR) and *formal* channels including which conflict is resolved—through collective bargaining, grievance systems, mediation, ombudsmen, arbitration, and the like (Friedman, Hunter, & Chen, 2008; Goldman, B., Cropanzano, R., Stein, J., & Benson, L., 2008; Ury et al., 1988). While this research has helped to understand what predicts ODR usage by employees and the relationship between ODR systems and organizational outcomes (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008; Ury et al., 1988), it has yet to systematically focus on informal organizational norms, routines, and processes that develop in organizations regarding conflict management (for exceptions, see Costantino & Merchant, 1996; Slaikeu & Hasson, 1998; Ury et al., 1988). As Kolb and Putnam (1992) argued, “it is unlikely that these formal channels constitute the only, or even the major, location where conflict and grievances are worked out” (p. 16). Advocating that scholars examine informal norms that arise from organizational culture as compared to formal and officially sanctioned roles and procedures found in grievance systems, they argued:

Conflict norms tend to arise from the organizational culture. For example, informal norms of conflict management might sanction hidden agendas, ‘bitching,’ ignoring requests, and other ideographic practices. In the informal setting, everyday practices govern the way issues evolve and the way conflict roles emerge to manage these issues (Kolb & Putnam, 1992, pp. 19–20).

More recently, De Dreu et al. (2004) also speculated that “units within organizations, or even entire organizations develop over time a relatively stable set of orientations toward, and strategies to manage conflict” (p. 9), and specifically called for more research on cultures of conflict. Nevertheless, there remains little systematic theory on these informal macro-level processes of conflict management in organizations. Taking a culture perspective on conflict management, we build on previous micro- and macro-efforts, offer a typology of conflict cultures, elucidate top-down and bottom-up factors that facilitate the development of conflict cultures, and discuss their implications for broader organizational outcomes.

3. A typology of conflict cultures

We propose that two dimensions underlie the development of conflict cultures in organizations (cf. Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). The first dimension reflects the notion that organizations develop norms for whether conflict is managed in an *agreeable* or *cooperative* manner versus a *disagreeable* or *competitive* manner. Agreeable norms prescribe behavior that promotes group and organizational interests and reflects a collective attempt to *move toward* others when managing conflicts. Disagreeable norms prescribe behavior that promotes self-interest and reflects collective attempts to *move against* others when managing conflicts. The second dimension reflects the notion that organizations develop norms for whether conflict is managed *actively* or *passively* (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Active norms are characterized by open engagement, high agency, and low-situational constraint when managing conflicts, while passive norms are characterized by a lack of open engagement, low agency, and high-situational

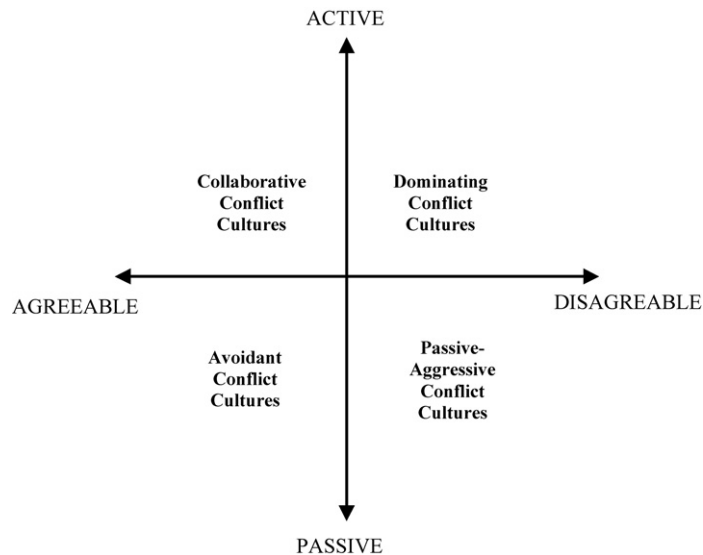


Fig. 1. A typology of conflict cultures.

constraint when managing conflicts. As seen in Fig. 1, these two dimensions are orthogonal, producing four distinct conflict cultures: *dominating conflict cultures* (active and disagreeable), *collaborative conflict cultures* (active and agreeable), *avoidant conflict cultures* (passive and agreeable), and *passive-aggressive conflict cultures* (passive and disagreeable).

The dimensions underlying this typology have similarity with typologies that exist at the individual level of analysis. For example, many if not all conflict management theories have focused on whether conflict is managed in an agreeable or cooperative versus a disagreeable or competitive manner (e.g., Axelrod, 1984; Deutsch, 1949, 1973; Tjosvold, 1998). Others have similarly made distinctions including moving away, moving toward, moving against (Horney, 1945); concern for people versus concern for results (Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1970); concern for self versus concern for others (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983), integration versus distribution (Thomas, 1976; Walton & McKersie, 1965), and mitigation versus intensification (Sternberg & Dobson, 1987; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Still others have also argued that another separate fundamental dimension of conflict management is whether conflict is managed in an active or passive manner (De Church & Marks, 2001; Simons, Pelled, & Smith, 1999; Sternberg & Dobson, 1987; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) illustrated the value of both of these dimensions at the individual level, showing that they can help to account for previously identified conflict strategies (see also De Church & Marks, 2001; Lovelace et al., 2001).

We expand upon this literature and focus on how these separate dimensions – agreeableness and activeness – in combination produce theoretically distinct conflict cultures at the organizational or unit level of analysis. We note that the above typology and descriptions throughout this chapter are “*ideal types*” (Doty & Glick, 1994) of conflict cultures based on the proposed underlying dimensions. Yet organizations may also have *hybrid* conflict cultures (Doty & Glick, 1994). An organization may at times have a dominating conflict culture and at other times have a passive-aggressive conflict culture, or engage in these simultaneously. For example, an organization may have a conflict culture of fighting it out in the board room, but a conflict culture of passive aggression after the meeting is over. We do not expect that there are an infinite number of hybrid possibilities, however (Doty & Glick, 1994). Hybrid conflict cultures will be most likely comprised of types that are adjacent to each other, as opposed to those that are opposite in the typology. Put differently, hybrid conflict cultures are likely to be comprised of types that are similar on at least one underlying dimension (active-passive or agreeable-disagreeable, e.g., collaborative avoidant, or dominating-passive-aggressive), and less likely to be comprised of types that are opposite on both underlying dimensions (e.g., collaborative-passive-aggressive, or conflict avoidant-dominating).

Below, we describe key norms, values, and assumptions that underlie the ideal types of dominating, collaborative, avoidant, and passive-aggressive conflict cultures, and we give illustrative examples of each before discussing the etiology and outcomes associated with each of these conflict cultures.

4. Dominating conflict cultures

The first type of conflict culture we discuss is a *dominating conflict culture*, which is characterized by conflict management norms that are both active and disagreeable. Core assumptions and values underlying this conflict culture are that employees have agency and are empowered to actively manage conflicts, that disagreeable behavior is acceptable, and that there are few constraints on conflict behavior. Similar to passive–aggressive conflict cultures (discussed below), the normative response to conflict in dominating conflict cultures is disagreeable in nature. Yet this conflict culture is distinct in that it involves norms for open confrontations where employees vie to publicly win conflicts. In dominating conflict cultures, normative behaviors for handling conflicts may include direct confrontations and heated arguments in which individuals are reluctant to give in, yelling and shouting matches, or threats and warnings. Thus, dominating conflict cultures are characterized by shared perceptions that open confrontation is an appropriate way of managing conflict. *In dominating conflict cultures, truth through conflict wins.*

The Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC, Digital) provides a vivid example of a dominating conflict culture. DEC was characterized by conflict management norms of both empowerment and individualism, leading to intense internal competition when organizational members disagreed with one another. The company emphasized “truth through conflict” and believed that if conflict situations were handled through open and heated debate, ultimately the best idea would win (DeLisi, 1998; Schein, 2003). As described by a former employee, the management of DEC actively encouraged and rewarded the dominating culture:

In those early years, I also learned about “pushback.” People at Digital seemed to fight a lot with one another. Shouting matches were a frequent occurrence, and I came to conclude that Digital people didn’t like one another. I was subsequently told by more senior members that it was okay to disagree with someone, because truth would ultimately prevail. . . . After one of these exchanges, one in which I almost came to blows with one of my peers, I was called in by my manager the next morning. Sensing that this time I had really exceeded the bounds of propriety, I thought about updating my resume. It was with great and pleasant surprise that I was told that my behavior the previous day had been admirable (DeLisi, 1998, p. 120).

A dominating conflict culture is also clearly evident at Link.com, a pseudonym for a computer company discussed by Martin and Meyerson (1998). Noting the norms for active confrontation and dominating behavior, they explain, “Link.com had a masculine culture, characterized by self-promotion, overt struggles for competition, and interpersonal norms that condoned yelling and other forms of controlled aggression” (Martin & Meyerson, 1998, p. 339). Individuals were expected to actively address differences through a dominating manner. One executive described norms for meetings as “You said what you thought. People screamed at each other. It was quite chaotic and yet very effective” (Martin & Meyerson, 1997, p. 3). Similarly, another executive described how

“she too saw the competition for power take place in rituals of aggression and machismo” (Martin & Meyerson, 1998, p. 335). According to the executive, “The higher you screamed, the more powerful you were, and the more you proved your point” (Martin & Meyerson, 1997, p. 4)

At Link.com, collaborative behaviors were not valued at the company, but instead viewed as a weakness.

The focus on fighting in organizations with dominant conflict cultures is even more visible in the company Playco, which manufactured childrens’ toys and games. Employees of Playco used phrases such as “the old west,” “sports,” and “warfare games” to describe conflict management at the company (Morrill, 1995, p. 195). One executive stated that a strong executive was “a tough son of a bitch, a guy who’s not afraid to shoot it out with someone he doesn’t agree with; who knows how to play the game; to win and lose with honor and dignity” (Morrill, 1995, p. 193). At Playco, reciprocal aggression in response to conflict was the norm and viewed as the honorable way to behave. Dominating conflict cultures were also evident in offshore oil platforms – contexts which are known for their masculine norms – where issues of disagreement are dealt with through open confrontation and bullying (Ely & Meyerson, submitted for publication). As they explain, “intimidation was the name of the game. . . . They decided who the driller was by fighting. If the job came open, the one that was left standing was the driller” (Ely & Meyerson, submitted for publication, p. 17–18). More generally, as these examples attest, organizations that exist in aggressive, masculine contexts are fertile ground for the development of dominating conflict cultures.

5. Collaborative conflict cultures

The second type of conflict culture we propose is referred to as a *collaborative conflict culture*, which is characterized by conflict management norms that are both agreeable and active. Core assumptions and values underlying this conflict culture include that employees are empowered to actively manage conflicts, cooperative behavior and resolving conflicts to serve the interests of the group is rewarded, and there are few organizational constraints on behavior. Like dominating conflict cultures, employees in collaborative conflict cultures are empowered to deal actively with conflicts. They diverge, from dominating conflict cultures however in that they involve agreeable and prosocial norms for managing conflicts. Likewise, collaborative conflict cultures are similar to conflict avoidant cultures (discussed below) in that the normative response to conflict is prosocial and cooperative. Yet they diverge from conflict avoidant cultures in that conflict is dealt with actively rather than passively. In collaborative conflict cultures, normative behaviors for handling conflict include active listening to the opinions of others, mediation of different perspectives, open discussion of the conflict, and demonstrations of mutual respect. When resolving conflicts, the standard response is to seek the best solution possible for all parties involved. *In collaborative conflict cultures, the whole is more than the sum of its parts.*

Southwest Airlines exemplifies a company that has historically had a collaborative conflict culture (Gittell, 2003). At Southwest, conflict is dealt with actively, but with a focus on resolutions that try to benefit all involved. According to one station manager, “What’s unique about Southwest is that we’re real proactive about conflict. We work very hard at destroying any turf battle once one crops up—and they do” (p. 101). Others observed that Southwest views conflict as a potentially constructive force, in that if conflict is managed in a proactive collaborative way it can actually help to strengthen relationships. For instance, one customer service manager noted:

You’re going to have conflict. You try to get them to talk it out. They can bring it up to the supervisors and myself. Hopefully they’ll do it in a positive tone. Maybe a wrong call was made in the heat of the moment. You give them the other side of it. It [sometimes] works to bring them together. . . You just shed light on why they did what they did (p. 102).

At Southwest, a collaborative conflict culture is reinforced through organizational routines, such as information-gathering sessions, which help employees resolve their conflicts openly and constructively. According to one assistant manager, “When there’s really a problem, we have a ‘Come to Jesus’ meeting and work it out. Whereas it’s warfare at other airlines, here the goal is to maintain the esteem of everybody” (p. 103). Other employees remarked on the active and collaborative approach to conflict management at Southwest. As one of the chief pilots at Southwest explained:

“Pilots and flight attendants—sometimes an interaction didn’t go right between them. They are upset, then we get them together and work it out, in a teamwork approach. If you have a problem, the best thing is to deal with it yourself. If you can’t, then we take it to the next step—we call a meeting of all the parties (p. 103).

Thus, at Southwest, conflict is considered inevitable, but norms focus on resolving conflicts in proactive, prosocial ways that benefit all involved.

Hewlett–Packard, particularly when the original founders led the company, also provides an example of a collaborative conflict culture. With its unique culture and approach to management, known as the “HP Way,” Hewlett–Packard practiced a management style known as “management by walking around” with the goal of promoting trust, openness, and collaboration (Packard, 1995). At HP, this policy created an environment where people were encouraged to openly discuss their concerns and disagreements and solve them in a collaborative, open atmosphere. As Packard (1995) explained:

The open door encourages employees, should they have problems of either a personal or job-related nature, to discuss these with an appropriate manager. . . . It must be clearly understood by supervisors and managers that people using the open door are not to be subjected to reprisals or to any other adverse consequences (p. 157).

In its later years, the collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution of Hewlett–Packard was said to have gone too far into a focus on consensus and endless discussion, and even described as changing to a conflict avoidant culture (Perlow & Kind, 2004). Yet when the “HP Way” was at its strongest, the focus on collaboration, trust, and openness was illustrative of a collaborative conflict culture.

6. Conflict avoidant cultures

The third type of conflict culture we propose is a *conflict avoidant culture*, which is characterized by norms for conflict management that are both agreeable and passive. Core assumptions and values in conflict avoidant cultures include that it is important to have order and control and/or to maintain interpersonal relationships and harmony within the organization. Similar to passive–aggressive conflict cultures (discussed below), employees in conflict avoidant cultures do not feel empowered to deal with conflict and are constrained from handling conflict in the open; yet this conflict culture is distinct in that it is driven by agreeable motives to promote social harmony and/or prevent the social order from being disrupted. In conflict avoidant cultures, normative behaviors for handling conflict include accommodating or acquiescing to the point of view of others, changing the subject, smoothing over or otherwise evading open discussion of the conflict, and working around the source of the conflict in order to maintain harmony and order (Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). On the surface, conflict avoidant cultures seem conflict free. Yet organizational members are made aware of suppressed tensions, for example through non-verbal behaviors or behind-the-scenes conversations. Thus, conflict avoidant cultures are characterized by shared perceptions that open debate and discussion of conflict situations is not desirable, has little utility, or is dangerous. *In conflict avoidant cultures, conflict is the elephant in the room that no one talks about.*

Versity, a small on-line education company located in suburban Ann Arbor, MI provides a vivid example of a conflict avoidant culture. As discussed at length by Perlow (2003), the founders of Varsity, four undergraduate business majors, viewed the preservation of internal relationships as a key to the company's success. As a result, conflict was not dealt with openly but was suppressed in order to maintain harmony. As noted by Perlow (2003), conflict avoidance norms started from the top: "The managers and the founders willingly engaged in the effort to avoid conflict, perpetuating a norm of silence that had been set in motion in Peter's [CEO] first days in the company and continued to gain support" (p. 133). As a result, at Varsity, conflict avoidance was the norm, and individuals were not encouraged to deal with conflict openly due to the pressure of preserving positive relationships. Commenting on how individuals masked their underlying disagreements to preserve harmony, Perlow (2003) remarked:

I therefore had the privilege of listening to people speak to each other, *and* of knowing what they were *not* saying. I noticed early on that colleagues weren't being completely frank with one another. They didn't want to endanger the success of their venture, so they shied away from differences. They smiled when they were seething; they nodded when deep down they couldn't have disagreed more. They pretended to accept differences for the sake of preserving their relationships and their business. And, the more people silenced themselves, the more pressure they felt to silence themselves again next time (p. 8–9).

Wang Laboratories, a once successful computer company that went bankrupt in the early 1990s, provides another example of a conflict avoidant culture. Ang Wang, the founder and director of Wang Laboratories, who has been described as a "benevolent dictator" (Finkelstein, 2005), played a key role in developing and sustaining a culture of conflict avoidance in the company. Wang was a controlling leader who took steps to keep a tight watch over all aspects of the organization. For example, in order to ensure that his agenda could not be overruled by other key players in the organization, he personally controlled 50% of the company's stock, and at one point in time, he simultaneously filled the positions of President, CEO, and Director of Research (Finkelstein, 2005). Wang's controlling behaviors sent a strong message to employees that any conflicts or disagreements with his policies and practices were to be suppressed, rather than brought into the open. Wang's motives for exerting tight control, however, were arguably prosocial. He acted in ways he believed would benefit everyone in the organization and, "as long as his instincts and actions were on target – as they were in the early years of the company – everyone prospered" (Finkelstein, 2005, p. 26). Moreover, employees were aware that their leader had the interests of the company at heart and trusted him to take the organization in the right direction. For example, "Wang's designers ceded some of their independence because they respected his brilliance and judgment, and he channeled their individualistic urges for the good of the firm" (Landry, 1993, p. 26). During the heyday of Wang Laboratories, organizational norms encouraged employees to suppress conflict as a means of doing what was best for the organization, thus creating a culture of conflict avoidance. As these examples illustrate, in conflict avoidant cultures, while latent conflict exists, there is a strong norm for suppressing it in the service of harmony and/or predictability and control.

7. Passive–aggressive conflict cultures

The final conflict culture in the typology is a *passive–aggressive conflict culture*, which is characterized by norms for conflict management that are both disagreeable and passive. Like a dominating conflict culture, the normative response to conflict in passive–aggressive cultures is disagreeable in nature. However, this conflict culture is distinct in that conflict is not dealt with in an open and active manner. Instead, in passive–aggressive conflict cultures, employees develop norms that when conflict arises, the most effective and appropriate way to handle it is in the form of passive resistance. Core assumptions and values underlying this conflict culture are that employees are not empowered and are cynical about their ability to actively manage conflicts, that competition and antisocial behavior is acceptable, and that there are many constraints on behavior. In this respect, passive–aggressive conflict cultures share some commonality with *conflict avoidant cultures* in that employees have low efficacy for dealing with conflict in the open; yet they diverge from conflict avoidant cultures in that they are characterized by competitive behaviors rather than being driven by harmony and needs for predictability. In passive–aggressive conflict cultures, normative behaviors for handling conflict include refusing to participate in discussions related to the conflict, giving the silent treatment, failing to pass on needed information, intentionally slowing down one's work to harm others, or withdrawing from work and interactions with others (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Buss, 1961; Geddes & Baron, 1997). As Hoffmann (1994) notes, passive–aggressiveness can be viewed as acts of omission and involve “passive resistance, passive provocativeness, and passively thwarting other people, without open conflict” (p. 21). *In passive–aggressive conflict cultures, keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

In their chapter, *The medical system: A complex arena for the exhibition of passive–aggressiveness*, Musiker and Norton (1983) discuss how medical settings are ripe contexts for the development of passive–aggressive cultures. The many layers of authority contained in hospitals, from the board, to the chief executive officer, to the department heads, to the professionals, and intense bureaucracy of medical systems constrain behaviors and often make open conflict resolution difficult, and as a result, a norm for dealing with conflict through passive–aggressive means tends to develop. In addition, role conflicts abound in these settings due to multiple and competing sources of accountability, which can lead to passive–aggressive behavior when conflicts arise. For example, when faced with a conflict between organizational policies and procedures and patient care, staff members may choose to ignore others' demands and instead do what they believe is correct for the patient. Commenting on the structure of medical settings, Musiker and Norton (1983) observe:

The various role definitions and special needs of these components and the range of possible interaction options make confrontation or open conflict either unfruitful or inappropriate; hence passive–aggressive behavior is often a fairly useful, if not very efficient, way of expressing disagreement or a negative attitude (p. 195).

In addition to the complexity of the organizational structure, competition for resources provides another shaping force in the development of passive–aggressive conflict norms. Musiker and Norton (1983) note that in the case of physicians:

Conflicts between and among medical school faculty for space, budget money, and grants are no less intense than the kind of political infighting that may go on in any large industrial organization. Here again, direct confrontation is neither approved nor generally effective and it is necessary to make end runs around obstacles rather than confronting them head on, ignoring some pressures and passively resisting others (p. 204).

Educational settings also provide fertile ground for the development of passive–aggressive conflict cultures. Similar to medical systems, educational settings are often hierarchical and provide little efficacy for employees to openly deal with many conflicts. For example, Parsons (1983) argues that “the demands placed on administrator, teacher, and student in this hierarchical authoritarian system leave little room for direct expression of anger” (p. 177). Teachers are often given mixed messages to be creative and have fun, yet at the same time to keep order in the classroom. They also tend to experience role conflicts in that they have control and autonomy over their teaching, yet are highly constrained by the accountability they have to multiple constituents. According to Parsons (1983):

The nature of the educational system, its norms, goals, and roles encourage the exhibition of such behavioral patterns; thus, the historic reliance on the doctrine of ‘in loco parentis,’ the absolute authority of the ‘school marm,’ and the perceived dictatorial power of the building principal or dean of students all stimulate the exhibition of passive–aggressiveness (p. 177).

As these examples attest, behavioral constraints lead to low efficacy for dealing with conflict, and as a result, employees take out their frustrations with others in the school system in a passive–aggressive manner. In all, hospital or education settings can provide the conditions for passive–aggressive conflict cultures to develop given their complex bureaucratic and hierarchical structures.

8. Divergence from other constructs

Having specified the constituent elements of dominating, collaborative, avoidant, and passive–aggressive conflict cultures, it is also important to elucidate what each culture *is not*, or in other words, how each is related to and distinct from other constructs advanced in the literature. A conflict avoidant culture is similar to *organizational silence*, defined as “widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 708), in that it results in little employee voice and hesitancy among employees to speak up about problems or concerns within the organization. On the one hand, a conflict avoidant culture is narrower than organizational silence in that it reflects a lack of voice specifically related to *conflict situations*, rather than a general lack of voice across organizational contexts. On the other hand, a conflict avoidant culture is also broader than organizational silence norms. For example, we specify two distinct motives that produce a culture of (conflict) silence. Agreeable norms combined with passive conflict management norms result in *conflict avoidant cultures*, but disagreeable norms combined with passive conflict management norms produce *passive–aggressive conflict cultures*.

Similarly, both disagreeable conflict cultures are related to but distinct from *workplace aggression*, or attempts to harm others at work (Neuman & Baron, 1998). Workplace aggression can take the form of more active behaviors, as would be seen in dominating conflict cultures, or more passive behaviors, as would be seen in passive–aggressive conflict cultures (Neuman & Baron, 1998). However, workplace aggression can stem from many sources, such as personality, organizational justice perceptions, and job dissatisfaction (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2007; Neuman & Baron, 1998), whereas the aggressive behaviors in dominating and passive–aggressive conflict cultures result specifically from conflict among organizational members. Workplace aggression as construed in the literature also necessarily involves the intent to harm, yet in a conflict culture perspective, aggressive behavior need not involve the intent to harm but rather a concern with winning (e.g., *dominating conflict cultures*). Workplace aggression is also usually studied as an individual-level behavior, rather than as a shared property of a higher-level unit as is the case with conflict cultures.

Finally, collaborating conflict cultures are related to but distinct from climates for *psychological safety*. Psychological safety reflects “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” and “a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). In organizations with a climate for psychological safety, individuals feel free to speak up about disagreements. In our typology, however, the latitude to speak one’s mind may lead employees to either cooperatively consider each others interests (i.e., *collaborative conflict culture*) or to fight for their own point of view (i.e., *dominating conflict culture*). In all, the two-dimensional theory of conflict cultures produces unique patterns that are related to but distinct from other constructs in the organizational behavior literature.

9. Top-down processes and conflict cultures

Having defined and provided prototypical examples of different conflict cultures and having differentiated them from other related constructs, we now turn our attention to articulating the etiology of conflict cultures. Drawing on the organizational culture literature, we consider proximal top-down factors such as the personality and behavioral style of leaders and organizational structure and reward systems, as well as more distal top-down factors such as industry, community, and national culture as important factors in the development of conflict cultures. Table 1 provides a summary of our discussion below.

9.1. Dominating conflict cultures

Dominating conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations where conditions foster competition as well as latitude. Accordingly, they are likely to emerge in organizations with masculine, performance-oriented or laissez-faire

Table 1

Top-down factors facilitating conflict cultures

	Dominating conflict cultures	Collaborative conflict cultures	Conflict avoidant cultures	Passive–aggressive conflict cultures
General underlying principles	Competition Latitude	Cooperation Latitude	Cooperation Constraint	Competition Constraint
Leadership	Masculine leadership	Charismatic leadership	High need for closure	Authoritarian/abusive leadership
	Performance-oriented leadership	Transformational leadership	Extreme relationality	Insecure/weak leadership
	Laissez-faire leadership	Relational leadership		
Organizational structure	Low centralization	Low centralization	High centralization	High centralization
	Low formalization	Low formalization	High formalization	High formalization High complexity
Organizational rewards	Competitive/individualistic reward structure	Cooperative/interdependent reward structure	Cooperative/interdependent reward structure	Competitive/individualistic reward structure
Industry and community context	Highly competitive industries	High growth/dynamic industries	Low growth/stable/mature industries; volatile industries	Low growth/stable mature industries
	Aggressive and/or poor communities	Low threat/affluent communities	Conservative communities	Closed systems
National and regional culture context	Vertical individualism	Horizontal collectivism	Vertical collectivism	Power distance
	Masculinity	Femininity	Uncertainty avoidance	Cultural tightness
	Cultural looseness	Cultural looseness	Cultural tightness	

leaders; in organizations that are low on formalization and centralization and that have competitive reward structures; in organizations that are in highly competitive industries; in communities that have a lot of aggression and poor economic conditions; and in regions or societies characterized by vertical individualism, masculinity, and cultural looseness. As with any system, the more these elements are in alignment, the stronger the dominating conflict culture.

9.1.1. Leadership

Different types of leaders create different conflict cultures. Schein (1983) advanced the notion that the personality of an organization's founder guides the development of culture, given that founders "introduce humanistic, social service, and other non-economic assumptions into their paradigm of how an organization should look" (p. 28). Thereafter, the culture of an organization is reinforced by the vision and actions of the organization's senior leaders (George, Sleeth, & Siders, 1999; Ostroff et al., 2003; Schein, 1983).

Dominating conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations with masculine, performance-oriented leaders who endorse competition as a valued way to accomplish tasks. Performance-oriented leaders reward demonstrations of ability and directly compare their subordinates to one another in order to determine external rewards (Van de Walle, 1997). The intense focus on performance promotes a competitive environment wherein individuals are encouraged to prove themselves (Dragoni, 2005). Masculine and performance-oriented leaders therefore breed perceptions that aggressively fighting for one's own position is both a desirable and an effective means for getting ahead in the organization. Much like the leaders of DEC who applauded active fighting among employees, masculine and performance-oriented leaders provide fertile ground for the development of dominating conflict cultures.

Dominating conflict cultures are also likely to emerge in organizations with leaders with a laissez-faire leadership style who avoid making decisions and let employees solve problems on their own (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). With absent leaders, particularly in organizations that have low formalization and centralization (see below), there is a lack of constraint and little accountability of employees, who are able to behave in ways that serve their own self-interest without risking punishment. Put simply, laissez-faire leadership creates a vacuum that enables individuals to actively engage in dominating behaviors when conflict arises. This is consistent with research that has found that overt aggression is prevalent in organizations with weak management that seldom intervenes in employee affairs (Salin, 2003; Vartia, 1996) and in organizations characterized by perceptions that individuals "can get away with it" (Rayner

& Keashly, 2005). In either case, masculine, performance, and laissez-faire leaders create the conditions that breed the aggressive, fighting behavior that is characteristic of dominating conflict cultures.

9.1.2. *Organizational structure and reward systems*

Dominating conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations that are decentralized and low in formalization and simultaneously have competitive or individualistic reward structures. Decentralization involves a dispersion of power across organizational levels and affords employees more control and empowerment to make decisions (Hage & Aiken, 1967). Thus, decentralization allows employees voice to aggressively fight for their own positions without much intervention or constraint (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Martinko & Gardner, 1982). Low formalization, in which rules, procedures, and communication are not formally written and recorded in the organization (Pugh, Hickson, Hinnings, & Turner, 1968) also leads to low accountability and freedom to behave in self-interested ways without having to defend or justify one's actions (Beu & Buckley, 2004). In all, low formalization and centralization allows for latitude and voice among employees, and combined with individualistic or competitive reward structures, which reinforce the disagreeable dimension of conflict cultures, these structures provide fertile ground for the open confrontation and fighting that characterizes dominating conflict cultures. Indeed, a lack of tight control and a competitive environment were arguably key characteristics that allowed a dominating conflict culture to flourish at DEC, as discussed previously. As the organization grew, CEO Ken Olsen attempted to implement greater control, yet his efforts were ineffective. As Schein (2003) noted, "What Olson did not realize, and what would haunt him more and more, was that twenty-five years of empowering others left them feeling they knew better what was wanted anyway, with the result that he could not assert control in the way he wanted to" (p. 200).

9.1.3. *Industry and community context*

Organizations do not operate in a vacuum, but are influenced by elements of the broader contexts in which they are embedded. Organizational cultures, for example, have been found to vary more across than within industries (Chatman & Jehn, 1994). Dominating conflict cultures will be more prevalent in highly competitive industries in which value is placed on coming out ahead and beating the competition. Put simply, the competitive norms within the broader industry context are expected to trickle down into organizations, resulting in organizational norms that similarly promote competition among employees. Likewise, community factors also affect the behaviors that are seen as appropriate within organizations through social learning processes (Dietz, Robinson, Folger, Baron, & Schulz, 2003). Dominating conflict cultures will be more prevalent in communities where there is a lot of aggression and violence (Brief et al., 2005; Scott, 1992) and in communities that value individualism and low constraint (e.g., the Northeast in the U.S.; Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002). Communities that have poor economic conditions (e.g., high degrees of unemployment, low opportunities for advancement) may also increase threats and competition in organizations (Quillian, 1996), thus facilitating the development of dominating conflict cultures.

9.1.4. *Societal culture*

Organizational theorists have long argued that work institutions are open systems that perpetuate and reinforce dominant norms in the societal context (Emery & Trist, 1965; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kopelman, Brief, & Guzzo, 1990; Thompson & McEwen, 1958). Cross-cultural psychologists have likewise theorized that societal culture has top-down effects on organizational culture (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Kanungo & Jaeger, 1990). While there is clearly within nation variability in conflict cultures, we theorize that the types of conflict cultures that emerge in organizations will vary, on average, across societal cultures. Dominating conflict cultures will be more common in national cultures that emphasize vertical individualism (Triandis, 1995), masculinity (Hofstede, 1980), and looseness (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006; Pelto, 1968). Research has shown, for example, that individuals in individualistic nations generally prefer forcing conflict resolution strategies (Holt & DeVore, 2005) and prefer to resolve conflicts actively and directly (Adair, Okumura, & Brett, 2001; Smith, Dugan, Peterson, & Leung, 1998). Indeed, in her book *The argument culture*, Tannen (1998) documents how adversarial rhetoric that conflicts should be handled as a "war" or a "battles to be won" is rampant throughout U.S. institutions—in the media, politics, courts, and schools (see also Gelfand & McCusker, 2002). Dominating conflict cultures will also be more prevalent in societies that are loose, wherein there is little situational constraint and there is tolerance for deviant behavior (Gelfand, Nishii, et al., 2006), and in masculine cultures, which value material resources, competition, and advancement (Hofstede, 1980).

9.2. Collaborative conflict cultures

Collaborative conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations where conditions foster cooperation along with empowerment and latitude. Accordingly, they are likely to emerge in organizations with charismatic, transformational, and/or relational leaders; in organizations characterized by decentralized decision-making, low formalization, and cooperative reward structures; in organizations that are in high growth and dynamic industries; and in regions and societies characterized by horizontal collectivism, societal looseness, and cultural femininity.

9.2.1. Leadership

Collaborative conflict cultures are most likely to emerge in organizations with charismatic, transformational, and relational leaders who empower their subordinates and emphasize the importance of the good of the organization over individual interests. Charismatic leaders are visionaries and challengers of the status quo, and they foster empowerment and cooperation among followers (Bass, 1988; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Hepworth & Towler, 2004; House, 1977; Jung & Sosik, 2002). Similarly, transformational leaders motivate followers to go beyond their individual self interest to work for the goals of the group, and they empower their followers through such strategies as intellectual stimulation in which they “encourage the expression of ideas” (Bass, 1997, p. 133). Finally, as compared to leaders with masculine orientations who focus on autonomy and individualism (discussed above), relational leaders foster *mutual empowerment*, wherein employees have high efficacy to accomplish tasks, and *team creation*, or “an environment in which the positive outcomes of relational interactions can be achieved—outcomes like cooperation, collaboration, trust, respect, and collective achievement” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 280). In all, charismatic, transformational, and relational leaders create environments where there is high efficacy and voice along with cooperation, key ingredients for the development of collaborative conflict cultures.

9.2.2. Organizational structure and rewards

Collaborative conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations with low formalization and low centralization and in organizations with cooperative reward structures. Both low formalization and low centralization afford latitude and opportunities for participation and innovation. Thus, in these structures, employees will be more empowered to actively deal with conflict. As well, cooperative reward structures orient employees toward the good of the group, instead of the individual, which facilitates a collaborative approach to conflict management. This is supported in research by Alper, Tjosvold, and Law (1998) who found that teams with cooperative goals were significantly more likely to engage in “constructive controversy,” or openly discussing different perspectives. In all, when low formalization and centralization are combined with cooperative reward systems, these structural elements will facilitate latitude and cooperation which are key components of collaborative conflict cultures.

9.2.3. Industry and community context

Collaborative conflict cultures are more likely to emerge in high growth and dynamic industries, which has been associated with innovation, people orientation, and team orientation (Chatman & Jehn, 1994). In addition, community characteristics are expected to facilitate the development of collaborative conflict cultures. The notion of safety and cooperation are central to the cooperative nature of collaborative conflict cultures. Therefore, collaborative conflict cultures are most likely to develop in communities and industries characterized by economic affluence and a low degree of threat.

9.2.4. Societal culture

Collaborative conflict cultures are most likely to emerge in societal cultures characterized by horizontal collectivism, looseness, and femininity. Horizontal collectivistic cultures are characterized by egalitarian and cooperative goals, and are not as tightly regulated by authorities as is the case in vertical collectivistic cultures (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Research indeed suggests that low-power distance and collectivism are both associated with greater empowerment (Sigler & Pearson, 2000). Collaborative conflict cultures are also likely to emerge in societies that are loose, where there is an absence of strict rules and a high degree of latitude (Gelfand, Nishii, et al., 2006), and in societies that are high on femininity, which value cooperation over competition (Hofstede, 1980). Leung, Bond, Carment, and Krishnan (1990), for example, found that cooperative approaches to conflict were more common in a more feminine society (i.e., the Netherlands) as opposed to a more masculine society (i.e., Canada).

9.3. Conflict avoidant cultures

Conflict avoidant cultures are likely to emerge in organizations where conditions foster cooperation along with a high degree of constraint. They are likely to emerge in organizations with leaders who have a high need for closure or who are characterized by an extreme relational orientation; in organizations that have a high degree of formalization and centralization and have a cooperative reward structure; in organizations that are in low growth and stable industries; and in societies characterized by vertical collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and tightness.

9.3.1. Leadership

Leaders with a high need for closure (NFC), who have a strong preference for order and predictability and a discomfort with ambiguity and lack of control (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), will facilitate the development of conflict avoidant cultures. Individuals high on NFC yearn for consensus and disdain dissent. As Kruglanski and Webster (1996) note, they “prefer to associate with similar-minded others, feel positively disposed toward group members who facilitate consensus, and feel negatively disposed toward dissenters or opinion deviates who jeopardize consensus” (p. 265). NFC has been associated with the desire to agree with others when making decisions at the individual level (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993) and pressures toward consensus at the group level. For example, groups with high NFC demonstrate greater conformity, stronger group norms, and greater resistance to the violation of group norms (De Grada, Kruglanski, Mannetti, & Pierro, 1999; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998). Accordingly, leaders with a high NFC will create strong pressures toward consensus and will send messages that conflicting opinions are not tolerated (e.g., by immediately cutting off discussion of contentious issues), thereby facilitating the development of conflict avoidant cultures.

Whereas high-NFC leaders breed conflict avoidance through fear of ambiguity and disorder, leaders who have an extreme relational orientation (Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O’Brien, 2006) or are high on unmitigated communion (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998) breed conflict avoidance through their fear of conflict disrupting relationships. Harmony and mutual liking are central goals for extremely relational and communal leaders, and accordingly, conflict among employees is considered a great source of distress (Cross & Madson, 1997). Extreme relationality has been associated with avoidant conflict strategies (Oetzel et al., 2001) and suboptimal negotiation outcomes (Amanatullah et al., 2007; Curhan, Neale, Ross, & Rosencranz-Engelmann, in press; Gelfand, Major, et al., 2006). Leaders high on relational orientation facilitate the emergence of conflict avoidant cultures by sending strong messages that conflict should be suppressed in order to maintain positive interpersonal relationships. In this way, although relational leaders facilitate collaborative conflict cultures (as discussed above), when relationality is taken to the extreme, avoidant conflict cultures are likely to develop.

9.3.2. Organizational structure and rewards

Conflict avoidant cultures are likely to emerge in organizations high on formalization and centralization which also have a cooperative reward structure. Highly formalized and centralized organizations afford more predictability, order, and constraint, and employees in such structures are less able to actively participate and voice their opinions (cf. Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Unlike passive-aggressive cultures (discussed below), however, avoidant cultures will emerge when high formalization/centralization is combined with structures that foster agreeable norms, such as interdependent and cooperative reward structures which emphasize group over individual interests. Together, these structural elements facilitate a high degree of constraint along with a focus on cooperation, which are key ingredients of collaborative conflict cultures.

9.3.3. Industry and community context

Conflict avoidant cultures are most likely to emerge in industries that are characterized by either very high stability or very high instability. In industries that are highly stable and have low growth, organizations tend to develop reliability-oriented cultures (Gordon, 1991), which value order and predictability, and employees tend to have low voice (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Likewise, in industries where there is unexpected threat, there is a strong need for control, predictability, and order, and dissent is viewed as threatening (Bourgeois, 1985; McKelvey, 1982; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In this way, either highly stable or unstable industries will facilitate the emergence of conflict avoidant cultures. The prevalence of avoidant conflict cultures may vary by geographic regions. For example, some

regions of the United States place greater emphasis on order and conservative values (e.g., the South and Mountain States, Medoff, 1997), and accordingly, we expect that conflict avoidant cultures may be more likely to develop in such regions.

9.3.4. *Societal culture*

Conflict avoidant cultures will be more prevalent in societal cultures characterized by high-uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and tightness. Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which ambiguous situations are seen as threatening to individuals, and people seek consistency, structure, and order in their daily lives (Hofstede, 1980). In high-uncertainty avoidant societies, ambiguous situations and unfamiliar risks raise fears, and there is a high formalization of rules (Hofstede, 1980). Conflict, which naturally involves uncertainty and threatens the social order, is viewed as dangerous, and accordingly, conflict avoidant cultures will be more likely to emerge in societies high on uncertainty avoidance. Conflict avoidant cultures will also be more likely to emerge in societies that are high on vertical collectivism, where individuals are motivated to maintain the harmony of the group and submit to authorities (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Research has found that avoidant conflict management strategies are prevalent in collectivistic societies that also tend to be high on verticality (Friedman, Chi, & Liu, 2002; Oetzel et al., 2001; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Finally, conflict avoidant cultures are also likely to emerge more in tight societies, in which there are strict rules for behavior and there is a high degree of situational constraint (Gelfand, Nishii, et al., 2006).

9.4. *Passive–aggressive conflict cultures*

Passive–aggressive conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations where conditions foster competition along with high constraint. Accordingly, they are most likely to emerge in organizations with authoritarian, abusive, and insecure leaders; in organizations with high formalization and centralization with competitive reward structures; in organizations that have many occupational specialties, ambiguous rule enforcement and an unclear scope of authority; in organizations that operate in stable, low-growth industries; and in societies characterized by high-power distance and cultural tightness.

9.4.1. *Leadership*

Passive–aggressive conflict cultures develop in organizations in which there is either a highly authoritarian leader, who provides too much control and structure, or a highly insecure or weak leader, who provides too little control and structure (Bush, 1983; Neilson, Pasternack, & Van Nuys, 2005). These types of leadership coupled with a highly bureaucratic structure and competitive structures (discussed below) lead to low-collective efficacy for dealing with conflicts openly and constructively. As Conger and Kanungo (1988) note, “authoritarian management styles can strip control and discretion from subordinates, thereby heightening the sense of powerlessness for employees” (p. 478). At the extreme, these leaders may be abusive or “petty tyrants” who force their own points of view and create a very negative, competitive atmosphere given their propensity for belittling subordinates, playing favorites, and administering arbitrary punishment (Ashforth, 1994, 1997). In contexts with authoritarian or abusive leaders, individuals are therefore likely to respond to conflict by taking it out in a passive–aggressive manner, which enables them to still deal with the conflict or “get away with it,” but in a manner that would not be controlled by the leader or risk potential punishment. Indeed, Kets de Vries (1999) argued that domineering leadership produces passive–aggressive behavior among individuals who are “afraid of showing disagreement openly, [and so] they express indirect resistance to control through such means as procrastination, stubbornness, intentional inefficiency, and forgetfulness.” (p. 760).

On the other hand, leaders who are insecure or weak are also likely to facilitate the development of passive–aggressive conflict cultures. Although weak or insecure leaders may evoke dominating behaviors (discussed previously), when there is also a highly bureaucratic, formalized organizational structure constraining behavior, passive–aggressive conflict cultures are more likely to develop. An insecure or weak leader, who has an unclear scope of authority or inconsistently enforces rules, is likely to create a shared perception that open discussion of conflict will not be fruitful, while at the same time, the bureaucratic organizational structure provides little efficacy for handling conflict in other ways, creating fertile ground for passive–aggressive conflict cultures. Consistent with this, Neilson et al. (2005) argue that leaders who are unclear about where their authority lies create passive–aggressive behavior among subordinates, who ultimately lack respect for organizational leadership. In all, organizations that have

authoritarian, abusive leaders or have insecure, weak leaders create feelings of low-collective efficacy that individuals can solve conflicts actively and constructively.

9.4.2. *Organizational structure and rewards*

Passive–aggressive conflict cultures are likely to emerge in highly centralized, formalized, and bureaucratic organizational structures. In organizations where power and control are concentrated at the top, individuals will not feel empowered to actively deal with conflicts. This is consistent with work on passive–defensive organizational cultures which also tend to be highly centralized and allow employees little control over their work lives (Cooke & Szumal, 2000). In addition, high formalization creates a bureaucratic environment in which individuals feel little autonomy and control (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Martinko & Gardner, 1982), and thus, little ability to deal with conflict openly. Passive–aggressive conflict cultures can also thrive in organizations that have many occupational specialties and multiple organizational subsystems (Hage & Aiken, 1967), creating ambiguous rule enforcement and scope of authority. Similar to dominating conflict cultures, organizations with passive–aggressive conflict cultures are also likely to have individualistic or competitive reward structures. Yet when combined with controlling, bureaucratic organizational structures or highly complex structures that lack a clear scope of authority and rule enforcement, passive–aggressive conflict culture will be more likely to emerge.

9.4.3. *Industry and community context*

Passive–aggressive conflict cultures will be more common in organizations that have a more closed system and operate in stable, low-growth industries. A closed organizational system is likely to emphasize greater control and less input from outside sources, creating a tighter and more constrained organization. As a result, this is also likely to exacerbate employee feelings of low efficacy in dealing with conflict in an open and active manner, leading to more non-constructive, passive–aggressive responses. As in conflict avoidant cultures, organizations with passive–aggressive conflict cultures are also likely to operate in stable, low-growth industries. Morrison and Milliken (2000) argue that organizations in more stable and mature industries are less likely to value employee ideas and opinions in general given that there is not as great a need for adaptability and creative strategies as compared to more changing and unstable industries. Such conditions provide conditions for the development of passive–aggressive conflict cultures, particularly when combined with other leadership and organizational structure features discussed previously.

9.4.4. *Societal context*

Finally, passive–aggressive conflict cultures are more likely to develop in organizations in societal cultures that are high in power distance (Hofstede, 1980) and tightness (Gelfand, Nishii, et al., 2006). Power distance refers to the degree to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980). In high-power distance nations, power is not actively challenged, there is a high degree of centralized decision-making, and subordinates are expected to provide loyalty in return for protection (Hofstede, 1980). We theorize that particularly in contexts where there are abusive leaders and competitive structures in high-power distance cultures, employees would manage conflict in passive–aggressive ways. Additionally, passive–aggressive conflict cultures are more likely to emerge in tight societies in which there are strict rules and there is a high degree of situational constraint (Gelfand, Nishii, et al., 2006).

10. Bottom-up processes and conflict cultures

In addition to the above top-down environmental factors, organizational culture is also shaped by bottom-up processes. Schneider (1987) advanced the notion that it is the attributes of the people that make up an organization that are the fundamental determinants of organizational climate and culture. According to the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model, people are attracted to particular careers, settings, and organizations as a function of their own values, attitudes, and personality characteristics. They are then selected into an organization based on the fit between their characteristics and the characteristics of the organization. Those individuals that do not fit the environment will leave the organization, while those that do fit will remain. Ultimately, this process yields homogeneity of personality in organizations. Moreover, through daily interactions and information sharing, individuals engage in a process of sensemaking and develop shared realities (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). As Ostroff (1992) explains “through daily

associations with others, employees develop relationships at work that fall into routine patterns, patterns that prescribe behavioral expectations and influence behaviors” (p. 964). It is through such bottom-up processes that characteristics of individuals become amplified and have emergent characteristics at higher levels (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

In the case of conflict cultures, we similarly theorize that through involvement in and repeated observation of *conflict situations*, individuals come to develop shared perceptions of how conflict is defined and viewed in the organization, as well as the value placed upon particular ways of dealing with conflict. The emergence process is constrained and influenced by higher-level factors, such as those previously discussed, that shape the interactions and exchanges that take place among organizational members (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). However, it is only through the interactions and behaviors of organizational members, which are influenced as much by individual characteristics as higher level factors, that the process of sensemaking and shared perceptions of conflict culture occurs. Below we discuss examples of such bottom-up factors in terms of the different characteristics of individuals and groups that make up organizations – including personality, demography, values, and networks – which through everyday interaction facilitates dominating, collaborative, conflict avoidant, and passive-aggressive conflict cultures.

10.1. Personality and conflict cultures

The big five factors of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992) have been implicated in many organizational behavior phenomena, and conflict cultures should be of no exception. For example, given that individuals high in agreeableness tend to be flexible, good-natured, cooperative, and tolerant (Barrick & Mount, 1991), organizations that tend to attract and retain a large percentage of individuals that are high on agreeableness will be more likely to develop agreeable conflict cultures. However, it is the *configuration* of big five traits that likely helps to further explain the development of avoidance or collaborative conflict cultures. For example, organizations that have a high percentage of individuals who are agreeable and introverted will be more likely to develop conflict avoidant cultures, whereas organizations with a high percentage of individuals who are agreeable and extraverted will be more likely to develop collaborative conflict cultures. This is consistent with research at the individual level which found that a combination of agreeableness and extraversion predicts problem-solving conflict management strategies (Nauta & Sanders, 2000), and with research that found that introversion predicts non-confrontational strategies (Moberg, 2001).

By contrast, organizations that tend to attract and retain individuals that are low on agreeableness will be more likely characterized by disagreeable conflict cultures. We expect dominating conflict cultures to emerge when a high percentage of individuals are low on agreeableness and are extraverted. This is consistent with research that found that a combination of extraversion and low agreeableness predicts contending at the individual level (Nauta & Sanders, 2000). By contrast, passive-aggressive conflict cultures are more likely to emerge when a high percentage of individuals are low on agreeableness and introverted. In all, given that certain organizations may be more likely to attract and retain individuals with similar personalities, the resulting homogeneity of these characteristics and subsequent interactions among organizational members will play a significant role in the different conflict cultures that develop.

10.2. Demographic composition and networks and conflict cultures

Demographic composition (e.g., gender, ethnicity, occupational status) and the nature of ties in social networks play a role in the bottom-up emergence of conflict cultures. Research has shown that men display more aggression than women in general (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) and in the workplace in particular (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Neuman & Baron, 1998). Moreover, men are more likely to express their aggression through direct as opposed to indirect means (Österman et al., 1998). We would therefore expect that predominantly male organizations are more likely to be characterized by dominating conflict cultures. Alternatively, women are more likely to engage in relational practices (e.g., Fletcher, 1998) and less likely to engage in aggressive acts (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Thus, we expect that predominantly female organizations are more likely to be characterized by agreeable conflict cultures (i.e., collaborative or avoidant) than disagreeable conflict cultures (i.e., dominating or passive-aggressive).

Composition in terms of the occupational status of organizational members also likely affects the emergence of conflict cultures. For example, disagreeable conflict cultures are more likely to emerge in organizations with predominantly high-status members given that high-status individuals engage in fewer communal behaviors than their low-status counterparts (Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount, 1996). By contrast, agreeable conflict cultures are

more likely to emerge in organizations with predominantly low-status members who tend to be more communal (Conway et al., 1996). Ethnic composition in groups is also expected to facilitate the development of distinct conflict cultures. For example, ethnically diverse groups comprised of clear faultlines may have a higher degree of intergroup competition and threat, causing disagreeable conflict cultures to develop (cf. Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). Finally, the composition of ties within social networks likely affects the emergence of conflict cultures. Disagreeable conflict cultures are more likely to emerge in networks with weak and uniplex ties, and with adversarial ties, whereas agreeable conflict cultures are more likely to emerge in networks that have strong and multiplex ties and more friendship ties.

10.3. *Values and conflict cultures*

The dominant value orientation of employees will also influence the type of conflict culture that emerges through its influence on the behaviors and routines that develop among employees. Drawing on Schwartz's (1994) values circumplex, we theorize that dominating conflict cultures will emerge in organizations that attract and retain individuals with *power* values, given that these individuals are motivated by "social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources" (p. 22). Passive–aggressive conflict cultures can also develop in organizations that have a high percentage of individuals with power values, particularly when situational factors or other individual differences constrain the active or direct expression of power. By contrast, collaborative conflict cultures are likely to emerge in organizations that attract and retain individuals with *benevolent* values, given that these individuals are motivated by "preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 22). Finally, conflict avoidant cultures are more likely to emerge in organizations that attract and retain individuals with *conformity* values, given that these individuals are motivated by "restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 22).

It is worth noting some constraints on the bottom-up processes discussed above. To the extent that individuals have similar characteristics in the organization *and* have some degree of interdependence, the more their characteristics will influence the development of distinct conflict cultures. However, when there is little homogeneity in these attributes and/or little possibility for interaction, *conflict culture strength* will be low. Likewise, bottom-up factors and emergent processes in the development of organizational culture are greatest when an organization is young or is going through a dramatic change (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Therefore, the development of certain types of conflict cultures may especially be influenced by bottom-up processes at earlier stages in the organizational life cycle.

Finally, there may be an interaction of some bottom-up and top-down processes in the development of conflict cultures. For example, the industry norms for competition that provide fertile ground for the development of dominating conflict cultures will be reinforced by the types of personalities that are attracted to these industries in the first place. That is, jobs in highly competitive industries are likely to attract individuals with more aggressive personalities due to the nature and skills required in the job. And, the greater the number of aggressive individuals in the organization, the more likely they will create dominating conflict cultures, through their mutual actions and development of a shared reality for managing conflict. By contrast, less competitive, non-profit contexts are more likely to attract and retain individuals with less aggressive, more relational personality characteristics which also reinforces the development of more agreeable conflict cultures. In these ways, bottom-up processes such as personality interact with top-down processes such as industry norms to create a mutually reinforcing conflict culture.

11. *Consequences of conflict cultures*

In this section, we consider some of the consequences of dominating, collaborative, avoidant, and passive–aggressive conflict cultures for organizational functioning. We consider conflict cultures' consequences for a number of criteria, including *organizational performance and viability* (Hackman, 1987), *organizational health and well-being* (De Dreu et al., 2004), and *conflict resolution or recurrence* (Ury et al., 1988). A key point is that each conflict culture can have both positive and negative consequences, and thus, the type of culture best suited to a given organization depends on the strategic goals therein. After detailing the positive and negative consequences of each conflict culture, we discuss moderators of the conflict culture–outcome relationship, including the nature of jobs, the degree and type of conflict, and congruency with the environmental context.

11.1. *Dominating conflict cultures*

Although dominating conflict cultures may appear hostile to outsiders, they may have some positive consequences. For example, dominating conflict cultures create the potential for innovation given that they foster the active expression of divergent and competing opinions (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Bantel & Jackson, 1989; De Dreu & West, 2001). In dominating conflict cultures, individuals actively voice their opinions and disagreements and try to win out over others. In this way, dominating conflict cultures create a market economy in which the best idea wins. For example, in describing DEC, an organization with a dominating conflict culture, a former employee remarked:

Over the years, I came to attribute Digital's tremendous success more and more to its culture. Additional research affirmed for me the uniqueness and strength of the core beliefs and the role they played in fostering innovation, industriousness, and team play. It is fair to say that in those years, Digital truly had an open, adaptive culture" (DeLisi, 1998, p. 121).

Additionally, dominating conflict cultures can facilitate rapid decision-making processes, as compared to other conflict cultures (e.g., collaborative cultures discussed below), given that the weakest arguments are likely to receive very little attention. As DeLisi (1998) noted, "In Digital, there seemed to be an imperative to action that overcame the slowness of decision-making" (p. 121).

Despite such potential benefits, however, dominating conflict cultures also have a number of detriments. Given the competitiveness inherent to dominating conflict cultures, individuals therein are likely to experience greater stress, burnout, and turnover. Moreover, because individuals are concerned with winning and advancing their own agendas, dominating conflict cultures may be susceptible to flawed decision-making due to a lack of careful consideration of alternative courses of action. For example, as the dominating culture at DEC became increasingly extreme, it became apparent that the "truth-through-conflict model was so strong that it tended to override efforts to reflect, contemplate, and consider alternatives carefully" (Schein, 2003, p. 87). Similarly, DeLisi (1998) remarked that at DEC, the "failure to value someone else's ideas and inputs also translated itself into an unwillingness to value external inputs and to take note of what was happening on the outside" (p. 123), which ultimately contributed to its downfall.

Finally, dominating conflict cultures are likely to lead to further conflict escalation given that individuals actively fight for their side without reflecting on others' perspectives, and thus are unlikely to uncover underlying interests that are driving conflicts (Ury et al., 1988). For example, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) found that string quartets with dominating conflict management styles had significant unresolved conflict which ultimately led the group to disband. As they noted about one dominating group:

If you continue screaming at every opportunity, you have a bloody chance of persuading them. The news of this group's break up was not surprising (p. 179).

11.2. *Collaborative conflict cultures*

Collaborative conflict cultures are also associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Like dominating cultures, collaborative conflict cultures can foster innovation and creativity, yet in this case, through an open discussion of divergent perspectives in a supportive environment (Chen, Liu, et al., 2005; Chen, Tjosvold, & Su, 2005). Unlike dominating cultures, however, organizations with collaborative conflict cultures will be more adaptive to change, given that there is an emphasis on active listening of others' point of view and seeking the best solutions for all parties involved. Norms that encourage the integration of multiple perspectives into problem solutions should better position the organization to rapidly adapt to new business demands. Finally, collaborative conflict cultures will positively impact organizational viability and conflict resolution. Norms for bringing conflicts into the open in a supportive environment help conflicting parties to resolve underlying interests and thus, promote conflict resolution (Ury et al., 1988). As well, the prosocial norms and empowerment that are inherent in collaborative conflict cultures should enhance employee satisfaction and reduce burnout and turnover.

Collaborative conflict cultures, however, are not without drawbacks. Norms for seeking everyone's input and active listening to all conflicting parties' perspectives is time-consuming and may impede an organization's ability to make decisions quickly and efficiently, especially under time pressure. Consider the case of Hewlett-Packard, known for its collaborative, but consensus focused, culture (Perlow & Kind, 2004). Hewlett and Packard had "a tradition they called

‘management by walking around,’ in which managers spend time having informal chats with employees in the workplace to get feedback and develop close ties” (Pimentel, 2001, online source). However, after the founders left, the VP of HR stated that “It was distorted into an everybody gets involved in every decision and we’ll keep discussing until we get consensus approach” (Pimentel, 2001, online source). When collaboration is taken to the extreme, the amount of time and energy devoted to consensus building, instead of task accomplishment, can outweigh benefits that are gained through increased innovation and adaptability.

11.3. *Conflict avoidant cultures*

Conflict avoidant cultures also have both positive and negative outcomes. For example, in conflict avoidant cultures discussion is suppressed, thus making avoidant cultures potentially the most efficient of the four conflict culture types. In this way, particularly if there is little time to follow through on conflicts and/or a high need for efficiency, conflict avoidant cultures can be advantageous. Conflict avoidant cultures can also enhance predictability and control, outcomes that are particularly important in high-threat environments. To the extent that the overt management of conflict can cause serious disruption, then, conflict avoidance can be functional. For example, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) noted that successful groups had “Well-established, implicit rules concerning what could be said and what couldn’t. . . They recognized that Pandora’s box would open if they violated these unwritten rules” (p. 178). As one member they interviewed remarked, “Obviously you know where the sore points are. If you press on them, if you invite them, it’s a massacre” (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991, p. 178).

Yet the benefits of increased efficiency and control associated with conflict avoidant cultures need to be weighed against a number of drawbacks. First, conflict avoidant cultures are likely to be low on adaptability. Due to strong norms against “rocking the boat,” open discussion, and therefore awareness of changing trends is likely to be low in conflict avoidant cultures. Furthermore, the lack of information sharing that characterizes conflict avoidant cultures can prevent innovative solutions to problems and optimal decision-making. Consider the case example of Varsity.com, as described by Perlow (2003):

As a result of all this silencing, the founders were left unaware of all the shortcomings Peter [CEO] saw in their organization, and Peter was left unaware of the founders’ doubts about his new hires. Worse yet, Peter felt resentment toward the founders for not understanding his concerns about the company, and the founders started to question Peter’s ability to run the company (p. 14).

Additionally, in conflict avoidant cultures differences are suppressed on the surface, yet if left to continue to bubble underneath, they will perpetuate unresolved conflicts. Moreover, if conflicts continue to fester, conflict avoidant cultures can threaten organizational viability, in that they can foster tension, distrust, and negative relationships among organizational members. Ironically, then, the suppression of conflict due to the desire to preserve relationships can end up having the opposite effect. Again consider the case of Varsity.com:

Originally, the founders and their new professional managers had silenced themselves in hopes of preserving their relationships above all else. Now both sides silenced themselves because they had lost so much respect for one another that it was not worth the effort to try to make things work between them (Perlow, 2003, p. 144).

Therefore, although conflict avoidant organizational cultures have the advantage of increased efficiency, order, and predictability, they can also be characterized by low adaptability, poor decision-making, low-conflict resolution, and low viability.

11.4. *Passive-aggressive conflict cultures*

Organizations with passive-aggressive conflict cultures can appear harmonious and functional on the surface, yet are characterized by a high degree of dysfunction behind the scenes. Thus, passive-aggressive conflict cultures share many of the negative outcomes but few of the positive outcomes associated with other conflict cultures. For example, like dominating conflict cultures, passive-aggressive conflict cultures are likely to result in low-organizational viability and have high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover due to backstabbing and other negative conflict management behaviors. Similar to conflict avoidant cultures, the lack of open expression of differences of opinions, along with cynicism that is inherent to passive aggressive cultures, will stifle innovation and adaptability. Unlike

conflict avoidant cultures, however, passive–aggressive conflict cultures are likely to be characterized by poor efficiency given that the dominant response to conflicts is passive resistance through such behaviors as withholding information or intentional work slowdowns. Take for example, the passive–aggressive culture in one organization described by Neilson et al. (2005). One employee remarked on the impact of passive–aggressive behavior on efficiency, stating that, “purchasing, feeling it had been ignored, withheld its approval” (p. 88). Through this act of omission, purchasing forced the business unit to find a new supplier in order to purchase the more expensive parts. As a result, “the whole process took months rather than the few weeks it should have” (Neilson et al., 2005, p. 88–89).

Similarly, passive–aggressive cultures can ultimately produce poor performance given that individuals resist cooperating with others to perform collective tasks. For example, in their study of String Quartets, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) noted that some groups

Acquiesced in arguments and only expressed their continuing disagreement in the worst possible place—in concert. . . they complied with group decisions about musical interpretations, but they played the tune their own way in performance (p. 178).

Finally, similar to dominating conflict cultures, passive–aggressive conflict cultures can lead to greater conflict escalation because an initial conflict is likely to be exacerbated through behind the scenes competition and backstabbing, preventing an understanding of underlying interests through which long-lasting solutions can be developed. In sum, passive–aggressive cultures negatively affect a number of organizational outcomes, including turnover, creativity, efficiency, and conflict resolution, and lack the benefits to organizational performance found in other conflict culture types.

11.5. Moderators of the conflict culture–outcome relationship

The relationships between conflict cultures on organizational outcomes described above will be contingent on factors such as the nature of jobs, the degree and nature of conflict, and the fit of the culture to the larger environment.

11.5.1. Nature of jobs

The nature of jobs, particularly the degree to which tasks are interdependent and complex, will moderate conflict culture effects (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). The conflict culture–outcome relationship will be stronger in organizations with highly interdependent tasks than with relatively autonomous tasks. If organizational goals can be accomplished through the independent work of organizational members, conflict management norms will have a weaker impact on outcomes. Alternatively, if organizational tasks require coordination among organizational members, norms for handling conflict will have a stronger impact on organizational outcomes. Likewise, routine tasks, as opposed to complex tasks, are unlikely to benefit from the open discussion of different views and perspectives. Thus, we expect a weaker relationship between organizational conflict culture type and outcomes in organizations that primarily engage in routine tasks as opposed to complex tasks. Consistent with task type as a moderator of the conflict culture–outcome relationship, research has found that integrative group conflict management strategies improve decision effectiveness for complex tasks but not for simple tasks (Kuhn & Poole, 2000).

11.5.2. Degree and nature of conflict

The degree and type of conflict present in the organization will also moderate the conflict culture to outcome relationship (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Conflict cultures will only have a strong impact on organizational outcomes when conflict is a frequent and pervasive characteristic of organizational life. Further, the most effective type of conflict culture for a given organization will be contingent on whether the organization is characterized by high levels of task or relationship conflict. Research suggests that open or active conflict management strategies improve performance in the face of task conflict (De Church & Marks, 2001; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Therefore, a conflict culture perspective would suggest task conflict could improve performance possibly in *either* collaborative or dominating, truth-wins, conflict cultures. In contrast, research has shown that relationship conflict is less detrimental to performance when it is not discussed openly as in conflict avoidant cultures (De Church & Marks, 2001; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). However, it remains possible that relationship conflict could be less detrimental in collaborative cultures, where norms for discussion are both collaborative and active, and the most detrimental in dominating cultures which are disagreeable and active.

11.5.3. *Fit to the context*

Conflict cultures may have different effects on outcomes depending on their alignment with the strategic goals of the organization and the broader environmental context therein. As a general principle, the more the conflict culture is congruent with norms in the larger environment in which organizations are embedded, the more likely it is to have positive (or less negative) outcomes within the organization. For example, conflict avoidant cultures might be more effective for task performance in stable industries and in highly collectivistic and uncertainty avoidant cultures, given that such strategies are aligned with the environmental context. Likewise, dominating conflict cultures may have fewer negative outcomes in industries that are highly competitive or in societies where competitive strategies are widely distributed throughout cultural institutions (e.g., vertical individualistic cultures).

12. Implications of the conflict culture paradigm

12.1. *Theoretical implications*

Conflict is inherent in any organizational system, and not surprisingly, conflict management has received much attention in the organizational behavior literature. Yet to date, with the exception of grievance and ODR systems, much of the research on conflict management has had a decidedly micro-focus, examining general conflict management processes at the individual and small group level of analysis. In this chapter, we argued that by conceptualizing conflict management processes as intricately linked to the organizational context, we are in a better position to understand conflict *in situ*, in this case, in organizations. Rather than merely strategies employed by individuals, we advocated that conflict management processes are a socially learned and socially reinforced phenomenon; through both top-down and bottom-up processes in organizations, distinct conflict cultures develop which reduce the range of individual variation in conflict management strategies and which ultimately affect higher level outcomes in organizational settings. More generally, the chapter begins to provide a multilevel perspective on conflict management which adds to the growing multilevel revolution taking place in the organizational sciences.

Another meta-theoretical aim of this paper was to connect the literature on conflict management with the broader organizational behavior literature. Conflict research has, generally speaking, been isolated from mainstream organizational behavior scholarship. Likewise, the organizational behavior literature rarely speaks to conflict processes. A conflict culture paradigm has the potential to provide intellectual bridges between conflict management scholarship and research on leadership, structure, culture, and industry, among other topics. For example, a conflict culture perspective provides a theoretical connection between conflict research and *organizational change*, where conflict cultures can be diagnosed and changed through the various “levers” or conditions that were identified in this article, a point to which we return below. Moreover, identifying the facilitating conditions of conflict cultures helps to unify *leadership* and conflict research, two areas that are surely in need of integration. From a conflict culture perspective, leadership styles are seen as not only motivating and directing followers’ goal directed behavior, but also setting the stage for conflict cultures in units. A conflict culture perspective also embraces the notion that *features of organizational environments*, including structure, industry, communities, and national culture, are related to organizational conflict processes.

From another meta-theoretical view, a conflict culture paradigm links the study of conflict management with a number of core theories that are at the bedrock of organizational behavior research. For example, theorizing about conflict as an element of the organizational context invariably involves *attraction-selection-attrition* processes at the individual and unit level (Schneider, 1987), and involves person-organization fit processes vis-à-vis conflict cultures. Likewise, the fit of conflict cultures can also be studied at the unit level and may be relevant to the success rates of mergers and acquisitions as well as the integration of different subsidiaries of global companies. In all, a conflict culture perspective has the potential to provide an intellectual bridge and mutual enrichment between conflict research and other organizational behavior topics.

12.2. *Diagnosing and changing conflict cultures*

A conflict culture perspective begins to provide a diagnostic toolkit for managers interested in better understanding and using conflict management to further their strategic goals. We have argued that dominating, collaborative, avoidant, and passive-aggressive conflict cultures develop and are maintained through specific top-down and bottom-up processes in organizations. Similar to other organizational diagnostic frameworks (e.g., Waterman, Peters, &

Phillips, 1980), organizations can use surveys, interviews, leadership profiles, etc., to assess not only the shared conflict management norms or type(s) of conflict culture that exists within their organization, but also obtain a profile of the leadership, structure and reward systems, and employee characteristics that may be helping or hindering the type of organizational conflict culture the organization would like to build. Diagnosing the industry, community, and societal contexts that we have discussed will also afford leaders the ability to further assess the fit between their organizational strategy and goals with their extant conflict cultures.

A conflict culture perspective helps to identify levers for organizational change. As with any culture, conflict cultures are not static, and processes associated with them can be actively challenged and changed, especially if conflict cultures are no longer serving strategic goals. Consider the highly visible organizational failures of DEC (dominating conflict culture) and Wang (conflict avoidant culture). Arguably, in both cases, the conflict cultures within these organizations served important functions and were associated with positive consequences early in their histories. Yet over time, they outlived changes in the environment.² In the case of Wang, for example, the conflict avoidant culture was effective as long as Ang Wang's strategic plan for the computer company was correct. Wang's failure to embrace the personal computer, however, ultimately led to the company's demise (Finkelstein, 2005). Similarly, the dominating conflict culture that characterized DEC was effective in the early years of the organization. Yet as the organization grew, competitive and disagreeable conflict management spiraled out of control and the organization's leaders were unable to reign in their employees (Schein, 2003).

As demonstrated by these examples, managers should be mindful of aligning conflict cultures with changes in the organization's environment. As with any culture change, conflict cultures can change through deliberate and drastic actions by top managers, or by employees – tempered radicals – who slowly challenge conflict norms in organizations (Meyerson, 2001). In either case, the identified determinants of conflict cultures – leadership, organizational structure and rewards, organizational context, and the types of people that are attracted, selected, and remain in the organization – can all be levers for conflict culture change. For example, leaders' behavior, we have argued, sends a strong signal to employees as to how conflict should be managed. Thus, leaders can create new conflict cultures by modeling and rewarding new conflict management behaviors and creating new rituals and symbols surrounding the conflict culture desired (Schein, 1990). As in any system, aligning leadership with changes in other elements that reinforce the conflict culture is critical for change to be effective (Kotter, 1995).

It is also important to note that throughout this paper we have discussed conflict cultures as a shared property of organizations, yet diagnosing conflict cultures at the organizational level may not always be appropriate. Subcultures may develop within organizations such that conflict cultures are shared within subunits on the basis of organizational structure (department, job position) or individual characteristics (gender, tenure, personality and values). Subcultures are likely to emerge in large organizations that include many professions because they are more likely to have a variety of functions (Boisnier & Chatman, 2003; Trice & Beyer, 1993); when organizational members are physically isolated from one another as in the case of geographically dispersed work units (Sackmann, 1992); in times of rapid change in which case some employees embrace the new direction of the organization while others attempt to hold onto the old way of doing business (e.g., Koza, 2002); or when the top-down and bottom-up forces that produce organizational-level culture are weak (Boisnier & Chatman, 2003; Coleman & Ramos, 1998; Jermier, Slocum, Fry, & Gaines, 1991; Sackmann, 1992). Thus, conflict culture diagnosis should be done not only with an eye for organizational-level cultures, but also with attention to subcultures and their strategic goals. Indeed, it may be functional for organizations to develop distinct conflict cultures across subunits. For example, organizations may benefit from facilitating a collaborative conflict culture in a research and development division that thrives on innovation, but a conflict avoidant culture in a manufacturing division that thrives on efficiency. Likewise, as we have noted, we presented “ideal types” (Doty & Glick, 1994), yet units may also develop hybrid conflict cultures which simultaneously incorporate elements from “neighboring” or similar conflict cultures in the typology.

12.3. *Empirical considerations*

Clearly, in order to test theory and create diagnostic tools, the development and validation of measures of organizational conflict cultures is needed. We view both qualitative and quantitative methodologies as useful and

² We thank Debbie Kolb for this insight.

complementary approaches for gaining a deep understanding of conflict cultures. Employees could be asked to tell stories (e.g., Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Pettigrew, 1979; Witmer, 1997) regarding how conflict is managed within the organization, which can then be used to infer conflict cultures. Qualitative information regarding conflict cultures could also be gleaned through individual (e.g., Brannen & Salk, 2000) or group interviews (Schein, 2000; Wilson, 2000), which can then be content coded, either manually or using a computer program such as NUDIST (e.g., Brannen & Salk, 2000; Witmer, 1997). Less obtrusive means of assessing conflict cultures, such as observations of meetings and casual conversations (e.g., Casey, 1999; Wilson, 2000) can also be used to assess conflict cultures. Alternatively, survey methodologies can be developed to assess conflict cultures, as they have been developed to assess more general aspects of organizational culture (e.g., Cooke & Szumal, 1993; House et al., 2004; O'Reilly et al., 1991). With this method, we recommend conceptualizing conflict culture as a referent-shift construct (Chan, 1998), and wording conflict culture items at the unit-level. For example, items used to assess conflict avoidant cultures should be worded as “In this organization, we avoid open discussion of conflict at all costs,” rather than “I avoid open discussion of conflict at all costs.” Regardless of whether qualitative or quantitative methods are used to assess conflict cultures, a key issue is the unit of specification or the meaningful unit of collective analysis. As noted above, conflict cultures need not exist only at the organization level; subcultures of conflict can exist within organizations and measurement and analysis strategies should be mindful of such potential variation.

13. Conclusion

Conflict in organizations is inevitable, and thus, understanding how to manage conflict has captured the attention of scholars and practitioners alike. Organizations as systems make the study and practice of conflict management, by necessity, a multilevel inquiry. In this chapter, we complement the basic processes perspective that is afforded by the micro-focus in conflict management research with a macro-perspective that is richly tied to the organization context. Together, they begin to provide a more complete account of conflict organizing processes in organizations.

Acknowledgements

We extend our gratitude to Jeanne Brett, Art Brief, Cheri Ostroff, Ray Friedman, Paul Hanges, Debbie Kolb, Andrew Schmidt, and Barry Staw for their very helpful comments on the manuscript. This chapter is dedicated to Benjamin Schneider, whose personal and intellectual influence have shaped the ideas expressed in this chapter, and whose collegiality and friendship have enriched the lives of many.

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