Towards understanding the role of emotions in conflict: a review and future directions

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper attempts to connect the literature on conflict and that of emotions. The argument presented is that emotions have until recently been understudied in conflict literature and vice versa. On the basis of the review of literature on both conflict and emotions, the paper points to new areas of exploration for researchers in both domains.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review of two separate sub-fields of study, namely conflict and emotions is provided with the intent of pointing towards gaps in connecting the two streams of research and towards a more holistic understanding of the role of emotions in conflict.

Findings – It is observed that the link between emotions and conflict has received little attention both in the literature on conflict and that of emotions. Insights into the role of emotions at the time of conflict and towards its subsequent resolution are provided. Future directions for study and potential linkages between the two streams are offered.

Originality/value – Connects two different streams of research and offers potential areas of exploration.

Keywords Conflict, Conflict resolution, Management research

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Conflict has traditionally been viewed as something to be avoided and with a somewhat negative connotation (Jehn, 1997; Pondy, 1967). Its presence is thought to be a perennial feature of organizations today; the picture of the modern organization is one rife with conflict, with roots in individual, social, organizational and cultural relationships (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). Early theorists suggested that conflict is detrimental to the functioning of the organization (Boulding, 1962; Pondy, 1967; Seiler, 1963; White, 1961); however modern theorists are of the view that conflict can also be beneficial (Amason, 1996; Ayoko *et al.*, 2002; Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990; Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold, 1991; van de Vliert and de Dreu, 1994). For example, task-related management team conflict has been posed as improving performance through an understanding of various viewpoints (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990) and Jehn (1995) found that in groups performing non-routine tasks, disagreements were actually beneficial. The literature on conflict has seen a move from a purely collaboration-based approach to a more contingent view of conflict management over time (Brown, 1992).

Emotions have traditionally been understood as the antithesis of rationality and been accorded secondary treatment in comparison to cognition in much of organizational research, with organizations not thought to be emotion friendly environments (Albrow, 1992; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Fineman, 1993; Kolb and Putnam, 1992; Muchinsky, 2000). However, there has been a lot of interest in emotions

in recent years with this body of work growing considerably (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Boudens, 2005; Fineman, 2006; Fisher and Ashkanasy, 2000; Hurley, 2007; Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Kiefer, 2005; Muchinsky, 2000; Pugh, 2001; Sieben, 2007; Sturdy, 2003; Tan *et al.*, 2003).

The role of emotions in conflict situations has traditionally not received much attention. Even though the relationship of emotions to conflict had been established early on (Pondy, 1967), the treatment to this forgotten link has been either couched in terms of broad generalizations such as affect and mood (Forgas, 1998; George, 1989, 1990), or received cursory attention with research directed at discrete emotions such as anger (Lanzetta, 1989). It is only recently that scholars (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Desivilya and Yagil, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Jordan and Troth, 2004, 2006; Von Glinow *et al.*, 2004; Yang and Mossholder, 2004) have begun evincing an interest in this rather rich domain to establish and explore the link of emotions and conflict.

The paper is organized around a review of research on conflict and then on emotions in organizations, following which gaps in the literature are identified. The last section of the paper is focused on integrative work in the two domains and proposes areas for exploration and further research in this substantive area.

Organizational conflict

The understanding and meaning of conflict has successively undergone changes. Early social theorists such as Marx and Weber viewed group conflict as an inevitable outgrowth of the social class system or organization hierarchy. This view sought harmony and cooperation in the workplace as desirable ends towards conflict resolution (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). The theme of conflict in organizational literature in the 1960s (Pondy, 1967; Walton and Dutton, 1969; White, 1961) focused on structural sources of conflict particularly between departments and across levels of the organization. Conflict was now no longer seen to be totally dysfunctional, but one that needed to be managed through negotiation or structural adaptation. The conflict literature from the 1980s and the 1990s suggests a significant turn with a more exhaustive understanding of conflict that encompassed formal-informal, rational-irrational, manifest and latent forms of conflict (Jehn, 1995, 1997; Kolb and Putnam, 1992; Pinkley, 1990; Tjosvold, 1998; Tjosvold and van de Vliert, 1994). The definition and meaning of what constitutes conflict has not only undergone changes but also still remains rather vague and contextual.

Defining conflict

In one of the earlier definitions of conflict, March and Simon (1958, p. 112) refer to conflict as "a breakdown in standard mechanisms of decision making." From this early view of conflict tied to decision making, the understanding of conflict shifted to incompatibilities in goals. Many researchers in later years (Boulding, 1962; Seiler, 1963; Walton and Dutton, 1969; White, 1961) focused on disagreements on ends or goals. Later views of conflict have also considered incompatibilities in means or views, with Jehn (1997) arguing that conflict can occur with disagreement on means as well. Kolb and Putnam (1992) propose that conflict exists when there are perceived differences in interests, views or goals. Others suggest that for a conflict to exist, one party must actually behave so as to interfere with the aims of another (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 1998).

Another view poses conflict in terms of opposing interests involving scarce resources and goal divergence (Pondy, 1967; Walton, 1966). Conflict has also been viewed as a cognitive bargaining process (Pinkley, 1990). It can be seen that the definitions of conflict have been varied in scope, meaning and focus. The distinction between concepts of conflict and competition has also led to some conceptual ambiguity (Schmidt and Kochan, 1972). Those arguing for a narrower definition of conflict treat competition and conflict as behaviorally distinct. The perception of goal incompatibility has been proposed (Fink, 1968) as a necessary precondition for either conflict or competition; however competition is said to occur when, given goal incompatibility, there is no interference with another's attainment, while conflict includes the element of interference (active or passive). Conflict is also thought to occur in mixed-motive relationships where persons have both competitive and cooperative interests (Tjosvold, 1998; Tjosvold and van de Vliert, 1994). The theory of cooperation and competition indicates that defining conflict as opposing interests has drawbacks, in that it denies the reality that people with cooperative, highly overlapping goals can be in conflict. However, definitions of conflict have either been under emphasized or stated in exceedingly vague terms.

Various meanings have been attributed to conflict without a clear definition emerging. Pondy (1967, p. 298) cites that:

> [...] the term conflict has been used at one time or another in the literature to describe: (1) antecedent conditions (for example scarcity of resources, policy differences) of conflictful behavior; (2) affective states (e.g. stress, tension, hostility, anxiety, etc.) of the individuals involved; (3) cognitive states of individuals (i.e. their perception or awareness of conflictual situations); and (4) conflictful behavior, ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression.

Attempting to resolve this dilemma, Pondy (1967) treats the development of conflict as a dynamic process.

Table I shows some of the definitions of conflict offered and supported by researchers over the years along with their differing basis that highlights ways of classifying the approaches to conflict.

Broadly the definitions have taken a process-oriented, descriptive/situated or conditional view of conflict. Early definitions took a more process view focusing on breakdown of decision making and oppositional patterns. Descriptive views of conflict tend to focus on what happens at the time of conflict in terms of perceptions and behavior. While the conditional approach is a contingent view underlying when conflict is likely to occur. In that sense, incompatible goals, means or activities leading to conflict can all be viewed as a conditional approach. It is worthy to note that later definitions of conflict have adopted a more contingent view of conflict considering the contextual implications, with Kolb and Putnam's (1992) definition even including emotion as a necessary condition for the playing out of conflict which solidly states the case for the consideration of emotions at the time of conflict. However, this has remained an area yet to be explored in depth.

Types of conflict
Blake and Mouton (1964) first presented a conceptual scheme for classifying the modes (styles) for handling interpersonal conflict, differentiated along the dimensions of concern for self and concern for production. Rahim (1983) offers a conceptualization similar to Blake and Mouton's using the dimensions of concern for selves and concern

Author(s)	Definitions of conflict	Focus
March and Simon (1958, p. 112)	Breakdown of standard mechanisms of decision making	Process: decision making
Boulding (1962, p. 4)	Situation of competition in which parties are aware of the incompatibility of potential future positions and in which each party wishes to occupy a position that is incompatible with the wishes of the other	Descriptive: perceived incompatibilities
Walton (1966, p. 411)	Opposition processes in any of several forms – competition, status, rivalry, bargaining, sabotage, verbal abuse, etc.	Process: opposition
Schmidt and Kochan (1972, p. 363)	Overt behavioral outcome of perceived goal incompatibility and the perceived opportunity for interference	Condition: goal incompatibility and interference
Deutsch's (1973) and Tjosvold (1998)	Incompatible activities where one person's actions interfere, obstruct or in some way get in the way of another's actions	Condition: incompatible activities
Pinkley (1990, p. 117)	Cognitive decision making process involving negotiation of what are to be considered the appropriate objects of dispute	Process/descriptive: cognitive bargaining
Kolb and Putnam (1992, p. 312)	When there are real or perceived differences that arise in specific organizational circumstances and that engender emotion as a consequence	Condition: antecedents and consequences

Table I.
A brief look at some definitions of conflict

for others to differentiate styles of handling conflict. The emerging five conflict management styles from this dual concern model have been classified as:

(1) *Dominating*. High concern for self and low concern for the other or task.

(2) *Obliging*. Low concern for self and high concern for the other.

(3) *Avoiding*. Low concern for self and low concern for the other.

(4) *Integrating*. High concern for self and high concern for the other.

(5) *Compromising*. Moderate concern for self and moderate concern for the other.

Pondy (1967) classified conflict as bargaining, bureaucratic and systems conflict. Bargaining conflict refers to the conflict emerging from bargaining among interest groups in competition for scarce resources, bureaucratic conflict to that between parties to a superior subordinate relationship and systems conflict referring to lateral conflict or conflict among parties to a functional relationship. Brett (1984) distinguishes conflict on the basis of the origins in terms of:

- conflict arising from conditions (e.g. personality and ideology) within the party; and
- conflict arising from conditions (e.g. rules, scarcity of commodities) outside the party, classifying them as integrating, obliging, avoiding, dominating and compromising.

Guetzkow and Gyr (1954) first distinguished between conflict based on task and those based on interpersonal relations. They refer to the two types of conflict as affective and substantive. Affective conflict refers to conflict in interpersonal relations, while substantive conflict is conflict involving the group's task. Priem and Price (1991) distinguish between cognitive, task-related and social-emotional conflicts arising from interpersonal disagreements not related to the task. Pinkley's (1990) multidimensional scaling study revealed the dimensions of conflict as:

- relationship versus task;
- emotional versus intellectual; and
- compromise versus win.

The second dimension of emotional versus intellectual seems to suggest that conflict can also be affect laden. Jehn (1995) found support for the task- and relationship-focused dimension of conflict. In her study investigating conflict across six organizational work teams, Jehn (1997) identified a third type of conflict called process conflict. This has been described as conflict about how task accomplishment should proceed in the work unit, who is responsible for what and how things should be delegated. Thus, Jehn (1997) classified the conflict types as task, relationship and procedural, with relationship conflict focusing on relationships, task conflict on the content and goals of the work and process conflict on how the work gets done. The conflict dimensions identified were negative emotionality, importance, acceptability norms and resolution potential. Jehn's (1997) model indicates that high-performing groups show little or no relationship conflict and considers a negative role for emotionality.

Management of conflict
Studies have shown that members of work groups often resort to passive forms of conflict management such as avoidance (Ayoko *et al.*, 2002). Pareek (1992) refers to the approach and avoidance mode of conflict management. The approach mode is thought to include strategies such as confrontation, compromise, arbitration and negotiation, while avoidance modes or styles could include resignation, withdrawal, buying time or appeasement. As part of negotiation he refers to the affective method of conflict resolution through the establishment of positive feelings by each party and minimizing feelings of anger, threat or defensiveness by depersonalizing the problem. This is an important cue for the use of emotions in the conflict management stage.

Kolb and Putnam (1992, p. 315) summarize the basic forms of conflict management as "self-help (force, vengeance), avoidance (withdrawing from the relationship), lumping it (tolerating the situation without public comment), negotiation and the involvement of third party mediators, arbitrators, and/or adjudicators." The modes of conflict management have been discussed elsewhere (Brett, 1984) as structural and procedural channeling, the use of negotiation skills and the use of third parties.

Structural channeling implies the use of organizational redesign using mechanisms such as liaisons, task forces, teams, matrix designs, etc. Negotiations could involve bargaining behaviors, concessions, and tactics. Tactics have been described as attempts to influence the opponent's perceptions via argumentation that attempt to change the other party's perception of power.

It has been argued (Kolb and Putnam, 1992) that non-rational approaches to conflict with emotional reactions such as venting feelings, expressing displeasure, and feeling hurt, become means of conflict management rather than irrational displays that hinder thinking. These forms also call attention to a different form of conflict management with intuition, sensitivity and situational adaptiveness becoming valued assets for conflict management. However, these non-rational approaches to conflict are somewhat denigrated and less-valued styles of conflict management.

Emotions in organizations

Modern research on emotions can be considered to have begun with Hochschild's (1983) seminal book on emotional labor: *The Managed Heart*. Attention was drawn to the processes of dealing with emotions in service occupations, discussed in terms of surface acting, deep structure or the genuine expression of emotions that highlight the expression of emotions in accordance with organizational expectations. Research on emotions progressed with Rafaeli and Sutton's (1987) work on emotional expression as part of the work role and consequently with much attention on trait affect and the state affect of mood (Fisher, 2000; Forgas, 1998; George, 1989, 1990, 1991). The popularization of emotions happened with Goleman's (1995) book on emotional intelligence (EI) by the same name. It has however been suggested that much of Goleman's work remains speculative and is based on inadequate measures and conceptualization (Fisher and Ashkanasy, 2000). Muchinsky (2000) points out that organization behavior has never fully allowed itself a formal entry into the realm of emotions in the workplace, even though studied constructs such as job satisfaction and stress inherently entail feelings. A number of scholars call for greater attention to the role of emotions in the work context (Albrow, 1992; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Fineman, 1993; Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Putnam and Mumby, 1993; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Muchinsky, 2000). Emotion is only just beginning to be incorporated into organizational studies and recent years have seen a spurt of interest in the field of emotions in organizations (Boudens, 2005; Fineman, 2006; Fisher and Ashkanasy, 2000; Kiefer, 2005; Muchinsky, 2000; Pugh, 2001; Sieben, 2007; Sturdy, 2003; Tan *et al.*, 2003; Yang and Mossholder, 2004).

Defining/understanding emotions in the workplace

Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) define emotionality in rather broad terms as a subjective feeling state. The definition is intended to encompass the basic emotions such as anger, joy, love, social emotions such as shame, guilt, jealousy as well as constructs such as affect, sentiments and moods. The term feeling and emotionality have been used interchangeably in the literature (Fineman, 1993). Some writers however consider feelings as private sensations that become emotions when enacted in social situations (Rosenberg, 1990). Emotions have also been discussed in cognitive terms and referred to as intentional mental states (Hurley, 2007). Labeling emotions as a syndrome with a pattern of co-occurring responses, Ashkanasy *et al.* (2000, p. 11)

consider the various manifestations of emotions such as the physiological, feeling states, displays and cognitive processes as components of the phenomenon of emotions. Barsade (2002) considers emotions a subset of affective experiences that fall into three types of categories, namely dispositional affect, emotions, and moods. Dispositional affect is considered to be a long-term, stable variable. Fisher (2000) distinguishes between mood and emotions, claiming that the term affect encompasses both state moods and emotions. Moods tend to be longer lasting but often weaker states of uncertain origin, while emotions are considered to be intense, relatively short-term affective reactions to a specific environmental stimulus.

The affective events theory (AET) model proposes causes and consequences of momentary mood and emotions at work (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). AET theory suggests emotions flow from work events or occurrences that influence affect driven behaviors and work attitudes which in turn affect judgment driven behaviors. What is interesting to note is that in the AET model there is a flow from work events to experienced emotions, but none from emotions to work events. The role of emotions in triggering events such as conflict remains an area yet to be investigated.

Ways of knowing emotion from a methodological perspective have been discussed (Sturdy, 2003) in terms of:

- display, disguise and authenticity of feelings;
- lived experience and discursive constitution for the coming alive of emotions;
- embodiment or its physiological nature; and
- through social structures such as power and inequality that are intimately linked to emotions.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) classify the experience of emotions as:

- social constructionist; and
- positivistic.

Adherents to the constructionist view believe that emotions are socially constructed, while positivists hold that specific situational stimuli elicit specific emotions and that all emotions are reducible to a few basic emotions such as fear, joy and anger. The two views disagree on the extent to which emotions are cognitively and socially mediated. Offering a multi-paradigmatic approach to research on emotions, Sieben (2007) classifies the differing emotion paradigms along emergent/a priori and monitoring/politicizing poles to yield the four approaches:

- interpretive (focus on episodes of emotion and sense making);
- functionalist (focused on explanation and functional role of emotions);
- poststructuralist (focus on power-knowledge connection and discursive formation); and
- critical (management and control of emotions).

Given the different epistemological and ontological underpinnings, emotions have variously been thought of as private/social, affective/cognitively mediated, unmanageable/to be managed, knowable/unknowable, discrete/multidimensional, and been discussed as feeling, behavioral, physiological, cognitive, linguistic, cultural and

socio-structural (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Burkitt, 1997; Fineman, 1993, 2006; Jackson, 1993; Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Sieben, 2007; Sturdy, 2003; Weiss and Brief, 2001).

Types of emotion/expression of emotion
Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) offer five categories of emotions classified as: nasty emotions (anger, envy and jealousy), existential emotions (anxiety, guilt and shame), emotions provoked by unfavorable life conditions (relief, hope, sadness and depression), emotions provoked by favorable life conditions (happiness, pride and love) and empathetic emotions (gratitude and compassion).

Emotions have also has been classified into expressive/behavioral, physiological and cognitive components (Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). The expressive component of emotion is the behavioral response to or the expression of the cognitively appraised or physiologically felt experience involving the actual expression of emotion in terms of anger, rage and other emotions. Most emotional expressions are thought to occur non-verbally through facial expressions, vocal qualities and body postures. The cognitive component is perceived as an appraisal process; how emotions are experienced as a result of assessing or appraising a situation in a particular way. It is assumed that different emotions are associated with different patterns of appraisal. The physiological component is the bodily experience of emotions or how the body responds to emotions such as increase in heart beat or blood pressure. The cognitive appraisal of emotions is an important element in understanding conflict. It suggests that disputants' attributional tendencies will influence the nature of conflict and offers insights for the management of the conflict in terms of reappraisal.

Emotional overloading has been referred to as emotional flooding and has been described as the condition when one is swamped with emotion to the extent that one cannot function or think effectively (Jones and Bodtker, 2001). The classic symptoms of flooding have been cited as tense muscles, rapid breathing, negative facial expressions and perspiration. However, flooding is also possible in situations when the disputants appear calm even though there is distress or emotional flooding. Emotional flooding has implications for conflict resolution as will be discussed later in the paper.

The sharing of emotions in groups and its catching on effect has been termed as emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield *et al.*, 1992; Pugh, 2001). It has been referred to as the "tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another personal and consequently to converge emotionally" (Hatfield *et al.*, 1992, pp. 153-4), or as:

> [...] a process in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes (Schoenewolf, 1990, p. 50).

The notion underlying emotional contagion is how the social context may induce or shape the arousal of emotions through both conscious and unconscious processing.

The meaning of the emotional experience and the emotional expression are determined by the cultural context as well (Batja, 2001; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Sturdy, 2003). Different cultures vary in their expression of different emotions both in terms of use as well as acceptability or appropriateness of the expression of forms of emotions. Emotional expression has also been conceptualized as a continuum ranging

from completely spontaneous and uncontrolled expression to completely strategic, inauthentic expression of emotion (Jones and Bodtker, 2001). Hochschild's (1979) "feeling rules" that dictate which emotions ought to be displayed and which ought to be hidden are also related to how cultures define what is allowed to be felt in different cultural contexts.

Management of emotions
Traditionally organizations have not been thought of as emotion friendly environments (Albrow, 1992; Fineman, 1993; Muchinsky, 2000; Putnam and Mumby, 1993), with emotions understood as the antithesis of rationality and posed as reducing effectiveness and conflict resolution potential (Jehn, 1997). Offering a historical review of emotion management, Mastenbroek (2000) draws attention to the pressures to control the expression of emotions. Gabriel (1998) notes that many authors have adopted a paradigm that emphasizes negative emotions as carriers of organizational pathologies and that they have failed to establish a distinction between positive and negative emotions.

Even when emotions are recognized it is mostly to serve instrumental purposes such as emotion work. Emotional labor has been posed as the management of emotional displays at work (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) involving the adherence to management scripts of appropriate emotional displays. Later works on emotional labor (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Grandey and Brauburger, 2002; Humphrey, 2000; Kruml and Geddes, 2000; Mastenbroek, 2000; Morris and Feldman, 1996; van Dijk and Brown, 2006; Zerbe, 2000) have all highlighted the regulatory aspect inherent in much of work involving emotions. Thus, it appears that emotions are acceptable at work as long as they can be controlled or regulated. The rather pejorative view of emotions especially when considered the antithesis of rationality has led to attempts to control both the experience and expression of emotions.

Emotion regulation has been proposed in numerous ways. Cropanzano *et al.* (2000) offer a model of emotional regulation involving:

- situation modification/attentional deployment focusing on the event;
- cognitive change focusing on appraisal;
- physiological modification focusing on arousal response; and
- response modification focusing on emotional expression.

Lord and Harvey (2002) offer an information processing framework for emotional regulation, classifying regulatory steps as situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change and response modulation. Calling attention to the institutional mechanisms for dealing with emotions in the workplace, Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) classify the processes for regulating the experience and expression of emotion as:

- neutralizing;
- buffering;
- prescribing; and
- normalizing emotions.

Neutralizing is thought to prevent or preclude the emergence of socially unacceptable emotions possibly through diversion tactics, buffering is used to encapsulate or segregate potentially disruptive emotions from other activities, prescribing is used to specify socially acceptable means of experiencing and expressing emotions, and normalizing is used to diffuse or reframe unacceptable emotions, such as the use of humor in order to preserve the status quo. What is interesting is that each of the four forms outlined are used to suppress or regulate emotions, not necessarily providing an outlet for emotions. This view is further evinced by Yang and Mossholder (2004) who hold that constraining negative emotionality may determine whether task conflict results in damaging relationship conflict, arguing for the elimination of all relationship conflict. The focus of much of the research on emotional regulation then appears to be suppression and containment of negative emotion, with a total denial of any positive role that emotions could potentially play.

Barsade (2002) provides a model of emotional contagion. The model proposes that there will be contagion among group members, which depend on the valence and energy of emotions expressed and that positive emotional contagion will lead to increase in cooperativeness, less group conflict and improved task performance. Pugh (2001) observes the role of positive emotional contagion demonstrated to the positive emotional experience of customers through positive emotional displays of employees. The two studies indicate that contagion of positive mood can be an important area of development which could also have implication for the constructive role of emotions in conflict.

Gaps in the literature

The review of literature on conflict and emotions indicates that there are a few areas that have been either understudied or neglected by researchers of both conflict and emotions.

The literature on conflict has developed with an almost complete neglect of emotions and even when emotions have been considered in the conflict literature, it has been examined more as a fallout of conflict (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002; Kolb and Putnam, 1992; Pareek, 1992; Yang and Mossholder, 2004) and rarely as the trigger or causal mechanism. Examining conflict as an antecedent of conflict could be a potential new avenue for research. The literature on conflict management or how organizations chose to deal with emotions seems to be laden with terms such as buffering, neutralizing, prescribing, constraining and regulating (Adler *et al.*, 1998; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Hochschild, 1979; Yang and Mossholder, 2004), all of which denote a view towards dealing with emotions by ignoring or containing it and a reluctance to accept the expression of emotions in a healthy form. Fortado (2001, p. 1191) points to the neglected field of emotions in conflict when he says, "the rational image of employees conducting cost-benefit analyses inappropriately masks the emotional and relational aspect of workplace conflict centering on factors such as self-esteem, status, power and face." The emphasis on rationality and cognitions in much of organizational research has led both to the bias against emotions in organization studies as a whole and within the conflict literature to very obvious lacunae which some researchers are only beginning to rectify.

The literature on emotions does not pay much attention to conflict either. Early theorists such as Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) argue that expectations about emotional

expression have largely been ignored by organizational theorists. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) point out that although the workplace is saturated with emotion, research has neglected the impact of emotions on organizational life. This view is endorsed by Muchinsky (2000) in his article aptly titled, "Emotions in the workplace: the neglect of organization behaviour." Even in later works, there is no mention of conflict in the review of emotions in work life (Fisher and Ashkanasy, 2000; Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002). Fisher and Ashkanasy (2000) provide an exhaustive list of idea clusters for research on emotions at work; however their list does not mention the role of emotions in conflict anywhere. The two editions of the book *Emotion in Organizations*, edited by Fineman (1993, 2000), provides a fine commentary on progressive research in the various domains of emotions and organizations, however there is no mention of emotions at the time of conflict or the use of emotions to manage conflict in both the editions. With the blossoming of research in emotions, various other books (Ashkanasy *et al.*, 2000; Lord *et al.*, 2002) offer insightful research into many aspects of emotions, but articles on emotions in relation to conflict are either missing or find cursory mention as sub-themes. The relative neglect of this sub-body of research, points to a potential area for further development. Further, the bias towards research on negative emotions such as negative affectivity has been more pronounced than the positive or functional channelization of emotions.

Where the two bodies of literature have been integrated (as will be discussed in the next section), emotions have been defined in terms of mood or affect and the effect of emotions on conflict has been examined in terms of discrete or negative emotions, EI or with respect to negotiations (Der Foo *et al.*, 2004; Desivilya and Yagil, 2005; Fisher, 2000; Forgas, 1998; George, 1989, 1990; Lanzetta, 1989; Yang and Mossholder, 2004). Even in the special issue of *Journal of Management and Organization* on "Managing emotions and conflict in the workplace," most articles have either dealt with aspects of emotion such as emotional labor (Bryant and Cox, 2006; van Dijk and Brown, 2006), effect of mood on team performance (Jordan *et al.*, 2006) or limited themselves to the domain of emotions in work family conflict (Harr, 2006; Lawrence, 2006). Although some researchers (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Humphrey, 2006; Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Jordan and Troth, 2006; Pruitt *et al.*, 1997; Von Glinow *et al.*, 2004) have pointed to the complexity of emotions in conflict and a few (Ayoko *et al.*, 2002; Barsade, 2002; Forgas, 1998; Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Kay *et al.*, 2001) have examined the positive effect of emotions in conflict, they are more the exception than the norm, with research in this field still in its nascent stage. Most of the work in this area has emerged in the late 1990s or 2000s and offers an exciting new area for exploration, as will be discussed in the next section.

Integrating conflict and emotions: research and future directions

Conflict and emotions are inextricably linked. Bodtker and Jameson (2001) argue that to be in conflict is to be emotionally charged. They point to the interesting phenomenon that one is not aware that one is in conflict unless one recognizes one is emotional about something. Events that trigger conflict are posed as events that elicit emotion of some form. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) suggest that emotionality and rationality are interdependent, with emotions an integral part of organizational life often proving functional for the organization. Pondy (1967) notes that there is an important distinction between perceiving conflict (cognition) and feeling conflict (affect), and that

conflict does not get manifest until it is felt. In his conceptualization of conflict, there is a role for emotion, with conflict considered a series of episodes with each episode involving stages of latency (conditions), feeling (affect), perception (cognition), manifestation (behavior) and aftermath. Jehn (1997, p. 532) observes that "emotions are an important element of conflict. They define individuals' subjective interpretations of reality and reactions to current situations." Even though the emotional component is most evident in relationship conflict, task and process conflict can also contain high levels of emotion (Jehn, 1997). Given that conflict elicits emotions, future research could focus on extending this link to examine what types of conflict elicit which kinds of emotions and when emotions are likely to manifest more strongly:

RO1. Linking types of conflict and types of emotions.

For example, working with the classification of conflict into task, procedural and relationship conflict, it would be interesting to note when and what type of emotions get engaged in each kind of conflict. Another area could be the examination of when the personalization of conflict happens (linked with what kind of emotions) to transform process or task conflict to relationship conflict.

The experience and expression of emotion during intra- or inter-group conflict has received some attention by a few scholars (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Desivilya and Yagil, 2005; Forgas, 1998; Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Jordan and Troth, 2004; Lanzetta, 1989; Pruitt *et al.*, 1997; Von Glinow *et al.*, 2004). However, most approaches view emotions as a fallout of conflict. It has been suggested (Jones and Bodtker, 2001) that rather than seeing emotions as a consequence of conflict, mediators need to view emotions as a framer of the conflict and as a social construction through which the disputants define the reality of the conflict. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) claim that tensions are often fuelled by affective or expressive concerns that have little to do with instrumental or task-focused concerns. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the nature of conflict it is essential to attend to the emotional triggers of the conflict. This approach remains to be fully developed:

RO2. Developing an understanding of emotions as a framer of conflict.

Researchers could focus on the emotional cues that are indicative of when a situation is likely to escalate to a conflict or what kind of emotions require particular attention at containment to avoid a conflict situation.

It has been argued that emotional communication is the essence of conflict interaction (Jones and Bodtker, 2001). Conflict as emotionally defined and involving an ongoing level of emotional intensity has been proposed by Jones and Bodtker (2001) and Bodtker and Jameson (2001). They pose that the triggers of conflict and emotions are the same, i.e. occurring when people perceive incompatible goals or interference from one another. Emotional intensity is thought to signal the valence of the conflict. Conflict is though to be sustained in an environment of emotional intensity that may vary and influence the selection of conflict behaviors. This seems to suggest that there may be a threshold of emotional intensity, which when crossed could be the trigger for a conflict. This notion, however, has not been developed and could be a potential area of examination:

RO3. Develop models for conflict in relation to its emotional definition and emotional intensity.

Researchers could examine the specific instances when emotion enters the conflict dimension, i.e. as antecedent, co-occurrence and/or consequence. A possible representation of the cyclical link between emotions and conflict is shown in Figure 1.

The figure is intended to show that emotions are likely to exist at all stages of the conflict, beginning from framer of the conflict, its presence at the time of conflict, and also as a consequence of the conflict. Unresolved or unaddressed emotions could also fuel further conflict situations.

The link between emotions and values has been offered (Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001), suggesting that people get emotional about something because of their conceptions of right or wrong, good and bad or appropriate or inappropriate. Hurley (2007) supports this ideological frame of emotions arguing that emotions reflect both objective and personal values; we get emotional about the things we value:

RO4. Examine the interrelationship of values, emotions and conflict.

Interesting questions in this regard could be:

- What types of conflict tend to be value laden?
- What are the value underpinnings of expressed emotions?
- Is there congruence or discord in the appraisal of conflict based on values and the emotional subtext?

The link between emotional responses and identity threats has been examined by Tjosvold and Sun (2000) through face threats concerns which are thought to stimulate defensiveness and an escalation of the conflict. It has been proposed that conflict in which identity is salient is likely to be characterized by more intense emotions. Their study indicates that confirmation of personal face as compared to affront, led to a cooperative resolution of conflict. Since social face is about maintaining a desirable image closely linked to feelings of self-esteem, the threat to social face has affective connotations. It is thus
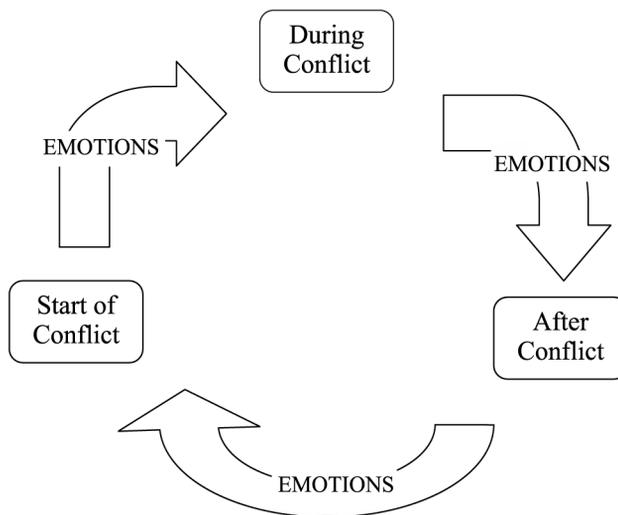

Figure 1.
Cyclical nature of the link
between emotions
and conflict

indicative of the role that emotions could play in conflict and the need to manage conflict at the emotional level. The notion that emotion reflects identity issues which has implication for conflict has also been suggested by Bodtker and Jameson (2001) and Jones and Bodtker (2001). They argue that emotion and identity are interlinked in that people become emotional only in connection to the ego or self. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) discuss surface acting and deep structure emotional labor in relation to identity. Elsewhere, Morris and Feldman (1996) discuss emotional dissonance in the context of emotional labor:

RO5a. The study of conflict and emotions in relation to identity.

Research in this area could focus on identity-based emotion research at the time of conflict. A systematic evaluation of emotions reflecting loss of face/identity threats could be examined in the light of conflict frames and types:

RO5b. The study of conflict in relation to emotional labor.

For example, it may be interesting to study if emotional dissonance mediates the relationship between conflict and emotional labor.

Johnson *et al.* (2000) show that workers emotional response to conflict depend on their relative power positions within the organization. Power based on dependence and power based on legitimacy was shown to affect subordinates' positive and negative emotional reaction at the time of a conflict. Power positions that reflect dependency were shown to be associated with negative emotions during a conflict in contrast to positive emotions experienced when the power relations were legitimacy based. It has also been proposed that emotion is influenced by and also influences the two-key relational elements of power and social status (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001; Jones and Bodtker, 2001):

RO6. The study of conflict and emotions in relation to power.

The relational element of conflict could be examined here in terms of power dynamics. It would be interesting to study what kinds of conflict lend themselves to power dynamics, or if all conflict can be cast in terms of power differentials, and the emotional undertones of such contests.

One of the conflict dimensions identified by Jehn (1997) is negative emotionality. This dimension was thought to represent the amount of negative affect exhibited and felt during the conflict. Some of the negative emotions identified in the conflict situations studied include frustration, uneasiness, discomfort, tenseness, resentment, annoyance, irritation, scorn, remorse and rage. The data indicated that regardless of the type of conflict, all emotions exhibited in response to conflict were negatively affected. Further, negative emotionality was associated with poor-group performance and low-member satisfaction. Jehn (1997) posed that highly emotional conflict is less resolvable than less-emotional conflicts. In his study, Pinkley (1990) found an intellectual versus emotional dimension of conflict resolution in studying conflict frames. Disputants with emotional frames were found to have feelings of jealousy, hatred, anger and frustration. Thus, research has tended to concentrate on the negative role of emotions in conflict. This leaves room for the exploration of the positive role of emotions in conflict.

Jones and Bodtker (2001) suggest that identifying and segregating emotional contagion could prove useful in unraveling the reasons why disputants may be swept up in a conflict. In his study on emotional contagion, Barsade (2002) found that the positive emotional contagion group members experienced improved cooperation, decreased conflict, and increased perceived task performance. Thus, analyzing the susceptibility of differing disputants to emotional contagion could have implications both in terms of isolation of the negative emotions and encouragement of positive emotions unleashed through the mediation process:

RO7. The positive role of emotions in conflict such as the emotional contagion of positive emotions.

Pruitt *et al.* (1997) examined the complex interplay of emotions at the time of a conflict in terms of sequences of escalatory behavior related to emotional responses. They found a standard escalation sequence when people respond to annoyance with requests for termination of the annoyance, impatient demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and abuse. It was found that as this sequence moved along, decreasing numbers of people were involved, and only a few people went all the way to the highest level of escalation. They note that "sequences of tactics, in which first one and then another approach is tried, are clearly important for protracted conflict and may be significant in any extended coping situation" (Pruitt *et al.*, 1997, p. 162). However, much research on conflict has ignored such sequences or changes in emotional responses as the conflict escalates:

RO8. A sequential or staggered approach to emotion development in conflict.

Specifying emotions in terms of expressive, physiological and cognitive components, Jones and Bodtker (2001) suggest that each of the three components have implications for understanding conflict. The manifestation of the expressive component can be problematic in terms of decoding and interpretation, since inadvertent sending of emotional messages could be linked to unproductive conflict and influence mediation dynamics. An understanding of the physiological component could have implications for emotional flooding and contagion which could influence mediation dynamics. The cognitive component could be beneficial to understand how emotions are explained or understood and possibly for a reappraisal of the situation in mediation. Future research could focus on studying emotions in conflict from each of the three perspectives. Individuals too may differ in the extent to which they express or experience the different manifestations of conflict:

RO9a. Linking the expressive, physiological and cognitive components of emotions to conflict episodes or stages.

RO9b. Identifying individual level differences in the varying emotional manifestations at the time of conflict.

It has been suggested that conflict is emotionally defined in a cultural sense (Jones and Bodtker, 2001; Bodtker and Jameson, 2001) given that people become emotional about the things they have come to associate as emotionally relevant, which gets shaped by the cultural context. Von Glinow *et al.* (2004) point to the complexities of managing emotions at the time of conflict in multi cultural contexts where the social construction

of emotions could pose barriers in terms of coding, decoding and interpretation. Their research points to the difficulty people have in expressing emotions when highly charged at the time of a conflict, the difficulty of finding words equivalent for emotions across cultures and the difficulty of interpreting emotionally laden communication across cultures:

RO10. Cross-cultural variations in emotional interpretation, emotional displays and emotion management in conflict.

The next section examines the interrelationship of emotion and conflict with respect to conflict resolution.

Emotions and conflict resolution

Emotions have been discussed to some extent in the mediation literature, but this has largely been towards the regulation or containment of emotions. It has been studied in terms of the management of anger (Adler *et al.*, 1998) or operationalized in terms of mood or affect (Forgas, 1998; George, 1990, 1991). Johnson *et al.* (2000) pose that strongly felt emotions may serve to motivate individuals to redress conflict. Positive emotional experiences in a work team were found to facilitate constructive conflict management (Ayoko *et al.*, 2002; Kay *et al.*, 2001). Thus, the role of positive emotions in mediation is another deserving area for examination:

RO11. The role of emotion (especially positive emotion) in conflict resolution.

Future research could adopt a more diversified view of emotions (including both positive and negative emotions as well as discrete emotions beyond anger) to examine their potential for conflict resolution.

The effect of EI on negotiation outcomes has received some attention (Der Foo *et al.*, 2004). The authors claim that while there is no one best way to study emotions, use of EI can capture a range of abilities such as perceiving emotion, facilitating thought with emotion, understanding and regulating emotion. Their study reported that individuals high in EI reported more positive experiences during the negotiation stage and that EI is a valuable factor for achieving integrative negotiation outcomes. Future research could address this link of EI and conflict resolution under different situational and contextual conditions:

RO12. The relationship between EI and conflict resolution.

An examination of the EI of disputants and mediators in both successful and unsuccessful conflict resolution and across different cultural contexts could be a potential starting point.

In a study examining the relation between conflict management styles and emotional states, Desivilya and Yagil (2005) found that cooperative patterns of conflict management are associated with positive emotional states; contentious or dominating patterns of conflict management were associated with both positive as well as negative emotional states and an avoidance pattern of conflict management was associated with negative emotions only. Their findings indicate that emotional states are closely linked to conflict management or resolution strategies. This notion could be developed further to include other forms of conflict management, use of discrete emotions in relation to

the different conflict management styles as well as linked to different forms of emotion management:

   RO13. Explore the relationship between conflict management and emotion management.

Challenging the standard assumption of mediation that with good facilitation, aggrieved parties should be able to talk through any issue, Jones and Bodtker (2001) invoke the concept of emotional flooding to suggest that in certain situations when the parties may be emotionally incapacitated to act rationally, talking through as a mediation strategy may not prove useful. Further, they argue that counteracting flooding requires sensitivity to the disputants flooding patterns. One of the modes of dealing with conflict as suggested by Kolb and Putnam (1992, p. 315) is "lumping it" (tolerating the situation without public comment), which could have a detrimental effect in terms of emotional flooding. This link between emotional flooding and conflict management is worthy of further exploration:

   RO14. Examine emotional flooding in the context of conflict resolution.

For example, it could be hypothesized that certain conflict management styles such as "lumping it" would be unsuccessful when emotional flooding happens or that the strategy of buffering may be useful if conflict dynamics lead to emotional flooding.

   The cognitive component of emotions that involves the appraisal process, suggests that mediators in a conflict situation can focus on reappraisal to guide disputants in a discussion of their emotions so that they can see the other's way of seeing, or reorient themselves to the situation so as to elicit a different set of emotions (Jones and Bodtker, 2001). This could entail a redefinition of the conflict itself in certain cases. Thus, an appreciation of the emotional experience in a conflict has consequences for its rational resolution as well:

   RO15. Cognitive reappraisal of emotions in conflict resolution.

For example, this could involve an exploration of:
   - What types of emotion lend themselves to cognitive reappraisal?
   - When cognitive reappraisal works and when not?
   - How to facilitate cognitive reappraisal of conflict?

The various research opportunities advanced in this paper hope to provide insights for a more nuanced and textured understanding of the subtext of emotionality in conflict. Emotions as a framer of conflict, diagnostics of the emotional triggers, examination of emotional intensity, a lens for the ideology of the disputants, individual level differences, identity needs, power and status differentials, positive role of emotions, and cultural sensitivity to emotional responses in conflict are some potential areas for exploration. Given the multitude of emotion regulation strategies, future research directed at the resolution of conflict could also focus on forms of emotion management, emotional flooding, emotional contagion and EI.

Conclusion

Traditional concerns with conflict have been more towards the conceptualization and classification of the types of conflict. The role of affect or emotions in conflict has been

an area largely under researched. Even when accorded some attention emotions have been acknowledged only within the realm of relationship conflict with a view towards its management or regulation, viewing emotions as an unnecessary evil in the sphere of organized work. The literature on emotions for its part also appears to have understudied conflict. It appears that research in the streams of conflict and emotions have until recently progressed almost in parallel, failing to acknowledge their mutual interdependence and influence. Only recently have researchers started taking interest in the link between emotions and conflict. Even then, there are many areas that are yet to be developed within this substantive area which shows much promise towards understanding the complex role that emotions play at the time of conflict and towards its subsequent resolution. Researchers in both areas need to not only examine the interlinked nature of emotions and conflict but also focus on the positive role of emotions in conflict and address the question of how to manage the expression and experience of emotions in a more inclusive way. Future research would also benefit from studying emotions not merely as a moderator or fallout of conflict, but as a framer of the conflict as well, leading to a cyclical and interlinked view of emotions and conflict. Moving away from a pejorative view of emotions and an overemphasis on managing it, future studies need to concentrate on a conditional and contingent approach to the study of emotions in conflict.

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