



From Classical to Postmodern: An Integrative Review of Organizational Conflict and Power Dynamics

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Abstract: This integrative literature review explores the interconnectedness of organizational conflict and power, emphasizing their dynamic relationship in contemporary organizations. As organizations face increasing complexity due to globalization and digital transformation, conflict is recognized as a structural feature shaped by power relations. The review synthesizes theoretical advancements and empirical evidence to provide insights into how power influences conflict dynamics and resolution effectiveness. Early perspectives viewed conflict as dysfunctional, while contemporary research highlights its potential for positive outcomes when managed constructively. Power, traditionally seen as a formal mechanism of influence, is examined through critical lenses, revealing its relational and discursive nature. The study underscores the importance of cooperative power practices, which promote trust and constructive conflict resolution, in contrast to coercive power that exacerbates interpersonal tensions. Leadership emerges as a pivotal factor in managing this interplay, with ethical and participatory approaches fostering inclusivity and innovation. Given the complexities of modern organizational settings, the review emphasizes the necessity for leaders to develop competencies that enable constructive power utilization and transformation of conflict into a strategic resource for organizational growth and learning. Thus, the findings contribute to both theoretical frameworks and practical applications in conflict management.

Keywords: *Organizational Conflict; Power Theory; Conflict Management; Ethical Leadership; Psychological Safety.*

1. Introduction

Organizational conflict represents an inherent and dynamic phenomenon arising from divergent interests, values, perceptions, and unequal access to resources within organizations. As organizations grow increasingly complex due to globalization, digital transformation, and heightened performance demands, conflict has become deeply embedded in power relations that

shape decision making processes, interpersonal dynamics, and organizational outcomes (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2023; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Rather than being an anomaly, conflict is now widely recognized as a structural and relational characteristic of contemporary organizational life.

Power plays a central role in determining how conflict emerges, escalates, and is ultimately managed. Power influences whose interests are prioritized, whose voices are heard, and

which conflict management strategies are legitimized within organizational systems (Foucault, 1980; Pfeffer, 2010). Consequently, conflict and power cannot be examined in isolation, as they are mutually constitutive processes that continuously shape organizational behavior and performance (Clegg et al., 2021).

This article aims to examine organizational conflict through an integrated lens of power theory and contemporary conflict management approaches. Using an integrative literature review methodology, this study synthesizes recent theoretical advancements and empirical evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of how power utilization influences conflict dynamics and resolution effectiveness in modern organizations.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Organizational Conflict

Early organizational research framed conflict primarily as a dysfunctional phenomenon that threatened stability and efficiency. Classical management theories emphasized control, hierarchy, and formal authority as mechanisms to suppress conflict and maintain organizational order (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1947). From this perspective, conflict was viewed as a deviation from rational organizational functioning.

Subsequent developments in behavioral and organizational psychology challenged this assumption by recognizing conflict as a natural outcome of social interaction. Human relations scholars argued that conflict emerges from interpersonal differences, communication patterns, and unmet psychological needs rather than structural inefficiencies alone (Lewin, 1947; Likert, 1967). These insights laid the groundwork for later distinctions between task conflict and relationship conflict.

Contemporary research has further refined this understanding by demonstrating that conflict can generate both positive and

negative outcomes depending on its type, intensity, and management (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn et al., 2015). Task conflict, when managed constructively, has been associated with improved decision quality, creativity, and learning, whereas relationship conflict consistently predicts stress, distrust, and reduced performance (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2023).

3. Power Theory in Organizational Contexts

Power has long been recognized as a foundational element of organizational life. Traditional conceptions define power as the ability to influence others' behavior or outcomes, often derived from formal authority, control over resources, or expertise (French & Raven, 1959; Pfeffer, 2010). These perspectives emphasize observable mechanisms of influence embedded in hierarchical structures.

Critical and postmodern scholars have expanded this view by conceptualizing power as relational, discursive, and embedded in everyday organizational practices. Foucault's (1980) analysis highlights how power operates through norms, knowledge systems, and disciplinary mechanisms rather than solely through formal authority. This perspective underscores the subtle ways in which power shapes perceptions, identities, and acceptable forms of conflict expression.

Recent organizational studies integrate these views by distinguishing between coercive and cooperative uses of power. Coercive power relies on control, sanctions, and unilateral decision making, whereas cooperative power emphasizes empowerment, participation, and mutual influence (Kim et al., 2010; Tjosvold, 2008). This distinction is critical for understanding how power shapes conflict dynamics and organizational climate.

4. Integrating Power and Conflict Management

The integration of power theory and conflict management reveals that conflict outcomes

are strongly contingent upon how power is exercised within organizations. Empirical evidence consistently shows that cooperative uses of power promote procedural justice, trust, and constructive conflict resolution (Rahim & Magner, 1995; De Hoogh et al., 2005). When leaders engage employees through participatory decision making and transparent communication, conflict is more likely to remain task focused and solution oriented.

Conversely, coercive power practices often intensify relationship conflict and resistance. Studies indicate that authoritarian leadership and unilateral power use exacerbate emotional conflict, reduce psychological safety, and undermine organizational commitment (Boddy et al., 2021; Schaubroeck et al., 2017). Such environments tend to suppress open dialogue, allowing conflict to become latent and destructive over time.

Leadership plays a particularly pivotal role in mediating the power conflict relationship. Leaders who balance formal authority with relational influence are better positioned to channel conflict toward productive outcomes such as innovation and learning (Tjosvold et al., 2014; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Ethical leadership further strengthens this process by fostering norms of fairness, accountability, and mutual respect (De Hoogh et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2005).

5. Contemporary Organizational Implications

In contemporary organizational settings characterized by digitalization, hybrid work, and cross cultural collaboration, power dynamics have become increasingly complex. Informal influence, knowledge control, and network centrality often rival formal authority as sources of power (Clegg et al., 2021; van Knippenberg et al., 2020). These shifts necessitate more nuanced approaches to conflict management that recognize multiple power bases and diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of psychological safety and inclusive leadership in managing conflict within virtual and diverse teams (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2020). When power is exercised inclusively, conflict becomes a catalyst for collective sensemaking and adaptive learning rather than a source of fragmentation.

6. Review Methodology

6.1 Search Strategy and Sources

This integrative literature review systematically synthesized seminal and contemporary publications spanning 1911-2023 from multiple academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Sage Journals. Search terms combined: ("organizational conflict" OR "workplace conflict") AND ("power dynamics" OR "power theory" OR "organizational power"), ("conflict management" OR "task conflict") AND ("leadership power" OR "ethical leadership"), ("psychological safety" OR "cooperative power") AND "organizations." The temporal scope captured theoretical evolution from classical to postmodern perspectives.

6.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and seminal works; (2) English language publications; (3) theoretical or empirical studies on organizational conflict-power nexus; (4) spanning classical (pre-1970), behavioral (1970-2000), and contemporary/postmodern (2000-2023) periods. Exclusion criteria eliminated: (1) non-organizational contexts; (2) practitioner reports; (3) non-peer-reviewed sources. From 856 initial records, 112 full-texts were assessed, yielding 22 sources selected for synthesis following integrative review principles.

6.3 Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis identified four evolutionary stages: classical suppression, behavioral

recognition, contemporary contingency, and postmodern relational perspectives. Content analysis mapped power types (coercive vs. cooperative), conflict outcomes (task vs. relationship), and leadership mediators. Quality assessment prioritized theoretical rigor, citation impact, and empirical validation across paradigmatic shifts.

7. Discussion and Theoretical Synthesis

7.1 Theoretical Evolution Summary

This review traces organizational conflict-power scholarship from Taylor's (1911) suppression paradigm through behavioral recognition (Lewin, 1947) to contemporary contingency models (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and postmodern relational perspectives (Foucault, 1980; Clegg et al., 2021). The synthesis reveals a fundamental paradigm shift: conflict transitioned from pathological threat to strategic resource, while power evolved from formal authority to discursive relational capacity.

7.2 Key Contributions to Organizational Theory

The review advances theory by establishing power as the central mediator determining conflict valence. Cooperative power transforms relationship conflict into task conflict (Tjosvold, 2008), while coercive power amplifies destructive outcomes (Boddy et al., 2021). Psychological safety emerges as the critical mechanism linking ethical leadership, power distribution, and constructive conflict resolution (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

7.3 Practical Implications for Managers

Leaders should prioritize: (1) participatory power practices over coercive control; (2) psychological safety training; (3) conflict competency development distinguishing task/relationship conflict; (4) ethical leadership fostering procedural justice. Digital/hybrid contexts demand network-based influence over hierarchical authority (van Knippenberg et al., 2020).

7.4 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Longitudinal studies tracking power-conflict trajectories needed. Cross-cultural validation of Western-centric models lacking. Digital transformation contexts (AI-mediated power, virtual conflict) unexplored. Mixed-methods research integrating neuro-leadership and conflict neurophysiology represents promising frontier.

8. Conclusion

This integrative literature review demonstrates that organizational conflict and power are deeply interconnected phenomena that must be managed simultaneously. Conflict does not inherently undermine organizational effectiveness; rather, its consequences depend largely on how power is exercised by organizational actors, particularly leaders. Cooperative, ethical, and participatory uses of power foster trust, procedural justice, and constructive conflict, thereby enhancing learning, innovation, and long term performance. In contrast, coercive power practices intensify relationship conflict, resistance, and disengagement.

By integrating power theory with contemporary conflict management perspectives, this article contributes to organizational theory by offering a unified analytical framework for understanding conflict dynamics in modern organizations. Practically, the findings highlight the need for leaders to develop relational and ethical competencies that enable them to leverage power constructively, transforming conflict from a potential liability into a strategic organizational resource.

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