

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: EXPLICATING THE NOTION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT CLIMATE AND AGENDA SETTING FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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Dual concerns models of varying specifications have been developed by theorists to describe different styles available to conflicting parties for conflict management during a conflict episode. Most of the research employing dual concerns models has exhausted its efforts to find a local-optimum solution in a particular situation or what Kenneth Thomas has described as short term conflict management. This major stream of research, although important, is void of descriptive value if one's goal is to achieve best possible solution by introducing structural changes in a system and the emphasis is on proactive conflict management rather than reactive. A theoretical distinction between short term and long term conflict management is at the heart of this scholarly effort. In line with the theoretical underpinning for long term conflict management, the structural framework for conflict management proposes parameters of a system which lead to a behaviour theorized to be aligned with proactive conflict management. Measuring structural parameters of a system for the purposes of empirical research could become difficult when the level of measurement shifts from micro (e.g. individual) to macro (e.g. organization). Industrial and organizational psychology has conceptualized and researched a notion known as climate that could adequately address the measurement challenge. Conflict management climate therefore is a notion that measures shared perceptions of people with regard to structural parameters of a system and is theorized to be an aggregated construct of organizational level. In a logical sequence, this paper further explicates the dimensions of the construct of conflict management climate. Thus, in a bid to develop research agenda for conflict management climate, this paper builds a case for long term conflict management and draws on the theory of climate to theorize and explicate the dimensions of conflict management climate. The paper culminates by setting a research agenda for this newly conceptualized construct.

Keywords: conflict management climate, interface management, structural framework for conflict management.

## INTRODUCTION

Among all the models of conflicts, dual concerns models have provided a dominant paradigm to study conflict behaviours (Thomas, 1976). However, they have been criticized for their over simplistic approach of representing reality as only two variables have been theorized to be determining the strategic intentions of a conflict party (Thomas, 1992). For example, in Blake and Mouton's model (1964), two variables 'concern for people' and 'concern for production' are theorized to be determining intentions of a conflict party. Similarly, in Rahim and Bonoma's model

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(1979) conflict management behaviour is theorized to be a function of ‘concern for others’ and ‘concern for self’. Also, dual concerns models provide theoretical underpinning to find ‘local optimum’ solution to a conflict in given circumstances but they are void of descriptive value if one’s desire is to find a ‘global optimum’ solution (Thomas, 1992). In response to these theoretical shortcomings, Thomas (1992) proposed process model of conflict and structural framework theoretically aligned with the notion of long term conflict management and ‘global optimum’ solution. Where the proposed structural framework enriches researcher’s mind about the ways to achieve long term conflict management in an organization, it also poses a challenge for empirical research especially when one is to measure the structural variables at the organizational level of analysis. Fortunately, industrial and organizational psychology has conceptualized a notion known as ‘climate’ that deals with the shared perceptions of individuals in particular settings about a distinct phenomenon. Climate of a distinct phenomenon may inform researchers/practitioners about individuals’ prioritization and consensus with regard to distinct phenomenon through its attributes of ‘level’ and ‘strength’ respectively. Hence, we submit that the notion of climate once combined with Thomas’ (1992) long term perspective of conflict management will allow researchers to measure the prioritization and consensus with regard to structural variables and in turn allow the measurement of variation in theorized outcomes. Accordingly, conflict management climate is a notion that measures shared perceptions of people with regard to structural parameters of a system which are theorized to shape reasoning and in turn determine the course of conflict management. Hence, this conceptualization is expected to serve four purposes primarily by: (1) allowing researchers to empirically test the structural framework proposed by Thomas (1992) (2) contributing to conflict management theory by showing the variation in theorized conflict management behaviour with the variations in level and strength of conflict management climate (3) allowing researchers to see the influence of variation in conflict management climate on those notions which are conceptually linked with conflict management e.g. intra-organizational interface management (4) allowing researchers to develop a conflict management climate instrument which may prove useful in informing project managers about the socio psychological state of their employees with regard to conflict management and possible actions they might need to take to improve situation proactively, if required. In a bid to conceptualize this construct, this paper presents theoretical underpinning of the construct, characterization of the construct and a research agenda which may reflect on the potential of this newly conceptualized construct in the field of construction project management.

## **RATIONALE UNDERPINNING THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THIS CONSTRUCT**

The concept of division of labour furthers the notion of specialization and provides ground to deal with challenges arising out of complex product designs and project architectures. However, this very same concept engenders fragmentation (Fellows and Liu, 2012) and consequently necessitates the creation of boundaries/interfaces between different entities challenging the free flow of information and ultimately threatening the achievement of project goals. Accordingly, Chua and Godinot (2006) notes that project success is contingent on the successful management of interfaces between different specialized work divisions. Construction project management literature has given extensive space to inter-organizational interface management since the publishing of Latham’s (1994) and Egan’s (1998) reports, but it is difficult to

find research on intra-organizational interfaces which have a potential of engendering improvements at operational level by reducing waste, delays and rework. General contractor's project organization that takes a responsibility of transforming drawings into reality faces enormous challenges with regard to intra-organizational interface management as there are multiple specialized teams working together to deliver project successfully. One of the great challenges is that of effective collaboration between different teams because due to different "thought worlds" (Dougherty, 1992), it is very likely that people from different functional teams get into conflict during the process of information sharing and decision making. The functional heterogeneity symbolizing different thought worlds in general contractor's project organization is reflected through fig.1 below. Katz and Kahn (1978) once observed that "every aspect of organizational life that creates order and coordination must overcome tendencies to action and in that fact lies the potentiality for conflict". At one side, where people contain themselves in "silo thinking" may get successful in avoiding conflict, however "silo thinking" doesn't allow alternative views and explanations which may create difficulties for the organization at the later stage in the form of delays, reworks and conflicts with other stakeholders (Ellegaard and Koch, 2014; Goh *et al.*, 2012). On the other side, where people take other teams' perspective to plan and execute may get into the trap of conflict owing to different "thought worlds" or functional heterogeneity.

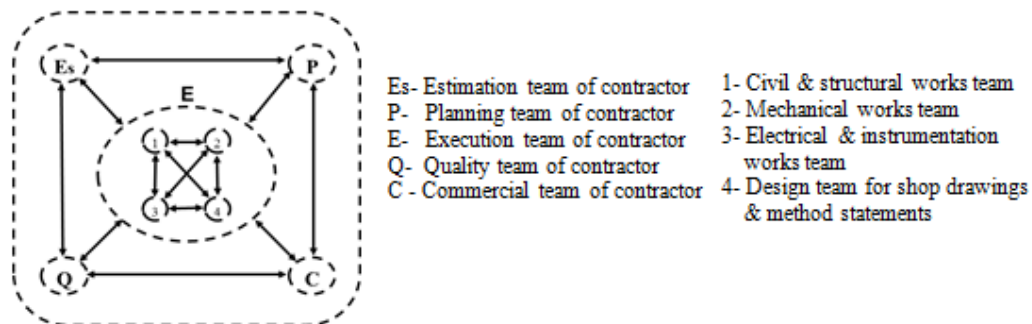


Fig.1 Graphical representation of functional differentiation in general contractor's project organization

This whole situation calls for a perspective which could explain theoretically as to how the individuals from different functional teams of an organization keep their dialogues constructive and benefit from the cross-fertilization of ideas and avoid getting into the abyss of dysfunctional conflict. A possible research question which then follows this discourse is: Is there any role of context in keeping the dialogue constructive? The research motivated to address this question of theoretical and practical importance, built on the long term perspective of conflict management (Thomas, 1992) which posits that structural parameters of a system influence thoughts and emotions which in turn determine the course of conflict management. Measuring structural parameters of a system to know whether they will engender collaborative conflict management is a challenge for empirical research purposes that has been overcome by bringing the notion of climate which deals with shared perceptions of people with regard to distinct phenomenon (Schneider *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, conflict management climate as a notion is conceptualized to act as a theoretical lens to explain the performance differentials between the project organizations with a climate for intra-organizational conflict management and those without.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational conflict and its management is a crucial component of management research and has been part of the literature from at least five decades (e.g. March and Simon, 1958; Pondy, 1967; Walton and Dutton, 1969) . Conflict is an integral part of organizational life, as Pondy (1989) observed that conflict constitutes an integral part of organizational life, rather than occasional break down of cooperation. Theorists have proposed different normative and descriptive models (see, Lewicki *et al.*, 1992) to capture the antecedents , dynamics and consequences of conflicts. Among these models, researchers concerned with conflict management behaviours have tried to focus on dual concerns models (Thomas, 1976). However, these models have been criticized for being over simplistic as primarily only two variables seem to be determining the intentions of a conflict party. Also, the rationale reasoning in the models seem to be shaped only by the valence parties attach to the desired outcomes besides ignoring the impact of normative reasoning and emotions altogether (Thomas, 1992). Jehn's (1997) seminal work and De Dreu and Weingart's (2003) meta-analysis showed the importance of emotions during a conflict episode and the possible interplay between task conflict and relationship conflict, thus giving empirical validity to Thomas' (1992) argument that there are multiple forces that act on a conflict party and therefore a more complex model is needed to account for such forces rather than just relying on two variables. Furthermore, dual concerns models' emphasize on the dynamics of conflict and outcomes precluding the importance of context on dynamics and consequences of conflict. In his seminal article, Johns (2006) has built his case for the importance of context in shaping one's behaviour. Johns (2006) has defined context as "*situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behaviour as well as functional relationships between variables*". Similarly Cappelli and Sherer portrayal of context is synthesized by Johns (2006)in following words "*organizational characteristics as providing context for individual members and the external environment as providing context for organizations.*" Therefore, we note that omission of context from the models articulated to represent conflict behaviour is meaningful in a sense that it allows current researchers to understand the shortcomings of prevalent models of conflict and to look for other models which are more comprehensive rather than reductive.

Similarly, in the construction project management literature, dual concerns models have been used to predict different outcomes (e.g. negotiations outcomes). However, these are again used without accounting for context. Cheung *et al.* (2006) have done research in which they have just tried to find how different conflict management styles impact on different negotiation outcomes isolating research from its context. Similarly, Liu and Zhai (2011) have tried to find how personality affect the choice of conflict management styles without considering its interaction with organizational context as Johns (2006) note that context can interact with personal disposition ultimately having effects on behaviour. Tsai and Chi (2009) did try to find the relationship between culture and conflict management styles of dual concerns model, however, national culture alone does not convey a complete picture as organizational context being more proximal antecedent of behaviour holds more potential to explain variance in the behavioural outcome of individuals. These researches, although important, suffer from two main fundamental theoretical deficiencies: (1) The context reflective of situational opportunities and countervailing constraints and their additive effects on behaviour (Johns, 2006) is not taken as such and therefore is suspected to have cast doubts on the generalizability of findings (2) theoretical underpinning

behind the dual concerns models is not rich that could inform about how context could possibly shape a meaning. In view of the above limitations of the dual concerns model and the extant research employing these models, we submit that Thomas’ (1992) process model of conflict together with structural framework address these theoretical shortcomings and provide theoretical underpinning to conceptualize a notion that could capture context, account for multiplicity of forces acting on conflict party during a conflict episode, and allows one to achieve global optimum solution— the type of solution which is reached by parties through collaborative management of conflicts as it is reported to be associated with perceived fairness, decision quality, quality of working relationships and increased satisfaction of the parties (Thomas, 1992) — through long term conflict management perspective. Long term perspective of conflict management is reflective of an idea of pro-active management of conflicts to achieve synergistic solution by keeping in mind the long term benefits of collaborative conflict management rather than an idea which takes long on the time horizon of project to bear its fruit.

### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF THE NOTION

Owing to the influence of economics on conflict/negotiation literature, the underlying assumptions of conflict models tend to be rational which means that conflict parties choose behaviours depending on their likelihood of achieving desired outcomes (Thomas, 1992). This influence, however, has ignored normative reasoning and emotions that could have strong effects on the behaviour of conflict parties (ibid). Drawing heavily on Fishbein’s (1963) work, Thomas (1992) notes that behaviour results from intention and intention is shaped by the additive effects of two forms of reasoning i.e. rational/instrumental reasoning and normative reasoning. As emotions are regarded as an important feature of conflict phenomenon (e.g., Pondy, 1967) therefore, Thomas (1992) expanded the Fishbein’s central idea and posited that intentions are shaped by the additive effects of reasoning and emotions i.e. rationale /instrumental reasoning, normative reasoning, and emotions. Fig.2 depicts the importance of reasoning and emotions in determining the course of conflict management. The relevance of process model of conflict to the construction project settings could be ascertained from the fact that the process model of conflict is grounded in the Fishbein’s work on behaviour — the basics of which have been extensively tested in the form of theory of planned behaviour in variety of contexts including construction project management settings (cf. Zhang and Ng (2012); Teo and Lossemore (2001); Begum *et al.*, (2009)). As the basics of Fishbein’s work have withstood the test of time in various contexts including construction, quite plausibly the process model of conflict grounded in Fishbein’s work is expected to offer insights on the proactive management of conflicts in construction project settings.

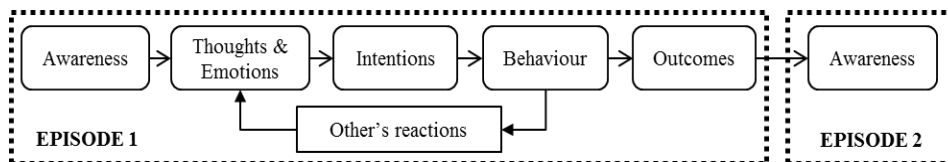


Fig.2 Process Model of Conflict (Thomas, 1992)

Depending on the goal of conflict management, Thomas (1992) proposed that conflict management can be either short term or long term. These both types of conflict management then could either be focused on addressing only one party’s concerns, or to look after the concerns of both parties or even to address the concerns of a larger system. As the short term perspective deals with the situations on “*here and now*”

basis it certainly is not of descriptive value for those who want conflicts to be managed through improvements in structural conditions (parameters) of the system. Short term conflict management perspective is essentially reactive in nature whereas long term conflict management professes the idea of proactive conflict management whereby structural parameters of a system shape one's reasoning to collaborate in a conflict situation. Both perspectives are of importance from their respective standpoints. Long term conflict management perspective is of value when the objective is to manage conflicts through collaboration whereas short term conflict management is appropriate when the principal parties expect to encounter conflict situations where the collaboration is not practical (Thomas, 1992). Intra-organizational interface management is benefited most when the conflicts are managed collaboratively. Also, the purpose of collaborative conflict management fits well with that of interface management as 28 CEOs of different companies have suggested that collaborative conflict management suits most when the objective is to learn; when it is desired to merge insights from people with different perspectives; and when the objective is to find integrative solutions (Thomas, 1992). This line of reasoning suggests that collaborative conflict management suits best to interface management and could systematically be achieved in an organization by the long term perspective of conflict management. Long term perspective of conflict management argues for structural changes in a system to enhance opportunities and reduce constraints to achieve more globally optimal set of solutions. Colloquially speaking, Thomas'(1992) 'long term conflict management' and Johns'(2006) 'context' are similar in nature as both see behaviour emanating from the force field (Lewin, 1951) characterized by enhancing opportunities and restraining constraints. Therefore, long term conflict management perspective provides opportunity to account for the context in the shape of structural variables and allows one to see how contextual variance impinges on the behavioural outcomes. Although the long term perspective of conflict management carries a lot of intuitive appeal, measuring structural conditions for empirical research purposes is a challenge. However, this challenge has been surmounted by bringing in the notion of climate that deals with shared perceptions of individuals with regard to particular phenomenon at certain level of analysis.

Organizational climate is defined as "*the shared perceptions of and the meaning attached to the policies, practices, and procedures employees experience and the behaviours they observe getting rewarded and that are supported and expected*" (Schneider *et al.*, 2013). Synthesizing Schneider and Reichers' (1983) etiology of climates, Naumann and Bennett (2000) note that climates develop from (1) social interaction giving rise to shared meanings (the symbolic interaction approach), (2) attraction/selection/attrition (ASA) giving rise to homogeneity (the ASA approach), and (3) mere exposure to the same policies, practices, and procedures (the structuralist approach). We submit that it is the structuralist and social interaction approach that offer insights into etiology of conflict management climate in contractor's project organization. Structural approach refers to the influence of characteristics of structural properties of an organization on individuals' attitudes, values and perceptions of organizational event in the organization. However, structuralist argument fails to provide insights as to how these organizational characteristics could influence perceptions homogeneously across different groups (Schneider and Reichers, 1983). Therefore structuralist argument could help in differentiating the climate of two different organizations but not within the same organization (*ibid*). This argument is complemented by social interaction view which argues that climates are created by the social interaction process. Social interactions allow individuals to understand the

meaning of various aspects of the work context and ultimately provides basis for development of homogenous perceptions across different groups working in the organization. Therefore, conflict management climate is expected to evolve through exposure of same policies, procedures and norms and the homogeneity in perceptions is linked to the social interaction of individuals from different functional teams.

## **CHARACTERIZATION OF THE NOTION**

Drawing on the Thomas' (1992) structural framework for collaborative conflict management and the theory of climate, the proposed three dimensions of the construct are as under:

### **Rational reasoning climate**

Drawing on the theory of climate and structural variables posited to foster rationale reasoning, the notion of rationale reasoning climate is defined as shared perceptions of the individuals with regard to structural variables— positive mutual regard, mutual trust, power parity, commitment to organization mission, organic climate and collaborative reward systems— that foster rationale reasoning necessary to achieve collaborative conflict management. Building on expectancy theory, Thomas (1992) has identified two distinct types of structural variables i.e. integrative incentives and feasibility conditions. Integrative incentives are those variables that contribute towards the valence of an intended outcome (in this case collaborative outcome), whereas feasibility conditions are those that contribute towards the expectancy that such an outcome is attainable. Therefore, rationale reasoning climate is construct that measures whether the individuals in the organization attach valence and expectancy in the attainment of integrated outcome.

### **Normative reasoning climate**

Normative reasoning climate is defined as shared perceptions of the individuals about the structural variables that foster normative reasoning which in turn allows to achieve collaborative conflict management. Synthesizing Fishbein's model (1963), Thomas (1992) has noted that *"force of each normative system on the individuals' intention to collaborate is assumed to be a multiplicative product of (a) the degree to which that normative system prescribes collaboration and (b) the degree to which the party is motivated to comply with that normative system. These structural factors are referred to as "collaborative norms and precepts" and "acceptance/internalization factors," respectively"*. Therefore normative reasoning climate is a construct that measures the perceptions of individuals about the organizational norms, shared collaborative expectations, and organizational cohesiveness.

### **Emotional management**

It is now well accepted notion that conflicts can only be productive if the emotions during the episode of conflict are positively channelized (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). In line with the definition of collaborative conflict management that is concerned with confrontation and cooperation, the collaborative efforts requires reality centric handling of the conflict situation. (Thoits (1984)) has named this reality centric handling of conflict as *"problem-focused coping"* where party handles the conflict in a pragmatic way rather than depending on defensive mechanisms such as cognitive distortion — a process that constructs a psychological protection from the threat to self-concept (Thomas, 1992). Thomas (1992) has identified 'social support' as a variable that buffers between individuals and the effects of stressor. Thomas (1992) also notes that *"social support is also a major source of positive affect which,*

*as discussed earlier, serves to block the expression of negative emotions and to provide a motivational force for cooperation*". Thomas (1992) further notes that social support is not merely notion of providing comfort to individual rather research shows that colleagues also help individuals to steer them away from the distorted interpretations of events "*that generate inappropriate or maladaptive negative emotions*".

## **RESEARCH AGENDA**

Conflict management climate as conceptualized in this paper provides understanding on how intra-organizational conflicts could be managed proactively. As conflicts are integral feature of organizational life, managing conflicts proactively can have productive ramifications on organizational performance. Therefore, this section delineates on the notions that could be explored well in connection with this newly conceptualized construct. However, the conceptual underpinning for the connections between conflict management climate and other notions is beyond the scope of this paper and may be presented elsewhere. Hence, the role of agenda here is to present the possible avenues for future research.

(1) Currently, in the main stream management literature, 'social capital' as a notion is being researched upon and many researches have shown its worth in the context of organizational performance. Some even have shown its influence on project success. However, not much is known as to how social capital can be developed in project organizations which are purposefully built and are of temporary nature. We believe that conflict management climate holds theoretical potential in explaining the development of social capital in project organizations. As conflict management climate epitomizes an environment of trust, normative norms, and social support, it may allow people from different functional teams to bridge and bond ultimately leading to the development of social capital.

(2) Organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) — compliance with the company, altruism, conscientiousness, interpersonal harmony, and protecting company resources— as an extra role behaviour is known to have positive impact on project performance. We expect that conflict management climate reflecting the perceptions of trust, social support, commitment to organizational mission, social cohesiveness, may influence OCB. We further propose that psychological capital — hope, resilience, optimism, and efficacy — may play a mediating role between conflict management climate and OCB.

(3) We also submit that conflict management climate holds theoretical potential in explaining the variance in intra-organizational interface management. Interface management is believed to be linked to conflict management climate via collaborative conflict management because collaborative conflict management provides critical foundation to understand different perspectives and to reach to an integrative solution— the idea which is at the heart of interface management. Also, owing to uncertain environment of complex projects, iterative working practices are required to successfully complete a task at hand. Iterative working practices are to be benefited most by collaborative conflict management as people will tend to communicate and coordinate with each other without getting into task or relationship conflict.

## **CONCLUSION**

The conceptualization presented in this paper marks a departure from the conceptualization that was advanced by the dominant paradigm of dual concerns



models. Where traditional paradigm of conflict management dominated by dual concerns models focus on short term conflict management, the notion of conflict management climate builds on long term perspective of conflict management and argues for pro-active conflict management by improving structural parameters of a system. This paper does not only contribute towards body of knowledge by presenting the conceptualization of this construct, it also has refreshed the process model of conflict which explains how rationale reasoning, normative reasoning and emotions play their part in determining the course of conflict management. It notes the importance of context in determining behavioural outcome and has therefore pointed out possible shortcomings in the extant literature of construction project management. By arguing that long term perspective of conflict management captures context, the conceptualization of conflict management climate is expected to produce empirical research whose findings will be more generalizable and attractive for practitioners. Finally, this paper has suggested a research agenda which we believe will provide a new perspective to look into other notions (e.g. social capital, organizational citizenship behaviour, psychological capital and interface management).

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