Discourses in the Use and Emergence of Organizational Conflict

IWONA L. KUSZTAL

Four discourses in use were identified in a grounded theory study of organizational conflict. This article discusses how these different discourses in use were involved in the emergence of organizational conflicts. Discourses in use determine what conflicts arise in the organization and how they are understood and managed. In this article, the practical implication of this approach for assessing and managing conflict processes in organizations is considered.

Little is known about how organizational conflicts emerge. When one starts with situations that have already escalated, it is difficult to retrace the process. For the participants, the present always colors the past, and what happened earlier is difficult to re-create. Therefore, it is important to study organizational conflicts when they first emerge. Many start out small and are soon forgotten. Others linger on and, over time, may become more serious problems. We need to know more about the emergent nature of organizational conflict and how conflict gets transformed in the process of organizational interaction. This knowledge can be crucial for successful conflict management and, in some cases, prevention.

A grounded theory study was conducted to explore how the process occurs naturally in the organizational setting. The study pursued the following research questions: (1) How do organizational members come to understand their problematic experience through discourse, and how are problematic situations noticed, labeled, and experienced? (2) How does members' understanding affect the way they deal with the problem, and, in reciprocal fashion, what consequences do their actions have for organizational practice and individual and collective understandings within the organization? (3) How are members' understanding of problematic

situations transformed in the process of organizational interaction? and (4) What role do individual and collective understandings play in conflict emergence and transformation?

Theoretical Background

To give the inquiry general focus and direction, the study integrated insights from Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat's model of dispute transformation (1980–81), Weick's theory of organizational sensemaking (1995), Giddens's structuration theory (1979, 1993, 1994), and interpretive sociolegal research that focused on discursive processes in dispute transformation (Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel, 1994; Mather and Yngvesson, 1980–81; Merry, 1990; Yngvesson, 1976, 1978, 1988, 1993). Based on the reviewed literature, a discourse-focused approach was developed. This section briefly outlines this approach.

Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980–81) view conflict as emergent. Conflict arises when individuals notice certain situations as being injurious or problematic. Their understanding evolves in the process of social interaction, and it influences how they deal with the problem. The researchers urge for the study of conflict transformations or "the way in which experiences become grievances, grievances become disputes, and disputes take various shapes, follow particular dispute processing paths, and lead to new forms of understanding" (p. 632). The process of conflict transformation, according to the researchers, is *subjective,* because transformation may just involve changes in interpretation or feelings and may not be directly apparent in a social actor's behavior. The process is *unstable,* in that the transformations may occur repeatedly and the social actor's view of what happened may keep changing over time. The process is *reactive,* because individuals redefine their perceptions and modify their behavior in response to the communication, behavior, and expectations of many different people, including opponents, intimates, agents, lawyers, and superiors. Finally, the process has a tendency to *avoid closure* because new claims often emerge, and conflicts, apparently resolved, may resurface.

The study proposed that the conflict dynamic be conceptualized as a discursive process of organizational sensemaking. Sensemaking can be broadly defined as a retrospective process of creating sense in the evolving interaction (Weick, 1995). Giddens's idea of duality of structure (1979, 1993, 1994) was used to better explain the reciprocal connection between members' understanding and actions. Members' discourse was treated as an

important link between the two. Focus on discourse helped connect key concepts and dimensions into a well-integrated whole. The following paragraphs present the underlying assumptions of this view and their implications for the study of organizational conflict.

Across the theories, discourse is considered the principle means by which individuals make sense of and construct their social reality. To make sense of organizational events, organizational members retrospectively apply categories of discourse to the flow of organizational action that is otherwise equivocal, puzzling, and uncertain. So discourse in use is both the means and the expression of members' understanding. Members construct their understanding through discourse, and in the process of their interactions, they re-create their organizational reality. The focus on discourse as the means and outcome of members' sensemaking enables one to systematically study the conflict dynamic in terms of organizational members' evolving understanding and action.

The study of members' sensemaking as a discursive phenomenon helps bridge the individual and collective dimensions of the process. Again, Giddens's idea of structuration was used to explain that connection. Discourse, as a structural property of the system, is tied to members' organizational practices. In the process of their everyday interactions, members construct in discourse an accountable universe of meaning that makes their organizational practices make sense. Members' discourse is considered the means through which collective understanding is reconstituted in situated actions or accounts of individuals. The systematic analysis of members' discourse can provide valuable insights into the patterns of collective understanding in the organization and how they are reconstituted in individuals' processes of sensemaking.

This view of discourse is consistent with a number of interpretive sociolegal studies that focus on the processes of dispute transformation in local communities (Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel, 1994; Mather and Yngvesson, 1980–81; Merry, 1990; Yngvesson, 1976, 1978, 1988, 1993). The studies examine how, in the process of conflict interaction, different discourses come to bear on social actors' understanding and actions and transform the conflict. Conflict transformation is conceptualized here as a discourse-driven process. This approach has many implications for the study of organizational conflict.

The analysis of members' discourse across time and space enables one to trace spatial and temporal transformations in organizational understanding. Organizational situations that are seen as problematic may represent

potential transformation points for the individuals and the organization. They may represent discontinuities between individual and collective understanding, understanding and action, and organizational past and present. Discourse is the means of managing these discontinuities. The way problematic situations are managed across time will have important consequences for what the organization and its members become.

Methodology

The site of this research was an administrative department of a large urban university in the Northeast. The university is a publicly funded research institution that serves over twenty-eight thousand students. The department, here called the Office, was responsible for development, scheduling, and operation of campus programs, activities, and social events. The Office was made up of eight full-time staff members, all of whom participated in the study. In addition, the department employed graduate assistants as part-time staff members, and three of them participated in the study.

The data collection at the site was conducted over a ten-month period and employed open-ended qualitative interviewing and observation. The interview sessions were scheduled roughly every two to three weeks, depending on the availability of the participants. Altogether, 136 interviews were conducted. Roughly one to two hours per week were spent observing members' informal interactions and staff meetings; the latter were also recorded.

The interviews focused on what the participants indicated were problematic situations encountered on the job. The participants were asked to bring up any situations that were in some way agitating or frustrating to them personally or that involved other members of the staff. They were encouraged to talk freely and at length about what had happened and how they had experienced it. Before they moved on to talk about another situation, questions were asked to clarify what was said and to seek additional information. Toward the end of the interview, follow-up questions were asked about the situations that participants had brought up during previous sessions.

The interviews were transcribed word for word, with hesitation, false starts, and longer pauses also being marked. The transcripts were arranged chronologically, and discourse sequences were marked to indicate the problematic incidents and subsequent accounts thereof. A chronological list of problematic incidents was generated that indicated the spatial and

temporal spans of conflicts—that is, who brought them up, when, and over what period of time. It helped identify the conflicts that were more salient. Spatial and temporal spans were treated as important properties of conflicts as a general category. The list was also a useful tool for navigating the expanding data set.

The process of data analysis was ongoing throughout the research process. It followed the general guidelines of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994). During the early stages of data analysis, close, line-by-line reading was used to uncover as many potentially relevant categories as possible. Subsequently, the readings became more selective and focused more closely on particular conflicts. The categories became more abstract and better developed as more cases were analyzed and contrasted. Four discourses in use were eventually identified as the highest-order categories. The analysis then concentrated on elaborating and refining the relationships between the categories and the subcategories.

Research Findings

Situations in which organizational members noticed that certain organizational occurrences were problematic were considered as instances of conflict emergence. The study focused mainly on the role of discourse in this conflict dynamic. Though conflicts can emerge from nondiscursive factors, they remain outside the purview of the study and are not discussed here. The study located the emergence of organizational conflict almost exclusively in the use of discourse. This was consistent with the study's interest in the processes of organizational sensemaking, for it is in one's sensemaking of the conflict through discourse that the conflict becomes a social entity and is enacted as such.

Discourse analysis revealed four different discourses in use. At the site studied, members used the managerial discourse of bureaucracy, professional discourse, human connection discourse, and political discourse to make sense of their organizational reality. The four discourses in use reconstituted members' collective understanding in everyday office interactions. They enabled members to coordinate their actions in meaningful ways and to function relatively smoothly as an organization. But the four discourses in use also lay at the basis of organizational conflicts. Giddens's model of duality of structure helped capture the systematic differences between the four discourses in use, in terms of their underlying structures of

signification, legitimation, and domination. On the level of members' interaction, the four discourses in use relied on (1) different sets of meanings, with attention focused on different issues, casting them in different terms, (2) members' roles being framed differently, as they determined who the relevant parties were, structuring their capacity for involvement, (3) the reproduction of different types of relationships between members, and (4) the suggestion of different types of "solutions," or courses of "appropriate" action.

Managerial Discourse of Bureaucracy

When managerial discourse of bureaucracy was used, the staff members considered their own and others' actions in terms of formal organizational structure—that is, policies and procedures, job responsibilities, task assignments, and reporting lines. A violation of these formal structures by student organizations, other departments, or the staff members themselves was what made situations problematic in terms of managerial discourse. When such violation was noticed, the staff members referred to organizational policies, procedures, and job responsibilities to better determine the nature of the problem—that is, what the problem was about, whose responsibility it was, and how it was to be managed. For example, Ron, who was the adviser to student organizations and who reported to Sally, made the following observation about problems in his area: "Based upon the rules and regulations of the university and of this department, red flags go up at different times. If students in their organization are getting ready to do some things that are counter to the university rules, and it looks like it's gonna affect some things, then I bring it up and get Sally's advice on how I should proceed."

Managerial discourse was associated with the use of formal roles in organizational interaction. When members used managerial discourse, they acted as occupants of a certain formal position—for example, as the director, office manager, or programmer. Their interaction reconstituted formal hierarchical relationships. It was understood that superiors had formal control over and responsibility for the units they supervised. Their subordinates were expected to keep them informed, seek their direction, and follow their decisions. Managerial discourse was not a participatory discourse. Parties' involvement was restricted by organizational procedures and it decreased down the organizational hierarchy.

Framing problems in managerial discourse suggested the use of proper organizational channels and procedures. When members failed in their

responsibilities, it was up to their immediate supervisor to deal with the problem and get them in line. The supervisor would evaluate their performance, restructure responsibilities, give oral or written warnings, and use other forms of formal control or discipline.

Discourse of Professionalism

When discourse of professionalism was used, organizational situations were understood in terms of more diverse and less explicit standards of professionalism. The emphasis shifted from whether or not organizational members did their job to how they did it. Based on their professional expertise, job experience, and work ethics, members often believed that certain situations should be managed differently. They felt that others used poor professional judgment, were being inefficient or ineffective in their jobs, and needed to be more creative or innovative, take more initiative, and be more supportive of the department and more involved in its operations. In the following fragment, a participant used professional discourse to express her frustration with Carol, the office manager: "We (the office) run okay now, but I think if I were an office manager, I would be constantly thinking of ways to improve the office, ways to improve the organization of cabinets and stuff like that, and ways to make most of the use of our students. If that were my job, then I think I would take more pride in coming up with some systems or improvements. I don't think Carol feels the need to do that, or even wants to."

In terms of their role, members acted as professionals, and, as team players, they often went "beyond the call." They emphasized the need for continuous professional development and growth. Professional expertise and initiative, passionate involvement in what one was doing, and adherence to high standards of performance were seen as very important aspects of who they were as professionals. When professional discourse was used, it reconstituted a collegial relationship. Members felt that they could approach others as colleagues and equals to raise important issues. Professional discourse fostered involvement and participation. For example, one participant observed, "Professionals need to sit down and say, 'This is what we need you to do. Do you realize that you may not be doing this or that you may be doing too much of this and not enough of this? And do you realize that . . . ?' . . . because things can look different . . . from somebody else's shoes, and ultimately, I think *that* is where any group needs to spend its time. I mean, if they . . . if people are gonna grow and not be hurt about things, you know. . . ."

Professional discourse in use suggested collegial solutions. Based on their commitment to the department, others felt the need to get involved and make the employee aware of the problems. They tried to understand the professional basis of his or her difficulties, what he or she was doing wrong, and what might help. They suggested certain systems and solutions, offered assistance, and tried to help the employee improve.

Discourse of Human Connection

When human connection discourse was used, members understood problematic situations in terms of commonsense understandings that were drawn from the general culture of everyday life and pertained to the "proper" way of being in the world. The issues raised had to do with other people being insensitive, inconsiderate of their feelings and special needs, unable or unwilling to understand them, and unwilling to consider their special circumstances or offer personal support. They failed to show basic human respect, empathy, maturity, and common sense.

When human connection discourse was used, members acted in their private capacity as human beings. Human connection discourse emphasized the commonness of human connection as the basis for relating to others. It reinforced the human capacity to understand and empathize with other people's problems, circumstances, and life situations. In the following fragment, a member used human connection discourse when he talked about the student staff member who reported the office manager.

> They are not staying busy, . . . you know they sit a lot. . . . I don't think it's healthy. I really want to see these students being very productive, always moving, doing things. As a parent, I taught my children the same principles with house chores. I believe that if children learn house chores, they are learning life skills, and I look at this office in the same way. If they learn how to consistently do things, they're learning life skills, so when they walk out of there they have gained some skills, you know. I am interested in seeing youngsters learn skills and have good manners and appreciate people, not just because of the way they look or the color of their skin but because of the character of their heart. And the person who teaches that has to have a good heart. A person with a bad heart can't teach another person how to have a good heart. It's almost like you have to walk the walk and talk the talk.

Human connection discourse in use fostered members' involvement and participation, particularly when members acted as friends. They would

often turn to others to seek support and vent their frustrations. Problems framed in human connection discourse suggested an informal, personal type of solutions–for example, providing personal help and support, being truthful and honest, and hearing others out. But curtailing the relationship instead of repairing it was sometimes also a viable option, particularly when one was just too angry or too hurt, and when the connection was lost because the other appeared to be so unlike oneself—was inconsiderate, dishonest, rude, lazy, or stupid. That was usually communicated nonverbally by limiting interaction, withdrawing, withholding acknowledgement during informal encounters, and so forth.

Political Discourse

When political discourse was used, problematic situations were seen in terms of members' threatened interests and underlying differences of power: "This is a dog-eat-dog kind of world," one staff member explained. "You need to be smart in order to survive." "Being smart" meant making the "right" moves and saying the "right" things—things that were not necessarily true or honest but that would get you what you needed or wanted. In the following fragment, a staff member used political discourse to talk about an upper administration person:

> Dr. Taylor makes assumptions of people with very, very, very limited information, which is very scary, but she does. So, if she walked into this office, I don't care how bad your day is, you have to be on, you have to be. I don't care, if . . . you know, you just have to act like . . . you know, like "I love my life, I love my job, and give me, give me, give me, I'll do anything." . . . That's the attitude she wants, and if she doesn't get it, then she assumes that you're that way all the time, and "I don't need you."

When members used political discourse, they emphasized the need to be politically smart and they took on the role of strategists or political players. In the majority of cases, members used political discourse when dealing with interoffice conflicts that involved other departments and higher administration. In those situations, political discourse in use reconstituted a "we against them" orientation that fostered intragroup connection. Things changed, however, when members sensed that others were playing their own games, and political discourse was being used more frequently in intraoffice conflicts. When that happened, a sense of distrust and suspicion permeated the office and transformed members' relationships.

Framing problems in political discourse made power imbalance between the parties particularly salient and called for a well-calculated strategy. Members felt that they had to be very careful about what they said, how they said it, and to whom: "Some things you don't bring up, you don't talk about them, you cover your tracks. . . . A lot of times I choose not to tell people things that they don't need to know," one member said. Or, "Sometimes, you let stuff out, because you want it leaked," another member observed. To stay on top of the game, members relied on a range of formal and informal resources that were available to them. In the process, they often appropriated the other discourses appealing to formal policies, professionalism, and personal, human ties. Their rationale, however, was based on political discourse, and their objective was to gain advantage or just survive in this game of organizational politics.

Members' accounts showed that it was members' inability to make sense of a situation as others did that often led to conflict. The majority of conflicts emerged when members used different discourses. They understood organizational situations differently; that is, (1) they focused on different issues and cast them in different terms, (2) they adopted different roles, (3) they acted on the basis of a different type of relationship, and (4) their actions, or solutions, made sense to them but were often problematic from the perspective of the others.

The two discourses that most frequently functioned in opposition to each other were managerial discourse and professional discourse. When members used professional discourse, they often resisted formal managerial structures and actions; they found them stifling and limiting. As professionals, they expected a more collegial relationship. For example, a member recalled a problematic interaction with her boss: "His position is 'I'm the director, and whatever I say goes.' What I'm noticing more and more is that he's questioning every single thing we do. . . . When he is on a rampage . . . And if there's a situation that comes up, he's gonna question, you know, your professionalism, your competency, all of that, you know?"

When members used professional discourse, they often sidestepped or challenged formal organizational procedures and policies. This presented problems for them and others, in terms of managerial discourse. In the following fragment, an employee talks about a decision he had made, which his boss later saw as problematic:

> I didn't want to make the student organization get all these four groups to get a review, write up a new constitution, and go through all this

> extra . . . you know, just to set up a Web page. . . . That's why I made my judgment call. . . . I was real upset that he felt he had to lecture me about why he thought that was a bad decision, and I was just . . . I was just trying to get the student organization taken care of, get them in and get them out . . . and, you know, serve them, as opposed to being a disservice to them.

Managerial discourse and human connection discourse also functioned in opposition in some situations. Members who used managerial discourse attended less to personal, human dimensions of the situation—others' feelings, needs, and special personal circumstances. For example, a supervisor confronted her subordinate when he missed a deadline: "I really don't care if he has to stay here till nine or ten . . . till it's done, and I told him that. I really don't care . . . whatever it takes, and I don't want to hear his excuses." Managerial actions were often seen as insensitive and inconsiderate by staff members, who expected more understanding and empathy. For example, one member remembered a meeting with her boss: "She was very cold, very cold, and kind of, well, formal, like: 'Give me this, give me that. Let's just get through this.'"

Human connection discourse and professional discourse in use lead to conflict less often. When members used human connection discourse, they were generally more understanding of their own and other people's follies. Professional discourse in use, on the other hand, was more strict in its standards of professional behavior. For example, a member noted, "I know it's a casual Friday, but come on, we're not at the beach."

Managerial discourse and political discourse in use also lead to conflict on some occasions. When members used managerial discourse, they found political discourse in use quite problematic, particularly, when coming from their subordinates. They felt that the other told them what they wanted to hear and tried to cover things up; they could not trust the information they were getting. One of the directors reported the following conflict with an employee: "She just plays with words, you know? Before she went on vacation I asked her about the Graduate Assistants' applications, and she said she had asked Carol to set up those appointments. I asked Carol on Thursday, and she didn't know what I was talking about. So, now, she's covering her tracks and saying she's gonna make her calls today, you know? It's frustrating to me as a supervisor, because I don't believe what she says she's gonna do is actually gonna happen, because it doesn't, or it's always different than what she said prior."

Members, too, suspected that on occasion their superiors were being political with them. They did not trust their managerial discourse and responded with political actions of their own. An employee reported how he was "watching his back" after receiving a series of formal warnings: "Maybe in the last six months, I've been noticing little things. You know, maybe it's nothing, maybe it's just . . . this is his managing style. It's . . . I find in talking to people all around campus that there is a concern all over the place of how supervisors are handling employees, I've heard many stories, I've heard some frightening stories about how people are being set up—like having four, five of that kind of comment that might be equal to one written discipline. It's called a paper trail. It's a process of how people eliminate people. I don't think that's happening to me, but just in case, I watch my back, you know?"

Professional discourse and political discourse functioned in opposition in some office conflicts. Staff members who used professional discourse generally resented what they saw as political discourse being used unprofessionally and unethically. They found it highly objectionable that others were being political with them or with other people whom they owed professional consideration. In some cases, this caused them to lose respect for that person. Political discourse in use went against their sense of collegiality. A member reported how a coworker "tabled" the issue that he raised at a staff meeting. He and some other staff members were concerned that student workers out in the front office played on the Internet while servicing clients. They did not think it was a professional thing to do. He proposed that they install a password to control the access. He described the coworker's tabling of the issue at the staff meeting: "She's very good; she'll gather the floor in the meeting, sort of like own the conversation to the point that people don't want to go forward with it any more, and she will sort of find a way to sort of table it, make it seem a little more complicated than it really is, like my issue about the Internet was very simple: 'Do you want to put a password on there? We can put a password on there.' And then very quickly it became a different discussion; it was like an effort to confuse the issue."

The staff member who used political discourse may have felt on occasions that others were possibly using professional discourse as leverage against her in a political game they were playing. The staff member could *either join* them or fight them. There is no first-party account of this process, however. There is a third-party account provided by a staff member who commented on a fragile relationship between her immediate

supervisor (Sally) and the head of the department (Robert): "Of course, she's going to agree with him. What's she gonna do, argue? Even if she did disagree with that, it wouldn't be in her best interest to say, 'Why, I don't agree with that,' you know? Right now, it's in her best interest to just say, 'Oh, yeah, that's a good idea, I'm all for it.'"

Human connection discourse and political discourse were particularly incompatible when used by the parties. When staff members used human connection discourse, they expected honesty, understanding, compassion, and caring. In political discourse, however, their actions were considered not very good strategy. In the following fragment, one of the directors recalled an interaction with a member of his staff:

> This is so funny. . . . He was late one day. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry I'm late. I overslept." And he proceeded to talk, and he said, "You know, I woke up really, really late, so then I went over to work out, and there was, like, no way I was gonna be at work on time." I'm like, "Wait. You woke up late, and you made a decision . . . you chose: 'Do I want to be late for work, or do I want to work out? Like which one should I give up?' I think you should've given up the workout, but if you chose not to, then don't tell your boss you did that, just say 'I overslept.'"

Actions considered political, from the perspective of human connection discourse, came across as morally objectionable, dishonest, manipulative, unfair, and malicious. In the following fragment, an employee wondered about her supervisor's true motives: "I'm not sure that all of his motives, you know, are for a greater good. I don't believe that, I don't believe that. I believe it's a lot of people in this university who were afraid for their jobs. It's instinct, instinct about when someone is being honest with you, you know?—a vibe that you get from anybody. Makes me distrustful and makes me believe that you're capable of the worst, and not only are you capable, but you're quite willing, you know, to see that through."

On some occasions, conflict emerged when parties used the same discourse. This was relatively rare, however. For example, parties who used human connection discourse were, on occasions, insulted or hurt by others' insensitive comments, jokes, and criticism. When parties used professional discourse, conflicts sometimes revolved around differences in their professional expertise and work experience, with one party criticizing the other's decisions or work practices. There were relatively few cases reported of conflicts that emerged when both parties used managerial discourse. The

issues usually had to do with lateral and hierarchical transfer of responsibility when some less formalized aspects of organizational practice failed. When both parties used political discourse, conflict was assumed and opposition was expected. It was not necessarily considered problematic, but rather "the way things are."

Practical Implications

The model developed in the study directs attention to multiple discourses in use that function in organizations. Depending on their practice, organizations may appropriate a range of different discourses from the broader culture. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of the four discourses found at the site—namely, managerial discourse, professional discourse, human connection discourse, and political discourse. But organizations can appropriate other discourses as well—for example, therapeutic, religious, scientific, legal, and the like. The model can be adapted to include other discourses not discussed in this study.

Discourses in use can be effectively identified through the use of qualitative methodology. The study relied mainly on individual interviews, but focus groups can also be used with some caution.

Discourses in use lie at the basis of organizational conflicts. Having identified the discourses in use, we have a better idea of the different types of conflicts that are likely to emerge in the organization. The approach can be adopted to study intragroup conflicts within organizational offices, departments, or teams that use the same set of discourses, or they can be expanded to trace intergroup conflicts between organizational units that use different discourses. Furthermore, the model can be used to assess the potential match between different organizations in organizational mergers and acquisitions. Organizations that appropriate different discourses face different types of conflicts and deal with them differently. Also, with more research, the model can be tailored to target specific types of organizations—for example, educational institutions, corporations, nonprofit agencies, and the like.

With the proliferation of new organizational programs and systems—for example, management by objectives and total quality management systems, organizations are likely to further expand their vocabularies. These new discourses, however, are likely to bring with them new types of conflicts. The model can be used to assess the fit between the organization and new programs that it plans to adopt. This can help us identify potential problems and better prepare to address them when they arise.

Contemporary organizational research and practice stress the need for requisite variety or internal diversity that matches the complexity of organizational environments (Orton and Weick, 1990; Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick 2001). Multiple discourses in use, which allow for different ways of seeing and acting, can facilitate organizational learning and adaptation. In that sense, organizational conflicts serve an important function: they are opportunities for positive change and organizational development.

Discourses in use determine what conflicts emerge across the organization and how they are handled. Different discourses in use have different implications for members' involvement and participation. For example, members reported significantly more problems when they used professional discourse. They were also more likely to raise those issues. They had high expectations of self and others and were more attentive to what was going on around them. When members used managerial discourse, they appeared to notice fewer problems. They focused mainly on doing their jobs and were much less concerned with what others were doing or not doing. Relatively few of those problems were addressed—those that were managed by appropriate supervisors. Members reported relatively few conflicts that started as personal problems, yet they remained quite sensitive to instances of rude or inconsiderate behavior, and many conflicts became personal when members dealt ineffectively with the original issues (either managerial, professional, or political). Other members got involved as parties turned to others to commiserate or seek support. When political discourse was used, members attended particularly to those relationships that they saw as political. At the time, they would report quite a few situations that they felt were politically threatening to them or to the department. Many problematic situations reported earlier would take on new significance and be managed through political actions. This article does not deal with conflict transformations or with discursive shifts in how conflict is defined and enacted across time and space. The model, however, can be effectively used to trace these processes as well. It can help identify problems such as patterns of conflict avoidance or conflict escalation, and it can be used to design appropriate interventions or conflict management systems to help organizations deal more effectively with their conflicts.

Limitations of the Study

The retrospective nature of participants' reports posed some limitations, however. Although members' accounts were quite detailed at times and often included recalled dialogue, it was still difficult to reproduce the actual

interaction, particularly when days, or sometimes weeks, had passed since it had happened. As a result, the study gained only limited insights into how discursive shifts were interactionally managed.

Another problem that had to do with participants' recall was that they were more likely to remember and report those conflict situations that were somehow significant to them. They reported minor problems only when they happened earlier that day or the day before.

Though it was important to be able to consider accounts provided by different parties, in some cases, only one side of the story was offered. Mostly for ethical reasons, the researcher chose not to inquire unless the participants themselves mentioned the conflict.

The research involved just one organizational site, which is a limitation in terms of the generalizability of its findings. Though the new model appears to have a lot of potential in terms of application across different organizational settings, it has not been tested in other contexts. The data were collected at an administrative unit of an academic institution. The four discourses identified at the site may not necessarily be found in other organizations. Depending on their practice, organizations may appropriate a range of different discourses from the general culture—such as discourses that are therapeutic, religious, scientific, or legal. The types of conflicts that emerge and the patterns of their transformations will also be different. They will also have different consequences for the organizations and their members in terms of issues, roles, relationships, and individual and collective identities.

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Iwona L. Kusztal is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at La Salle University in Philadelphia. Her work focuses on conflict processes in organizations—particularly the role of discourse in conflict emergence and transformation.