

# *The Causes of Conflict in Public and Private Sector Organizations in South Africa*

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The uncertainty that accompanies organizational change heightens prospects for intra organizational conflict. Notwithstanding this, the knowledge base on the sources (or causes) of organizational conflict is underdeveloped – largely as a result of a low incidence of empirical research, and in particular in South Africa. The current study explored the perceived sources of conflict in two South African organizations operating in different economic sectors. An experimental survey focusing on both the causes and the impact of conflict was administered to a sample of 203 employees, representing both companies. Comparative analysis revealed significant differences between the two organizations' views with regard to the causes and consequences of conflict. The implications of these findings for future research and conflict management are discussed.

*Key Words:* organizational conflict, conflict management, human resource management, management

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## **Introduction**

Major change and continued turbulence in the social, political, technological and economic environments at a global level, but also locally in South Africa, are creating an uncertain and complex environment in which organizations have to operate. Fuelled predominantly by rapid advances in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector, globalism has become both a cause and a consequence of sustained change (Van Tonder 2008), which, by all accounts, appear to be increasing in magnitude and pace (Burnes 2003; Schabracq and Cooper

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2000; Vakola, Tsaousis, and Nikolaou 2004; Van Tonder 2007a; 2007b).

Increasing uncertainty and complexity in the operating environment of organizations provide fertile ground for the onset of conflict in the workplace (in the vernacular *conflict* is typically viewed as a form of disagreement or argument, or an incompatibility in the views, opinions, principles and so forth of two or more individuals – *The South African Concise Oxford Dictionary* 2002: 242). Indeed, an increase in the incidence of conflict is to be expected (cf. De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, and De Best-Waldhober 2002). Given these considerations a strong case can be argued for a heightened probability of conflict in both public and private sector organizations in South Africa on grounds of the influence of, among other, organizational change, affirmative action programmes, competition for scarce resources and regular changes in management. In the South African context, however, limited empirical information is available on local authorities' and private sector businesses' awareness and understanding of conflict, their perception of the causes or sources thereof, and how conflict should be managed. In this regard Holtzhausen (1994, 19) has argued that organizational conflict can be resolved if the causes are identified and solutions are found which accommodate all the parties involved. Indeed, attempting to deal with and/or manage conflict successfully without identifying the causes of such conflict is a lost cause (Havenga 2004, 04). With conflict being a pervasive phenomenon in organizations, effective management i. e. dealing with conflict in such a way that it does not recur, is clearly needed. In this regard the management of the origin (or sources) appears to be key to the effective resolution of the conflict. This, in turn, presupposes that managers have a clear understanding of the many sources of conflict in organizational settings (cf. Nelson and Quick 2001, 24).

With regard to the causes of conflict, it is useful to note that the causes (sources) and 'conditions' of conflict can be linked and collectively regarded as prerequisites for conflict (Jordaan 1993, 25–45). Closer scrutiny of relevant terminology reveals that several authors in fact equate sources of conflict to prerequisites or causes of conflict (Marx 1965; Dahrendorf 1976; Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman 1983; Robbins, Odendaal, and Roodt 2003).

Marx (1965) and Dahrendorf (1976) specifically emphasized *freehold* (poverty rights), *poverty*, *social mobility*, *absence of security*, *unemployment*, *competition* and *class consciousness* as causes of conflict. Some of these sources were implicitly identified by the authors as forming an inte-

gral part of the structure of society. Scholars in the domains of sociology, industrial sociology, behaviorism, and management science have since incorporated these causes, in one way or another, in their typologies of the causes of conflict (Ashley and Orenstein 1985; Lopreato and Hazelrigg 1972; Deutsch and Coleman 2000; Ritzer 1992; Turner 1991). Most of these scholars, however, approached conflict and its causes from a macro economics and political perspective and paid very little attention, if any, to conflict as experienced at the level of the individual organization or business, whether small, medium or large.

### **Problem Statement and Objective**

The impact and consequences of unattended conflict in the workplace on employees and the organization generally (cf. Dijkstra 2006), would argue for immediate attention to the resolution of the conflict rather than a careful and systematic (and invariably more time-intensive) approach to investigating the underlying causes of conflict. There is little to indicate that organizations actually attempt to establish the underlying causes of institutional conflict. Rather, and in order to resolve conflict, individuals or groups resort to conflict management instruments without first determining what the sources (causes) of conflict are – a key element in developing appropriate conflict resolution strategies (Havenga 2004, 88). Mayer (2000, 8), for instance, argues that if the causes of conflict are known and understood, a conflict map can be developed, which could guide conflict resolution processes. Understanding the different forces that inform conflict behavior consequently empowers the facilitator or manager with the opportunity to develop a more selectively focused and nuanced approach for dealing with the specific occurrence of conflict.

An important consideration, however, is the likelihood of organization-specific conflict perceptions. In much the same way that employees at different levels within the organization tend to differ in their perception and characterization of a common change event (cf. Van Tonder 2006; 2007b), so too should inter-organizational differences in conflict perception be anticipated. Perceived differences in the characterization of organizational changes imply a differentiated approach to dealing effectively with the unfolding change event (i. e. 'change management'). A comparative analysis of conflict perceptions, between different types of business organizations, may consequently itself assist in the process of identifying appropriate conflict resolution styles or strategies.

The key research question that emerges from this brief consideration

of organizational conflict is whether the *perceived causes of institutional conflict are organization-specific or universal across organizations* in different economic sectors. Secondly, and related to the former, is *whether employees' experience of the impact of the conflict is organization-specific or common across different organizations?* The current study's primary objective, consequently, was to establish and compare causes of conflict in a private business and a public concern. As a secondary consideration, the study also attempted to establish, at this preliminary stage, variation in the reported impact of conflict on the individual employee.

Before considering the design and methodological parameters for conducting such an (exploratory) study, it is necessary to briefly consider prevailing views on the sources of organizational conflict.

### **Sources of Conflict**

The number and range of potential sources of conflict suggested by scholars are substantive, but most of these were theoretical conceptualizations with rigorous empirical research a rarity. The scientific legitimacy of these claimed sources of conflict as well as the categorization systems proposed, remain problematic in the absence of empirical research. This is particularly applicable to the South African environment where empirical studies on the causes of organization-level conflict are not in evidence.

When considering research beyond the South African setting, it is observed that the causes of conflict emphasized by scholars seldom pertinently addressed the organization or business level. Earlier and more recent accounts of these sources of conflict in many instances addressed the subject at the *macro-structural* rather than the micro- or business level, where these sources were typically interpreted as prerequisites for conflict to develop (Dahrendorf 1976; Jordaan 1993; Marx 1965; Mayer 2000; Robbins Odendaal, and Roodt 2003; Stroh 2002). Those who did consider the causes of conflict at the *organizational level* identified a multitude of potential sources of conflict. Accordingly, such sources or causes included differences in knowledge, beliefs or basic values; competition for position, power or recognition; a need for tension release; a drive for autonomy; personal dislikes; and differing perceptions or attributes brought about by the organizational structure, different role structures, heterogeneity of the workforce, environmental changes, differences in goals, diverse economic interests, loyalties of groups, and value discrepancies, which were all considered at various stages as major causes of

conflict in organizations (Renwick 1975, 444–456; Weider and Hatfield 1995, 687).

Havenga (2002, 160) indicated that causes of conflict at the level of the organization could also include resource availability; affirmative action programs; the scope and content of workload; the introduction of new management techniques; and differences of a cultural and racial nature. A typology that further categorizes sources of conflict is offered by Nelson and Quick (2001, 424–8) who differentiate between structural factors (causes) i. e. those that develop from within the organization and originate from the manner in which work is organized, and secondly, personal factors, which emerge as a result of individual differences among employees. Although the potential sources of conflict seemingly abound, the important role of communication as a potential source of conflict appears to be understated. With a few exceptions (Ritzer 1972; Robbins 1998; Vecchio 2000) communication is infrequently considered as a source of conflict. The typologies utilized by these authors tend to suggest that the various sources of conflict can be classified into three categories, namely communication processes, structure, and individual behavioral factors. However, despite the frequency with which causes (sources) of conflict are nominated or suggested, empirical support for the claimed validity of these causes or typologies is substantively lacking, which suggests that any and each categorization framework is as helpful or unhelpful as the next.

### **Research Methodology**

The preceding and somewhat reductionistic perspective on conflict belies the complexity that has gradually crept into definitions of conflict over time. These definitions have invariably further differentiated or accentuated different types of conflict, for example intrapersonal, interpersonal, intra- and intergroup conflict, and organisational conflict (Rahim 1983). Others have focused on the different dimensions on which conflict is partially or completely described, for example, the emotive and cognitive components of conflict (cf. Schmidt and Kogan 1972), while others accentuate the act of opposition, disagreement or argument (the action component) of conflict as emphasized in the Oxford definition. It is understandable that definitions will range from the inclusive to the exclusive and would reflect discipline-specific foci and variation.

Several considerations, however, have a bearing on the manner in which conflict is conceptualized and operationalised in this study. The

paucity of empirical research in the South African context suggests an exploratory study which would constitute a first step towards more refined and focused research on the sources of organizational conflict. The current study consequently aims to empirically explore the causes or sources of conflict as perceived by employees of participating organizations.

Moreover, the adoption of a specific definition of conflict could impose unnecessary constraints on the operationalisation of the construct, especially if it is acknowledged that the average employee is bound to have an internalized, yet rudimentary concept of conflict – more in line with popular usage and definitions. Dijkstra (2006, 104–5) for example has proposed that the distinction between cognitive and affective conflict be abandoned on the grounds of the strong correlations observed in two independent studies and the virtual impossibility of precisely separating out cognitive and affective dimensions in an assessment of workplace conflict. For the purpose of this study and drawing on definitional parameters utilized among other by Dijkstra (2006, 21), De Dreu, Harinck and Van Vianen (1999), Schmidt and Kochan (1972), and Wall and Callister (1995), conflict is viewed as a dynamic process that commences with a perception of incompatibility of opinions, beliefs, principles, values, and perceptions between individuals and groups of varying sizes.

Practical considerations suggested a survey-based field study design. This entailed the development and administration of an experimental questionnaire that sampled employees' perceptions with regard to various causes (or sources) of organizational conflict and, secondly, employees' reported experience of the impact of institutional conflict. For comparative purposes two organizations operating in different economic sectors were approached for participation in the research. The methodological parameters of the study are briefly outlined in the ensuing section.

#### THE RESEARCH SETTING

For the current study the research setting was limited to one public (non-profit) *local authority* and one private (profit-orientated) *agricultural company*. The choice of these two organizations was based on the perceived differences in their relative status, not only in terms of their core business orientation (public versus private) but in particular because of the differential rates at which affirmative action and transformation programs have been implemented in these organizations. At the time of the research, the local authority has progressed considerably with regard to affirmative action and transformation programs, and in excess of 45%

of its employee complement was people of color. In the case of the agricultural company more than 90% of the employees in post levels 5 to 16 were white. Differences are also observed in the organizations' employee profiles on dimensions such as ethnicity, language, social and cultural factors, but also in terms of the pace with which affirmative action and transformation have taken place in the organizations. Against this context, it is intuitively logical that variation in the causes and manifestations of conflict would more readily surface in a comparative study of organizations with more rather than less diverse employee profiles. The primary focus, consequently, is not so much on discerning differences between similar organizations as it is about discerning variation in potential sources of conflict (which is maximized by the inclusion of dissimilar organizations and consequently employee profiles).

Notwithstanding the preceding, and using a common measure, both the local authority (municipality) and the agricultural company were classified as B-category (or B-type) organizations when considered in relation to 'peer' organizations. This simply meant that the two participating organizations were comparable in terms of the size and scope of operations.

#### MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

The study utilized a single, experimental questionnaire to explore respondent perceptions of the causes and manifestations of organizational conflict. It comprised three sections which sampled biographical information (section A), perceived causes of organizational conflict, (section B), and alternative manifestations or consequences of organizational conflict (section C).

Section B employed a 4-point Likert-scale which allows respondents to indicate the extent of agreement or disagreement with listed causes of conflict. The choice of variables for inclusion in section B, the potential causes of conflict, was hampered by the many different viewpoints on what variables should be regarded as causes of organizational conflict. The limited empirical research available, furthermore, does not provide adequate guidelines or pointers in terms of more or less prominent causes, or the settings or circumstances in which they are likely to be observed or not. As point of departure, nine seemingly more prominent sources of conflict were identified from the literature, as well as *affirmative action* – a potential cause of organizational conflict that is novel and unique to South Africa. This variable has received attention in several

other areas of scholarly pursuit, but in the domain of conflict research has received limited attention. It was argued that these ten causes should suffice as an initial and exploratory framework for revealing differences between different organizations (and different sectors) on the causes of organizational conflict (should they exist). Subsequent research could focus more pertinently on using a refined and possibly more elaborated list of potential causes of organizational conflict. The ten sources of conflict evaluated empirically were: *affirmative action*; *cultural differences*; *racial differences*; *new management techniques*; *scarce physical resources*; *effective personnel*; *rationalization*; *new technology*; *extent and content of employee's work*; and *misuse of power*.

Section c made use of seven statements which conveyed different forms in which conflict could manifest. These were identified after considering the views of Folger (1993), Nelson and Quick (2001) and Opotow (2000) and included a decline in performance, hostility towards colleagues, a decline in cooperation, experienced depression, considering a job change, alienation from colleagues, and developing health problems. Respondents were asked if they experienced conflict and if so, how it impacted on them. They then had to indicate those consequences or manifestations that applied to them.

The questionnaire was pretested in a pilot study to enhance its validity and was administered among academic colleagues at two universities, and human resources managers and staff-members of the organizations that participated in the study (but who did not form part of the sample).

#### THE SAMPLE

For both the local government and the agricultural organizations, samples were drawn from top-management and middle-management as well as operational levels. In the case of the *local authority* a stratified random sample was drawn which spanned all departments and included employees who differed in terms of gender and race group. The theoretical sample comprised 193 of a population of 386 employees (job-levels 1 through 13), but in practice 143 questionnaires were returned, of which only 139 were useful. This represents a 72% return rate, which is considered adequate for purposes of employing statistical procedures and making inferences about the population (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black 1995, 103).

The corresponding population for the agricultural company comprised 101 employees. Questionnaires were sent to every member of this



group and 65 completed questionnaires were returned. One questionnaire proved unusable, with the remaining 64 questionnaires signifying a return rate of 63.4%. This return rate, similarly, was considered adequate for purposes of statistical analysis.

In the local authority sample of 139, males dominated (74.1%) while females (62.5%) constituted the largest contingent of the 64 respondents in the agricultural company. Local authority respondents were evenly spread across the age categories 'up to 35 years', '36 to 45 years' and '46 years and older' (34.5%, 32.4% and 32.4% respectively). For the agricultural company the comparative proportions of respondents for these categories were 28.1%, 37.5% and 32.8% respectively. The majority of the agricultural company sample, 78.1%, possessed a grade 12 or lower educational qualification compared to the 56.1% for the local authority sample. This difference is accounted for by the observed variation in post-school qualifications, where the local authority sample consisted of 43.9% or 61 respondents that possessed a tertiary diploma or degree, compared to the 21.9% (14 respondents) of the agricultural company. The most notable differences observed between the two samples relate to home language. In the case of the local authority, 56.5% of respondents were Afrikaans-speaking (8.7% were English-speaking) compared to the 92.1% of the agricultural company (no English-speaking respondents were among the participating members). This substantial difference is echoed also in the difference observed with respect to African languages. In the local authority 34.8% of respondents spoke African languages compared to the 7.9% in the agricultural company. In the latter instance all respondents (7.9%) spoke Sotho. In the Local Authority sample the proportion of respondents that spoke African languages (34.8%) comprised Tswana (15.2%), Sotho (10.9%), Xhosa (5.8%) and Zulu (2.9%). For the purpose of analyzing the structure of the measurement instruments, the two samples were combined and treated as a single sample. However, demographic indicators (e. g. group/organizational affiliation) allowed the researcher to control for variation between groups and where indicated independent analyses per subsample were conducted.

#### PROCEDURE

Authorization to conduct the research and administer the questionnaires was obtained in advance from both companies, and employees were notified of the impending research via the Human Resource departments

of the participating organizations. In both instances respondents were briefed and questionnaires distributed with the assistance of these departments. Protocols were all received within two weeks of distribution.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

Data obtained in response to the questions on the sources of conflict (section B) was of a continuous (interval) nature, while that obtained in respect of the impact of conflict (section C) was of a categorical nature, requiring different analytical procedures. For all analyses the SPSS 16.0 program (SPSS 2007) was utilised, and for all statistical tests an alpha or significance level of 0.05 was the accepted threshold at or beyond which the occurrence of a type I error will be tolerated.

On grounds of the theoretically inductive manner in which the sources of conflict items were identified and the questionnaire constructed, it was uncertain whether the different sources of conflict (items in the questionnaire) did in fact measure distinct constructs. For this reason principal components analysis, which utilises total and unique variance as opposed to shared or common variance, was selected to reveal potential latent constructs and to establish underlying patterns in the data set. This suited the exploratory objectives of the study to a greater extent than factor analysis (cf. Hair et al. 1998). The internal consistency of the extracted components (sources of conflict) was established using Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , after which component scores were computed and mean differences between the local authority and the agricultural organisation analysed with the aid of ANOVA procedures.

For the second focus of the study which dealt with the impact or manifestation of conflict, the obtained categorical (frequency) data were converted to proportions and the different effects of conflict (variables) were subjected to an exploratory hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method. This was followed with a two-step cluster analysis, which incorporated the extracted sources of conflict as continuous variables. The local authority and the agricultural company were then compared on the basis of how respondents per organisation were grouped by the procedure.

#### **Research Findings**

The results of the empirical study are reported in accordance with the two main foci of the study, namely the causes or sources of conflict and the effect or manifestation of conflict.

TABLE 1 Intercorrelations among items related to sources of conflict

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	M	SD
1. Affirmative action	1.00	.49 <sup>3</sup>	.43 <sup>3</sup>	.30 <sup>3</sup>	.31 <sup>3</sup>	.45 <sup>3</sup>	.23 <sup>3</sup>	.08	.28 <sup>3</sup>	.39 <sup>3</sup>	2.76	1.07
2. Cultural differences		1.00	.79 <sup>3</sup>	.24 <sup>3</sup>	.29 <sup>3</sup>	.35 <sup>3</sup>	.15 <sup>1</sup>	.12	.34 <sup>3</sup>	.44 <sup>3</sup>	2.48	1.08
3. Racial differences			1.00	.17 <sup>2</sup>	.27 <sup>3</sup>	.31 <sup>3</sup>	.10	.13 <sup>1</sup>	.35 <sup>3</sup>	.49 <sup>3</sup>	2.45	1.03
4. New management techniques				1.00	.31 <sup>3</sup>	.28 <sup>3</sup>	.16 <sup>1</sup>	.31 <sup>3</sup>	.33 <sup>3</sup>	.31 <sup>3</sup>	2.55	.99
5. Lacking physical resources					1.00	.60 <sup>3</sup>	.19 <sup>2</sup>	.29 <sup>3</sup>	.31 <sup>3</sup>	.37 <sup>3</sup>	3.02	1.06
6. Shortage: effective personnel						1.00	.27 <sup>3</sup>	.26 <sup>3</sup>	.36 <sup>3</sup>	.45 <sup>3</sup>	3.08	1.03
7. Rationalization/dismissals							1.00	.12 <sup>1</sup>	.15 <sup>1</sup>	.36 <sup>3</sup>	2.21	1.17
8. New technology								1.00	.42 <sup>3</sup>	.11	2.21	1.03
9. Work: scope, content									1.00	.34 <sup>3</sup>	2.33	1.04
10. Misuse of power										1.00	2.50	1.16

NOTES Correlations of 0.3 and 0.5 are regarded as indicating medium and large effects respectively (Cohen 1988). A correlation in excess of 0.3 was considered practically meaningful for the sample and research population engaged in this study.  $N = 184$ , <sup>1</sup> $p < .05$ , <sup>2</sup> $p < .01$ , <sup>3</sup> $p < .001$  (one-tailed).

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

After allowing for the elimination of cases with missing values, a sample of 184 was available for analysis and the intercorrelation matrix of the ten sources of conflict items was compiled (table 1). The latter was considered suitable for the application of principle components analysis on grounds of Bartlett’s test of sphericity (approximate  $\chi^2 (45, N = 184) = 614.17, p < .0005$ ) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (.789).

Principle components analysis, using varimax rotation, revealed multiple components, but four components were retained (three complied with the latent root criterion of one, while inclusion of the fourth component was based on interpretation of the scree plot). The four components collectively accounted for 71.34% of the total variance and although the small number of items per scale (4) impacted on the reliability coefficients, the obtained alpha values (.81, .75, .65 and .62) were acceptable given the study’s exploratory nature (see table 2).

Inspection of table 2 reveals that data on sources of conflict did indeed follow response patterns which essentially indicate that respondents perceived four primary sources of conflict. These indicate that respondents view conflict as originating in managerial practices that are perceived as racially informed (or related) abuses of power (workplace discrimina-

TABLE 2 Rotated component matrix, Eigen values, explained variance and reliability coefficients

Variables	Component <sup>b</sup>			
	C1	C2	C3	C4
3. Racial differences	.90	.08	.14	-.00
2. Cultural differences	.89	.13	.13	.04
1. Affirmative Action	.55	.40	.04	.22
10. Misuse of power	.51	.32	.13	.48
5. Lacking physical resources	.12	.84	.23	.03
6. Shortage: effective personnel	.22	.81	.19	.17
8. New technology	-.04	.12	.85	-.02
9. Scope and content of work	.33	.13	.71	.06
4. New management techniques	.13	.22	.57	.21
7. Rationalization/dismissals	.03	.08	.10	.93
Eigen values	3.90	1.34	1.04	.84
% total variance	39.05	13.41	10.44	8.44
Cumulative variance (%)	39.05	52.46	62.90	71.34
Alpha Coefficient <sup>a</sup>	.81 (4)	.75 (4)	.65 (4)	.62 (4)

NOTES  $N = 184$ . Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization.

<sup>a</sup> Cronbach  $\alpha$  calculations based on standardised items/variables. For each of the four scales the four highest loading variables were retained. Alpha coefficients of .70 or above are desirable (Bartholomew, Handerson, and Marcia 2000; Nunnally and Bernstein 1994), but in exploratory research could be as low as .60 and be acceptable (Hair et al. 1998).

<sup>b</sup> Components were labelled Racially-informed management practices (c1), Inadequate and ineffective resources (c2), Work demands associated with changes in technology and management practices (c3), and unjust layoffs/rationalization (c4).

tion would be illustrative). Inadequate and ineffective resources, which include physical resources to perform work, but also ineffective staff, emerged as the second major source of conflict (Component c2 – table 2). Changes in work demands associated with changes (e. g. innovation) in technology and management practice, and perceived unjust rationalization (staff layoffs) emerged as the third and fourth sources of conflict in these organizations.

The individual variables (items) which loaded highly on the first and second components (c1 and c2) suggest that employees in this study effectively interpreted racial and cultural differences as synonyms. They

TABLE 3 Analysis of variance for group differences with regard to sources of conflict

	Local Authority		Agricult. Company			SS	df	MS	F	p	d <sup>a</sup>
	M	SD	M	SD							
C1	7.91	2.36	6.10	2.51	B	133.88	1	133.88	22.93 <sup>3</sup>	.000	.75
	(2.87; 11.48)		(2.87; 11.48)		W	1085.61	186	5.83			
C2	7.63	1.68	5.62	1.99	B	171.43	1	171.43	53.69 <sup>3</sup>	.000	1.12
	(2.39; 9.58)		(2.39; 9.58)		W	609.76	191	3.19			
C3	6.14	1.76	5.00	1.62	B	56.30	1	56.30	19.02 <sup>3</sup>	.000	.66
	(2.38; 9.52)		(2.38; 8.56)		W	565.30	191	2.96			
C4	4.68	1.49	3.88	1.64	B	26.93	1	26.93	11.24 <sup>2</sup>	.001	.52
	(1.86; 7.44)		(1.86; 7.44)		W	450.22	188	2.39			

NOTES Values in parentheses represent minimum and maximum values for the group. Sources of conflict: C1 – racially-informed management practices, C2 – inadequate and ineffective resources, C3 – work demands associated with changes in technology and management technique, C4 – rationalization/layoffs perceived as unjustified (sources of conflict are the retained components from PC analysis).

<sup>a</sup> Cohen’s *d* (index of effect size) is considered small when ranging between .20 and .50, medium when between .50 and .80, and large when equal to .80 and above (cf. Cohen 1988; Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991; Valentine and Cooper 2003). An effect size of *d* = .80 is generally considered practically meaningful.

B – between, W – within, <sup>1</sup>*p* < .05, <sup>2</sup>*p* < .01, <sup>3</sup>*p* < .001.

similarly experienced difficulty in disassociating a lack of physical resources and a shortage of effective personnel. This observation underscores the necessity of empirically testing theory-derived concepts of conflict (sources of conflict).

When comparing the local authority and the agricultural company on each of the four sources of conflict, statistically significant differences were observed between the two organizations (see table 3). For each of the four sources of conflict the staff of the local authority experienced this more intensely than those of the agricultural company. Most notable, were perceived racially-informed management practices and the absence of adequate and effective resources, which were more prominent sources of conflict in the local authority, compared to the agricultural company,  $F(1,186) = 22.93, p < .001$  and  $F(1,191) = 53.69, p < .001$  respectively. Medium to large effect sizes are recorded for the differences observed between the two institutions with regard to the sources of conflict (refer Cohen’s *d*, table 3), which suggest that differences are practically meaningful (or approaching practical meaningfulness).

The mediating role of demographic variables in the perceived causes

of conflict (dependent variable) was tested with several factorial ANOVAS. Significant main and interaction effects for different demographic variables were occasionally observed e. g. *language* for racially-informed managerial practices,  $F(2,132) = 4.50$ ,  $p = .01$  and  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ ). In a similar manner main effects for *organization* and *age*, and several interaction effects with *organization* were observed for the second source of conflict (c2 – quality of resources), while a *gender-age* interaction was noted for the third source of conflict (c3 – work demands). For the fourth source of conflict, c4 (rationalization), *organization* and *qualifications* emerged as main effects together with a *language-age* interaction effect. The strength of these associations, however, was negligible (the highest partial Eta-squared recorded were  $\eta_p^2 = .15$  and  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ , with the majority  $\eta_p^2 < .07$ ). The influence of these demographics on the differences observed in the mean sources of conflict scores for the two organizations are therefore inconsistent and of no practical significance. These findings instead point to further analyses at the level of the organization where the role of various other organization-specific variables including demographic variables might shed further light on *organization-specific* respondent views of the sources of conflict. These analyses are beyond the scope of the current study.

In essence the results suggest that sources of conflict are likely to be multifaceted, but common to different types of organizations (across economic sectors) in South Africa, yet may not be equally relevant or influential in the perceived onset of conflict within these organizations.

#### MANIFESTATION AND IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

The second research question dealt with the manifestation or effects of organizational conflict. Respondents were presented with seven response categories which conveyed the effects of conflict (or manner of conflict manifestation) in their respective workplaces. Each respondent marked those effects he/she experienced. The frequency with which the different effects of conflict were experienced by the respondents of the two organizations is indicated in table 4.

Again, and consistent with the exploratory aims of the study, the obtained response frequencies for *effects of conflict* (variables) were subjected to hierarchical cluster analysis (cf. Hair et al. 1998) using Ward's method and squared Euclidian distance (standardized) to reveal structure and coherence in the categorical data. The dendrogram resulting from this analysis is presented in figure 1. Variables (or cases) with high

TABLE 4 Frequencies for the local authority and the agricultural company on effects of conflict

Effects of conflict	Local Authority		Agriculture Company		Total Sample	
	<i>f</i> <sup>a</sup>	%	<i>f</i> <sup>b</sup>	%	<i>f</i> <sup>c</sup>	%
ca Performance decline	67	49.3	31	49.2	98	48.3
cb Hostility towards colleagues	37	27.2	18	28.6	55	27.1
cc Decline cooperation	29	21.3	7	11.1	36	17.7
cd Experience depression	65	47.8	24	38.1	89	43.9
ce Contemplate job change	43	31.6	21	33.3	64	31.5
cf Withdrawing from colleagues	41	30.1	26	41.3	67	33.0
cg Develop health problems	41	30.1	14	22.2	55	27.1

NOTES *N* = 203. For the local authority, *n* = 139. For the agriculture company, *n* = 64. <sup>a</sup> *f* = number of local authority respondents who experienced this effect of conflict, while % indicates *f* expressed as a proportion of all local authority employees that participated in the research. <sup>b</sup> *f* = number of agriculture company respondents who experienced this effect of conflict, while % indicates *f* expressed as a proportion of all agriculture company employees that participated in the research. <sup>c</sup> *f* = total number of respondents (local authority and the agriculture company) who experienced this effect of conflict, while % indicates this frequency expressed as a proportion of the total sample (*N* = 203).

similarity (or low distance) are clustered close together. The proximity observed between effects of conflict on the *y*-axis indicates this perceived association between different effects of conflict. This is echoed by the proximity coefficients on the *x*-axis where lower order effects of conflict (clusters) converge to form more embracive clusters and constructs, for example *depression* and *health problems* are closely associated, which when clustered together address the impact of conflict on the employees' physical and emotional wellbeing. This category is somewhat removed and hence different from experienced hostility towards colleagues, and withdrawing from colleagues as a result of conflict, which both indicate the effect of conflict on relations with colleagues. The next level of convergence occurs when thoughts of changing jobs (a state of mind) combine with depression and health problems to provide an overall index of the impact of conflict on employee wellbeing (mentally, emotionally and physically). At more or less the same position on the *x*-axis it is also observed that a decline in cooperativeness as a result of conflict, converges with experienced hostility towards and withdrawal from colleagues. This suggests that conflict has a pronounced effect on social and interpersonal

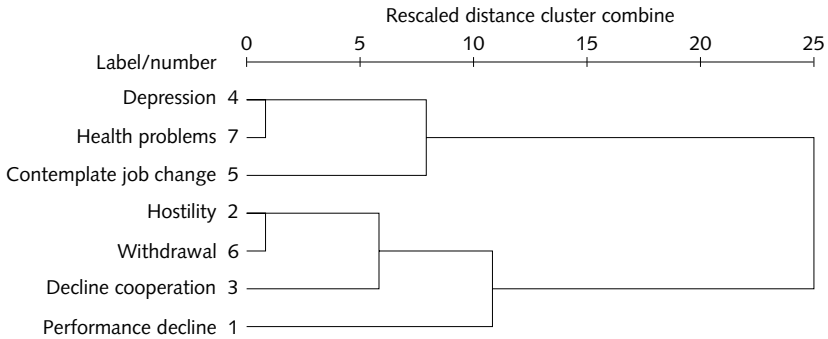


FIGURE 1 Effects of conflict: Dendrogram of cluster solutions (hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method and squared Euclidian distance between observations (converted to z-scores),  $N = 199$ )

relations more generally. A decline in the employee's performance appears to be distinct from the social and individual well-being effects of conflict. These categories similarly suggest that the effects of conflict in these organizations reflect different degrees of severity with a decline in the employee's performance presumed to be less severe than social withdrawal or depression. Regardless of the relatedness of these categories of conflict manifestations, they all constitute undesirable outcomes for the individual and organization.

In summary, hierarchical cluster analysis for this sample indicates that the experienced impact of conflict contributes to a decline in performance, has a social impact which manifests in hostility, withdrawal and uncooperative behavior, and impacts on the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of the employee.

To probe whether the experienced impact of conflict was consistent across the participating organizations or organization-specific, but also associated with the sources of conflict, a two-step cluster analysis procedure was performed. During the first step of this exploratory technique the categorical variables of organizational affiliation, gender, age, qualifications, tenure and the seven effects of conflict, as well as the four standardized continuous variables (sources of conflict, refer table 2) were incorporated in the extraction of 'preclusters'. This was achieved through the centroid method with the log-likelihood criterion as a distance measure (Chan 2005; SPSS 2007). During the second step these 'preclusters' were used as single cases in a hierarchical clustering procedure. The Schwarz Bayesian information criterion (BIC) indicated that five clusters



TABLE 5 Cluster profiles following two-step cluster analysis: Categorical variables

Variables	Cluster 1 <sup>a</sup>		Cluster 2 <sup>b</sup>		Cluster 3 <sup>c</sup>		Total
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>
<i>Demographic variables</i>							
Organization							
• Local Authority	88	75.2	29	24.8	.0	.0	117
• Agriculture company	7	12.1	15	25.9	36	62.1	58
Gender							
• Male	76	69.7	19	17.4	14	12.8	109
• Female	19	28.8	25	37.9	22	33.3	66
Age							
• Less than 35	22	36.7	26	43.3	12	20.0	60
• 36–45	32	58.2	14	25.5	9	16.4	55
• More than 46	41	68.3	4	6.7	15	25.0	60
Qualifications							
• Up to grade 12	53	48.6	28	25.7	28	25.7	109
• Diploma/certificate	27	65.9	11	26.8	3	7.3	41
• Degree	15	60.0	5	20.0	5	20.0	25
Language							
• English	9	100	.0	.0	.0	.0	9
• Afrikaans	60	48.8	27	22.0	36	29.3	123
• Other	26	60.5	17	39.5	0	.0	43
Tenure							
• 1–4 years	5	14.3	17	48.6	13	37.1	35
• 5–10 years	32	58.2	16	29.1	7	12.7	55
• More than 11 years	58	68.2	11	12.9	16	18.8	85
<i>Effects of conflict</i>							
Performance decline	41	45.6	35	38.9	14	15.6	90
Hostility towards colleagues	17	32.7	30	57.7	5	9.6	52
Decline cooperation	15	45.5	18	54.5	.0	.0	33
Experience depression	37	45.7	37	45.7	7	8.6	81
Contemplate job change	18	32.1	33	58.9	5	8.9	56
Withdrawing from colleagues	17	28.3	28	46.7	15	25.0	60
Develop health problems	28	56	19	38.0	3	6.0	50

NOTES *N* = 175. Excluded cases = 28. *f* conveys the cluster frequency on the specific row variable, which is expressed in the adjacent column as a % of the total row frequency for the row variable (indicated in the last column). <sup>a</sup> *n* = 95, <sup>b</sup> *n* = 44, <sup>c</sup> *n* = 36.

TABLE 6 Centroid means on continuous variables (sources of conflict)

Source of conflict	Cluster 1 <sup>a</sup>		Cluster 2 <sup>b</sup>		Cluster 3 <sup>c</sup>	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Racially-informed management practices (c1)	7.35	2.34	8.87	2.01	5.16	1.94
Inadequate and ineffective resources (c2)	7.54	1.53	7.55	1.87	5.00	1.77
Work demands associated with changes in technology and management technique (c3)	6.04	1.72	5.98	1.89	4.71	1.43
Rationalization/layoffs perceived as unjustified (c4)	4.61	1.47	5.08	1.52	3.38	1.35

NOTES  $N = 175$ . Excluded cases = 28. <sup>a</sup>  $n = 95$ , <sup>b</sup>  $n = 44$ , <sup>c</sup>  $n = 36$ .

were probably optimal, but the SPSS two-step cluster algorithm by default selects that number of clusters beyond which the anticipated gains of adding further cluster information are offset by the complexity of the new (elaborated) cluster solution, and instead extracted three clusters (SPSS 2007). Tables 5 and 6 provide an outline of the three cluster profiles in terms of included categorical variables as well as the centroid means and standard deviations for the clusters on the different sources of conflict.

As observed in the data presented in tables 5 and 6, the three identified employee groups (clusters) differ markedly and significantly in terms of important categorical and continuous variables (figures 2 and 3).

Inspection of figures 2 and 3 reveals that clusters one and three are effectively organization-specific employee groups with the vast majority of the membership in cluster one (88 or 83.6% of cluster one membership) employed by the local authority, while all employees in cluster three (36 or 100% of cluster three membership) are employed by the Agricultural company. Chi-square values (horizontal axes, categorical variables – figure 2) indicate that cluster one, comprising largely long-serving male local authority employees, differs significantly from cluster two (a predominantly young to middle-aged group with relatively short tenure with membership equally distributed among the Local Authority and the Agriculture organization), and cluster three (two thirds of members being female, all Afrikaans-speaking and all employed by the agriculture company).

Of importance is that the local authority and agriculture company employees (clusters one and three) do not differ from one another in terms of the impact of conflict, apart from the muted effects of conflict re-

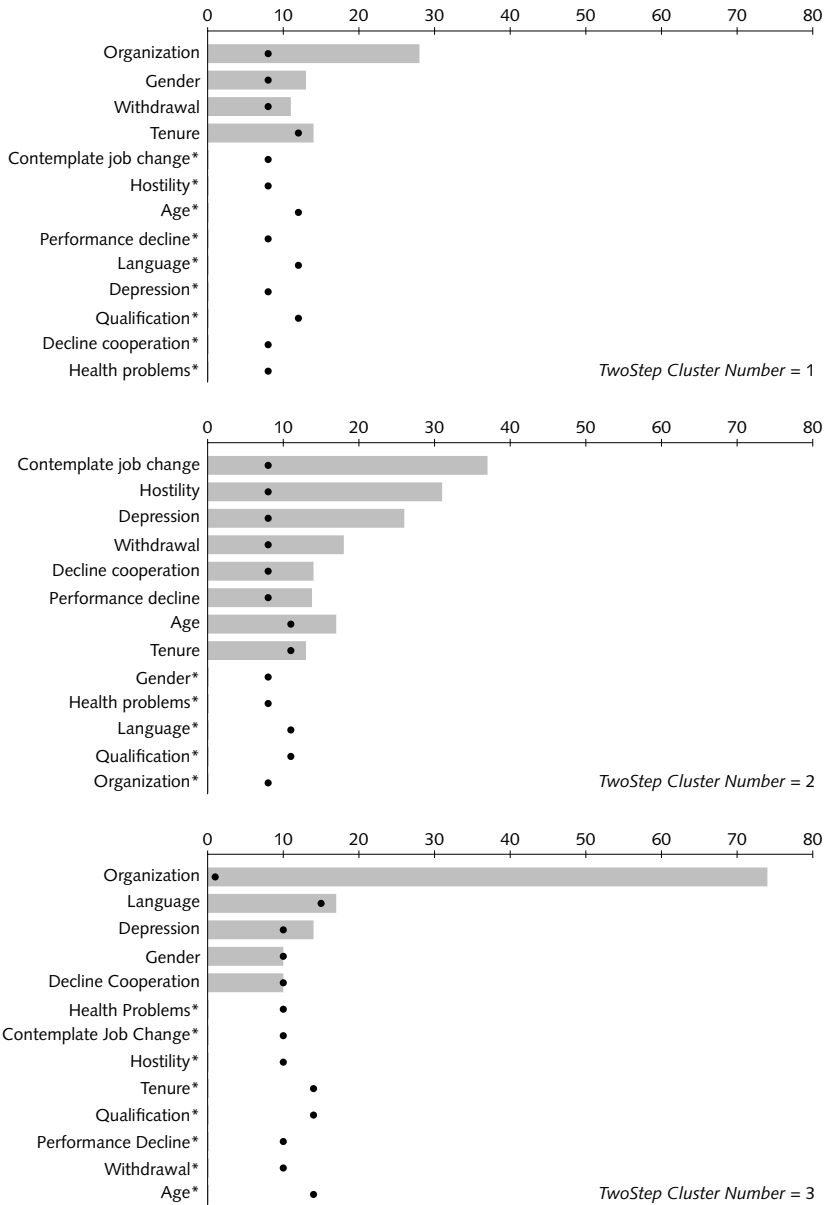


FIGURE 2 Extracted clusters and the importance of demographic variables and effects of conflict: Chi-square

NOTES Two-step cluster analysis performed through using the centroid method with log-likelihood as distance measure. *N* = 175 (case-wise deletion of missing values), \* non-significant, • critical value, ■ test statistic.

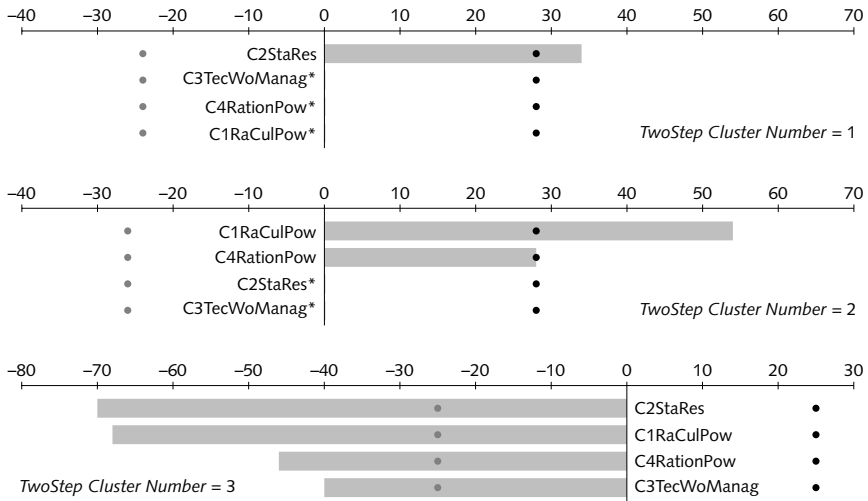


FIGURE 3 Extracted clusters and the importance of sources of conflict: Student's *t*

NOTES Two-step cluster analysis performed through using the centroid method with log-likelihood as distance measure. *N* = 175 (case-wise deletion of missing values), \* non-significant, \*\* critical value, ■ test statistic.

ported on a single dimension (in the former, 28.3% of employees tend to withdraw socially, while 8.6% in the latter experience depression as a consequence of conflict). Employees in the agriculture company cluster, however, also differ significantly from the other clusters in terms of the absence of a reported decline in cooperation.

In stark contrast, the younger and relatively short-tenure employee group (cluster two), comprising both the local authority and agriculture company employees, differs significantly from groups (clusters) one and three in terms of their experience of the effects of conflict. In this cluster the proportion of members who reported experiencing six of the seven manifestations of conflict, ranged between 38.9% and 58.9%. Whereas the most important differentiating categorical variables for groups one and three were organizational affiliation and gender (cluster one) and organizational affiliation, language and gender (cluster three), this group's most prominent differentiating categorical variables were the six manifestations of conflict. These results suggest that factors other than demographic features and organization-specific features may be contributing to this intense and wide-ranging experience of the impact of con-

flict. What these factors may be, is the subject of speculation, but stress-proneness and/or a personality predisposition may be explored as hypothetical factors in subsequent research.

The three employee groups, however, are also significantly differentiated by their perceptions of the *sources of conflict* (see figure 3). The *shortage of effective staff and resources* (c2) emerged as a more important source of conflict for the local authority group (cluster one) compared to the other groups. By contrast, the employees of the agriculture company (cluster three) do not perceive the four sources of conflict with the same intensity as the local authority group (cluster one) and the mixed membership group (cluster two). The mixed membership group (cluster two), comprising employees of both the local authority and agriculture organizations, is significantly differentiated from the two organizational groups (clusters one and three) on the basis of the significant importance accorded to *racially-informed management practices* (c1) and perceived *unjust rationalization or layoffs* (c4) as sources of conflict.

It is not possible to infer causality, but cluster analysis does indicate that younger and shorter tenure employees (male and female, from both organizations) display a greater sensitivity to sources of conflict associated with power abuses, and experience such conflict in a significantly more elaborate and destructive manner when compared to the organization-specific employee groups. To be expected, the diverse employee profiles of the two organizations preclude sensible comparison of the sources and effects of conflict as observed for the two organizations.

In summary, the exploratory two-step cluster analysis reveals that both the perceived sources of conflict and the reported effects of conflict for this sample are group (cluster)-specific but also organization-specific (yet at the same time not exclusively so).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The current study set out to investigate firstly whether the perceived causes of institutional conflict are *organization-specific* or *universal across organizations* in the public and private sectors and, secondly, whether employees' *experience* of the *impact* of conflict follows similar patterns. More importantly, results reveal a coherent structure for the sources of conflict across the different respondent populations and organizations engaged in this study. Yet, at the same time, evidence of organizational distinctiveness (organization-specific variation) was also observed. The exploratory cluster analyses suggest that this 'similar-yet-different' pat-

tern applies equally to respondents' experience of the impact of conflict.

#### SOURCES OF CONFLICT

The results generated by this exploratory study are broadly consistent with earlier observations by Renwick (1975) and Weider and Hatfield (1995) who have indicated that factors such as the heterogeneity of the workforce, loyalties of groups, diverse economic interests, among other, are relevant sources of workplace conflict. To an extent the findings also affirm Havenga's (2002) perspective that causes of conflict at the organizational level would include factors such as resource availability, affirmative action programs, the scope and content of work, the introduction of new management techniques, and differences of a cultural and racial nature. The findings obtained do indeed indicate these factors to be relevant, but not in the unidimensional and somewhat reductionist manner in which they were conceptualized. Indeed, sources of conflict are bound to be more complex and multifaceted than are currently suggested by the unidimensional labels encountered in the bulk of the literature.

The findings of this study indicate, for example, that it is not management that is a source conflict, but management that *is predisposed to act in a racially-informed manner* and which manifests in managerial practices that are perceived as *abuses of power* that emerges as a source of conflict. Similarly, it is not rationalization or staff layoffs that are considered a source of conflict, but rationalization/staff layoffs that are perceived as *an abuse of managerial power*. New technology in itself (and new management techniques for that matter) do not prompt conflict, but it is the relationship of these innovations to the *employee's scope and content of work* that is likely to be perceived as a source of conflict in the workplace. These observations suggest that perceived sources of conflict in the organisation cannot be disentangled, inter alia, from broader systemic, socio-political, economic and labour trends and dynamics. Indeed, researchers should exercise caution and avoid overly reductionist conceptualisations of organisation behaviour constructs in an increasingly dynamic and open systems setting.

The prominence of 'organization' as differentiating factor between respondents' views of sources of organizational conflict in the absence of consistent and significant demographic influences, prompts us to hypothesize that other organization-specific characteristics may be more important mediators of perceived sources of conflict than may be generally presumed. This may for example relate to phenomena such as orga-

nizational identity and organizational culture (cf. Van Tonder 2000; Van Tonder and Lessing 2003), the dynamics associated with distinctive management profiles and styles in such identity- and culture-specific settings, the attitudes cultivated under such circumstances, as well as the influence of these features in attracting employees with a particular profile to these companies.

The marked differences observed between the two organizations in terms of perceived sources of conflict and the experienced impact of conflict are accounted for by the advanced stage of sociopolitical transformation in the local authority. Of the two companies, the latter has substantially progressed with the introduction of employment equity practices and has a large contingent of African (non-white) employees (principles of affirmative action and employment equity have been implemented to a considerable extent). This substantially diverse workforce presents with greater heterogeneity (e. g. in values and belief systems) and hence the enhanced prospects for conflict (cf. Williams and O'Reilly 1998). The agricultural company's workforce, by contrast, is substantially more homogeneous (has very few non white employees in the job levels sampled, and a single language, Afrikaans, is dominant which, in a broader ethnical sense, conveys greater conservatism in nature and culture). This coherence should translate into a reduced likelihood of misunderstanding and consequently a lower incidence of perceived conflict. Not being a private sector company, the local authority would experience resource constraints to a greater extent than the agricultural company. Note, however, that although these sources of conflict are less intensely experienced in the agricultural company, they are still strongly felt.

The low incidence with which sources of conflict is perceived in the agriculture company is likely to be an artefact of a largely homogeneous workforce where socio-political transformation has not yet progressed to the extent that the organisation's culture, identity and managerial and workforce profiles have been altered substantially by the 'enforced' intake of senior staff from previously disadvantaged communities. Unlike the significant differences observed between the local authority and the agriculture company groups (clusters), which are explained in terms of the impact of transformation on the homogeneity of the workforce in the respective institutions, the results for the mixed membership group (cluster 2) are less clear. The severity with which conflict is experienced by this group (cluster 2), which is equally comprised of local authority and agriculture company employees, and which is markedly different from the

organisational groups (clusters 1 and 3) points to common denominators other than institutional affiliation or population demographics. Personality predispositions and tendencies toward anxiety, stress, and burnout, but also coping styles, belief systems and attitudes may offer important avenues for more elaborate investigation. In the prevailing South African setting with its diverse workforces, employment equity legislation, and heightened sensitivity to racism, it is quite plausible that Baron's (1997) 'hostile attribution bias' may offer additional explanatory power. The latter refers to a predisposition towards attributing the conduct of other parties in the conflict situation to hostile motives and objectives.

Although tentative, the results nonetheless suggest that ongoing research should adequately account for the complex influence of context – both the immediate organizational setting and the broader sociopolitical and national context in which organizations are situated. This is evidenced in references to affirmative action and in particular in its association with managerial practices and perceived power abuse.

#### EFFECTS OF CONFLICT

Results of the two-step cluster analysis confirmed the largely organisation-specific nature of not only the perceived sources of conflict, but in particular also the reported experience and impact of workplace conflict. Consistent with Dijkstra's (2006) observations, conflict as a stressor in the current study elicited unpleasant emotions, which are associated with reduced work performance and individual well-being. Drawing on the Euclidian distance measures which portray similarity-dissimilarity between effects of conflict (see dendrogram, figure 1), it can be surmised, *ceteris paribus*, that a declining performance would be the most obvious and common consequence of these three equally undesirable outcomes of conflict. The interpersonal and social relations impact of conflict, as well as the compromised mental, emotional and physical well-being of the employee, represents increasingly severe consequences of workplace conflict. The intrapsychic dynamics involved in the differential experience of conflict cannot be discerned from the results of the current study and represents an important area of continued research into the sources and effects of workplace conflict. This is important, as differentiated responses to conflict call for differentiated conflict mediation and management strategies. In the current study (refer figures 2 and 3) the mostly male and longer tenure local authority employee group (cluster 1), manifested with a significantly greater incidence of reported withdrawal, which is not only damaging to the organization and will



adversely impact organizational performance, but also suggests and reinforces a conflict strategy best described as 'conflict avoidance'. This in fact appears to be the essence of the response of employee groups two and three to the experienced conflict. The reported effects of conflict as evidenced for these two groups similarly convey a conflict negation or conflict avoidance approach or strategy (see figures 2 and 3). Withdrawal or alienation from peers and superiors in conflict situations echoes an avoidance style of conflict management, while experienced depression may result in a similar avoidance style of dealing with conflict – both adversely impacting on the individual and the organization's performance. Evidence of such 'avoidance' of conflict, is also observed in, for example, absenteeism and personnel turnover, as observed by Van de Vliert (1996, 405–25). The observed inefficiencies reported by Van de Vliert (1996) were also recorded by Jehn (1997, 557), who noted that these inefficiencies resulted in poor work performance. This perspective underscores the importance of differentiating between the occurrence (incidence) of conflict and the employee and organization's response to such conflict (e.g. avoidance) – as argued by Dijkstra (2006). Not only will such a distinction facilitate understanding of the nature of conflict and its impact on every day employee well-being, but it will crystallise the action component in the response to the conflict ('the reaction'). This in turn introduces greater focus and specificity and will result in differentiated conflict management strategies, which should prove more effective in the resolution of specific sources of workplace conflict. Effective conflict resolution strategies will remove and eliminate the underlying causes of conflict and will reduce the potential for recurrence of similar conflicts in future. The implications of this, however, are that appropriate and accurate data on the sources of conflict should emerge, and secondly, that organizational functionaries and managers acknowledge that conflict resolution is a shared priority (Kreitner and Kinicki 2000, 43), which in turn necessitates a greater involvement of all individuals and groups likely to be effected by the conflict. The fundamental challenge of conflict management, is to address the identified sources of conflict effectively and expediently in a manner that will minimise its negative impact on the workforce (cf. Crawley 1995, 5).

CONSTRAINTS OF THE CURRENT STUDY  
AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Notwithstanding the exploratory aims, the findings of the current study should be interpreted with a measure of caution. In the current study

the range and nature of sources of conflict and its manifestation have been constrained by the theoretically-inductive approach adopted by the researchers in conceptualising the sources and effects of workplace conflict. The results of the principle components analysis suggest that more potential sources of conflict exist than those reliably extracted. Continuing research should consequently concentrate on the theoretical elaboration and refinement of the tentative measures employed in this study. This should address both the range of potential sources of conflict, and the item pool which operationalizes such theoretically derived constructs. However, it would be more productive and expedient to engage in in-depth exploratory qualitative research to supplement the prevailing understanding of theoretically-derived conflict sources – as a precursor to elaborating and refining the measurement instruments. The current study furthermore indicates that reductionistic conceptualisations of otherwise elaborate and complex dynamic constructs, such as sources of organisational conflict, is a material threat.

The exploratory design utilised in the study, while revealing in many respects, nonetheless imposed constraints which precluded analyses and observations on causality. Future research should also probe the extent to which specific sources of conflict contribute to specific response patterns (experienced impact of conflict), and whether specific types of conflict (sources) may elicit specific behavioural, emotional and psychological responses. This points to a need also for more systemic theories of conflict that not only reveal causality between antecedent conditions, sources and experienced effects of conflict, but also adequately account for personal (e. g. psychological), institutional and broader contextual factors that relate to the phenomenon of workplace conflict.

Despite these cautions, the findings of this exploratory study nonetheless provide pointers and several productive avenues for continuing research on the sources of conflict, which ultimately should contribute to the emergence of more effective conflict diagnosis and management strategies.

In closing, the current study – albeit tentative – has raised awareness of the multifaceted nature of sources of conflict and revealed both universal and idiosyncratic content in the sources and effects of conflict. This underscores the importance of maintaining a contextual and systemic frame of mind when conceptualizing and operationalizing sources of conflict and, indeed, when contemplating the effective resolution of conflict in organizational settings.

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