ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Pragmatism and Conflicts at Work: Theoretical and Methodological Insights from William James

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the practical implications of William James' pragmatism for examining workplace conflicts. Specifically, I aim to elucidate the relationship between the meaning of a conflict, its utility for those involved, and how this utility is connected to specific needs that arise in the workplace. Additionally, I examine how multiple belief systems can be integrated into a higher-order belief system that is negotiated among individuals entrenched in the conflict, ensuring that this over-arching belief system does not contradict the individual belief systems. Insights from this Jamesian perspective of pragmatism are derived by reinterpreting a historical case study by Kurt Lewin, followed by the development of an interview guide. This guide is intended to assist both researchers and practitioners in applying the pragmatic method to workplace conflicts, particularly in situations of chronic discord.

Keywords Pragmatism · Conflicts at work · Belief systems · Negotiation · Conflict resolution · Interview guide

The Lack of Jamesian Pragmatic Theories in the Working Domain

I was struck by the scarcity of studies examining William James' pragmatism in relation to business and work psychology. Most existing research tends to focus on the relationship between pragmatism and the works of Peirce (Lorino et al., 2011) and Mead (Simpson, 2009). For example, the Dialogical Mediated Inquiry (Lorino, 2018), as developed by French psychologists, is connected to the broader notion of the activity clinic (Clot, 2009). Unfortunately, William James' pragmatism is often relegated to the background in these studies, serving merely to reinforce the perspectives of other authors rather than contributing to the incremental advancement of knowledge, which is the ultimate goal of research (von Fircks, 2023a).

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In the domain of work, we are confronted with the dynamic nature of the global environment, which is in a constant state of flux and development over time (von Fircks, 2022a). This transformation is further accelerated by the technological revolution, with leading scientists drawing parallels to the industrialization era (Schwab, 2016). Such changes inevitably alter the individual's relationship with their environment and their ability to master their own behavior (Vygotsky, 1994a). Consequently, we are compelled to adopt a pluralistic perspective when examining human behavior in the workplace.

The cultural demands facing individuals today are immense. These demands extend beyond excelling in one's professional area and include achieving work-life balance, being an active parent, contributing to the local community, and caring for aging parents, among others. These competing demands inevitably interfere with one's work and cannot be strictly separated, thereby creating tensions and conflicts. The various stances we adopt in response to these demands are not merely juxtaposed; they are integrated into a higher-order structure that regulates both intra-personal and interpersonal behavior. This process can be understood in Valsiner's terms as the creation of a hyper-generalized sign field (2014, 2019, 2021), which Boesch (1975) describes as a regulative pattern.

Thus, we encounter the human being as a unitas multiplex (Stern, 1906, 1923; von Fircks, 2024a), possessing diverse needs that must be fulfilled across various interconnected action spheres (von Fircks, 2022b). The individual as a unitas multiplex is not only intra- and inter-dialogical (Hermans, 1999, 2001) but also inherently pluralistic (Campill & von Fircks, 2023). This pluralism, once internalized, facilitates the development of a dynamic hyper-generalized sign field, or life pattern.

With this exploration, we delve into a novel area of inquiry—the intersection of work psychology, pluralism, and cultural psychology as the science of unraveling social and personal meaning-making patterns, with a specific focus on conflicts at work. We begin by closely examining the implications of pragmatism for psychology and social groups in (workplace) conflicts, while incorporating these emerging premises into a broader understanding of the psychology of conflicts. Subsequently, we develop an interview guide aimed at helping practitioners and researchers approach conflicts from a pragmatic perspective. We conclude with a discussion of limitations and a brief outlook on future research in this field.

I would like to address some remarks raised by the reviewers. The lack of empirical testing of our pragmatic cultural psychological theory and methodology has been criticized. I acknowledge the limitations of a purely theoretical paper, as empirical research plays a crucial role in refining theory. While I do not underestimate the value of empirical research, I believe there is also a need for theoretical papers that multiple authors can apply from their unique perspectives. Additionally, the proposed theory and methodology are applied to a historical case study, making the manuscript not merely a theoretical exercise but a reapplication of empirical work in a new context. With that, let us move beyond the introductory remarks.

Explaining the Pragmatic Method

James frequently refers to the pragmatic method, which he uses to set aside "metaphysical disputes" (James, 2000a, p. 25). His primary concern is with the practical consequences of a given interpretation. For example, in the well-known Lewinian factory study (1948), where two workers engage in a heated argument over some gossip, James would not be interested in whether the gossip is true. Instead, he would focus on the practical consequences that arise from the beliefs or positions held by the individuals involved in the gossiping situation.

> The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a discussion is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right. (James, 2000a, p. 25)

We can apply this rather philosophical endeavor of William James—again to the Lewinian field example (1948).[1] Paulson, a mechanic at the sewing factory, is accused of inadequately repairing the broken machines. Sulinda, the supervisor responsible for sewing products, fears losing her integrity and authority when Paulson responds by accusing her of lying to her employees. Sulinda, however, insists that she did not lie about Paulson's unwillingness to repair the broken machine, leaving her both angry and saddened.

In this brief excerpt from Lewin's larger work (1948), we observe the diverging beliefs surrounding a specific workplace situation—the need to repair a broken machine. The result is that Sulinda and Paulson, the two key actors involved in the conflict, respond differently based on their underlying beliefs. James would avoid trying to determine who is right or wrong in this conflict, as such an inquiry would involve a metaphysical question that is unhelpful for resolving the dispute (James, 2000a). Instead, James would direct our attention to the practical consequences of these diverging beliefs, explaining that "our beliefs are really rules for our actions" (James, 2000a, p. 25).

What actions does Sulinda take based on her underlying belief in the scenario described above? As the sewing supervisor, she not only believes that Paulson is unreliable as a mechanic but also acts to preserve her authority and integrity when accused of being a liar. In contrast, Paulson's reaction is less interpersonal. Although he experiences fear in the conflict, this fear is directed more inwardly than outwardly. Paulson is less concerned with losing authority and more worried about

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[1] Making use of the Lewinian case example can be done in many ways (see also von Fircks. 2024b). We will see that this is also a pragmatic premise. In general, I am the opinion that we need to develop a sustainable stance towards the accumulation of data. This means that we can re-use many prominent examples that are already out there, in the scientific world and shed light onto hidden aspects of the related study and re-interpret the given meaning.

damaging his reputation as a skilled mechanic—a quality worker within the organization under scrutiny.

This scenario presents a complex, interconnected action sphere involving both Paulson and Sulinda. Sulinda fears that her leadership authority will deteriorate, potentially undermining the cohesion of her sewing team, while Paulson fears that his reputation as a competent mechanic will suffer. For both actors, these potential outcomes are unacceptable, as they thwart the fulfillment of deep-seated needs. The actions, reactions, and interactions related to the conflict further entrench their underlying beliefs: Sulinda increasingly views Paulson as an indifferent mechanic who disregards both her job and the jobs of other employees, while Paulson becomes more convinced that Sulinda is a liar whose evaluations of his work cannot be trusted. As a result, both Sulinda and Paulson adopt aggressive stances toward each other, as they perceive each other as obstacles within their respective action spheres. Once again, we can turn to James for insight into the pragmatic method.

> The whole function of philosophy ought to be find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one. (…) A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles in closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. (…) It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth. (James, 2000a, p. 27)

This quote from the American psychologist is particularly significant, especially the final sentence. William James suggests that interconnected action spheres are open fields of meaning-making, necessitating constant negotiation of meaning among individuals. Thus, meaning-making is never fully predetermined nor entirely completed; it relies on the continuous modification of meaning by the individuals engaged in the social field of action.[2]

The implications of Lewin's excerpt are clear in light of James' pragmatic presuppositions. Specifically, we are not concerned with determining who is at fault in the conflict mentioned above. We would not ask whether Paulson is right or if Sulinda is mistaken. Nor would we expend interpersonal and intrapersonal resources in a protracted search for evidence to support either perspective. Instead, following James, we argue that both individuals hold valid viewpoints on the matter. Valid here means that the conflict serves a purpose for both actors in relation to their life-spaces and individual need hierarchies.

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[2] This fits well Lorino's perspective (Lorino et al., 2011) onto the alteration of meaning making when he explains—with reference to Bachtin (1986)—that the person's unique style (personal culture) expands the speech genre of the community while the community also sets the frame for the development of a given personal style of thinking and speaking.

This brings us to another premise of James' pragmatism: every belief we hold about the world serves a certain utility, which in turn informs our subsequent actions. It is this inherent usefulness within a specific belief that shapes how an individual positions themselves in the world. Consequently, we also encounter the realm of diverging or converging actions. For Paulson, the belief in being a skilled mechanic is useful because it allows him to engage meaningfully with his work and complete the tasks that arise each day. Without this belief—without the conviction that he can perform his job adequately—his entire position would be jeopardized, along with his broader sphere of action.

For Sulinda, by contrast, the belief in her reliability as a supervisor is useful because it enables her to effectively manage her sewing team and maintain productive team cohesion. Without her belief in her supervisory abilities—without her conviction of being reliable—she would struggle to keep the team together, eventually rendering her supervisory role obsolete.

This analysis highlights that pragmatism does not produce specific results. Such an outcome would contradict its philosophical foundation in radical empiricism, which grounds beliefs, convictions, and worldviews in the necessary (and useful) everyday experiences of individuals (see also von Fircks, 2022c). For James, a belief that is useful in fulfilling a deep underlying human need and that catalyzes action toward that fulfillment is a crucial criterion for considering a theory, idea, or belief as true.

> No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation is what the pragmatic method means. The attitude of looking away from first things, from principles, categories, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts. (…) The pragmatist clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth at its work in particular cases and generalizes. Truth, for him, becomes a class-name for all sorts of different working values in experience. (James, 2000a, pp. 29-34)

The Relationship Between Truth, Usefulness, and Needs

There is a distinct and intricate relationship between what James refers to as pragmatism, truth, usefulness, and human needs. As psychologists and philosophers, it is crucial to untangle this relationship to make James' theory applicable, particularly within the organizational domain of psychology. In the Paulson-Sulinda example, it becomes evident that both actors believe in their respective worldviews and regard them as true—at least to a significant extent. However, their beliefs are considered true precisely because they are useful; they allow both individuals to satisfy deep underlying personal needs through the maintenance of their beliefs and the subsequent actions those beliefs catalyze.[3]

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[3] Lorino et al. (2011) speak of purposefulness or existential relatedness that trigger the search for truth and lead to peculiar actions. I prefer the term usefulness as advocated by William James as it relates more starkly to the general inquiry of Gestalt Psychology and the importance of needs and goals being the driving force for action (Lewin, 1926, 1933).

This illustrates that a particular belief is deemed true because it is useful in satisfying a pressing need in a given situation confronting one or more individuals. For instance, from Paulson's perspective, the belief that Sulinda is lying is true because Paulson constructs this truth through his daily work, which he reflects upon in the context of the conflict. Simultaneously, the belief that Paulson is lying is equally true from Sulinda's perspective. She constructs and sustains team cohesion among her sewing employees, relying on their ongoing trust in her. The threat to this trust is unacceptable to her because it jeopardizes a critical personal need.

I acknowledge that this concept can seem abstract—an aspect that contributes to the complexity of James' writings. To clarify, let's return to the words of the American psychologist himself.

> The importance to human life of having true beliefs about matters of fact is a thing too notorious. We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. (…) The possession of truth so far from being here an end in itself is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions. If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful. The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. Their objects are, indeed, not important at all times. I may on another occasion have no use for the house; and then my idea of it, however verifiable, will be practically irrelevant and had better remained latent. Yet since almost any object may some day become temporarily important, the advantage of having a general stock of extra truths, of ideas that shall be true of merely possible situations is obvious. (James, 2000b, pp. 89-90)

In this illustrative Jamesian example, we observe that the concept of pragmatism is inextricably linked to human needs that may be activated in specific situations. The cow path analogy that James uses serves as a compelling example: an idea holds truth and thus usefulness because it is the pathway toward an object that can help an individual satisfy an immediate and pressing need. This implies that ideas or beliefs acquire their truth only when they are relevant to specific situations that reveal a pressing human need that can be addressed through action. The concept of a house and its attributes—providing food, water, shelter, friendship, and protection—only emerges because it is useful to the human organism and its complex array of needs. Without these needs, and the utility they confer, the concept of a house would either not exist or would be linked to different needs of the human organism.

This principle holds true even in cross-cultural contexts, such as the traditions of Taoism or Zen Buddhism. In these traditions, the floor of a house, which typically invites walking and unites different parts of the house, can take on different meanings, truths, and uses. The floor is not merely a surface for walking; it is also a space for sleeping and connecting with the ground, reflecting the Taoist premise of all-connectedness. *Both interpretations of the floor are true because they are useful, yet they are only useful insofar as they meet specific human needs within a given environmental context.* Without these needs, and without the floor's usefulness to

the human organism, there would be no floor, and the concept of the house would be different.

In James' pragmatic framework, truth is an empirical quality that emerges as human beings act upon and transform their environment to satisfy ongoing, deeply rooted human needs. An object is rendered true by the various human needs it fulfills for different individuals, and thus, its value or demand character acquires a unique cultural imprint due to its usefulness.

Therefore, truth becomes solidified by human action on the environment, making it more useful in fulfilling underlying need structures. This is why James refrains from distinguishing between whether something is true because it is useful or useful because it is true. This discussion demonstrates that, in analyzing our initial example, it is not enough to merely explore the practical consequences of holding a specific belief, conviction, or idea. Instead, the psychologist or philosopher must delve deeper, investigating how a belief is useful to the individual and how this usefulness is connected to the dynamic need structure of the individual or the group in question.[4]

> True ideas would never have been singled out as such, would never have acquired a class-name, least of all a name suggesting value, unless they had been useful from the outset in this way. From the simple cue pragmatism gets her general notion of truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to. Primarily, and on the common-sense level, the truth of a state of mind means this function of a leading that is worth while. When a moment in our experience, of any kind whatever, inspires us with a thought that is true, that means sooner or later we dip by the thought's guidance into the particulars of experience again and make advantageous connection with them. (James, 2000b, p. 90)

In applying the pragmatic method, we must consider its integration of a temporal dimension, meaning that beliefs, convictions, and ideas are connected across past, present, and future. Before exploring this time axis, let us revisit the relationship between truth, usefulness, and human needs. Referring back to our industrial example from Lewin (1948), we observe the following scenario: Paulson believes that Sulinda is lying and counters her perspective with his belief in his competence as a mechanic. This belief in Sulinda's dishonesty is crucial for Paulson, as it aligns with and supports one or more of his underlying needs. Consequently, Paulson maintains his conviction that Sulinda is lying, as this belief facilitates his pursuit of fulfilling his need to be recognized as a capable mechanic who performs his job well. Meanwhile, Sulinda clings to her belief that Paulson's accusations are unfounded, as this belief supports her role in maintaining the cohesion of the sewing team.

From a pragmatic perspective, both Paulson's and Sulinda's beliefs are valid because they are useful in fulfilling important personal needs that enable them to

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[4] Feeding the notion of needs into the discussion of pragmatism and linking it to pragmatic concept of usefulness can be considered an extension of James' original research in pragmatism.

continue their meaningful work. Furthermore, we must consider the temporal aspect of the pragmatic method. This time axis suggests that beliefs are not isolated entities within an individual or group but are interconnected to varying degrees, ensuring their practical relevance and continuity over time (see also Vygotsky, 1994b). For example, the belief that there is a house at the end of a cow path is not just useful for motivating oneself in the present moment. It extends beyond that: the belief in the house's material benefits (food, shelter, water, protection) is intrinsically linked to an individual's underlying needs. Once these needs are met, and the belief is validated, the belief does not simply vanish; instead, it persists within the psyche. Thus, the belief in the house's resources becomes linked to the belief that, after regaining strength and energy, one can continue moving forward. This illustrates how individual beliefs can be integrated into a higher-order belief system, one that is more than the sum of its parts.

This synthesis of beliefs into a higher-order structure is facilitated by the freedom of the individual (James, 2000c), enabling the person to alter actions by reconfiguring specific beliefs into a cohesive whole. *It is this process of combination and recombination that transforms an individual's relationship with both their psyche and environment, significantly influencing the unfolding of the next moment*. The pragmatic method, therefore, seeks to illuminate how individuals (or groups) connect disparate beliefs and how these connections form a higher-order structure that transcends individual beliefs. This synthesis is essential in shaping how a person positions themselves relative to their environment, guiding their future actions in an uncertain world.

> Every hour brings its new percepts, its own facts of sensation and relation, to be truly taken account of but the whole of our past dealings with such facts is already funded in the previous truths. It is therefore only the smallest and recentest fraction of the first two parts of reality that comes to us without the human touch, and that fraction has immediately to become humanized in the sense of being squatted, assimilated, or in some way adapted [.] (…) As a matter of fact we can hardly take in an impression at all, in the absence of a preconception of what impression there may possibly be. (James, 2000c, pp. 108-109)

Thus, we must recognize that the pragmatic method encompasses not only a radical empiricism, as articulated by William James, but also a dynamic quality inherent to this empiricism. This implies that truth, usefulness, and complex human needs do not exist in isolation; rather, they are fundamentally interconnected through the individual—and in time.

What Does Follow from the Pragmatic Method for a Potential Conflict Resolution?

What are the consequences of the pragmatic method for our Lewinian case example presented in the introductory paragraphs? Are both Paulson's and Sulinda's perspectives valid or true? What implications does this have for psychologists working in

the factory? These questions become complex when examined through a pragmatic lens. It can be argued that Paulson and Sulinda inhabit different realities, leading to distinct conceptions of truth. This divergence arises because each has different needs and views the conflict at hand through their own perceived usefulness (von Fircks, 2024b). Consequently, their differing conceptions of truth do not merely coexist; they are in direct conflict. Both individuals are motivated to uphold their respective beliefs, as these beliefs are essential for satisfying their complex needs.

This situation poses a challenge for the organization, as the conflicting truths cannot be harmonized. If the conflict remains unresolved, the established truths and connections formed by each actor persist, potentially leading to destructive consequences both in the present and in the future. This concern is precisely what Lewin and Bavelas aim to address. If the conflict cannot be resolved and the truths are not approximated, the clash will endure. Importantly, this clash persists because it serves a purpose for both actors.

In light of this, the psychologist in Lewin's example must contemplate how the conflict is useful. As previously noted, the conflict facilitates the actors' satisfaction of deep underlying and pressing needs. However, the psychologist is called to go beyond merely assessing the peculiar relationship between belief, truth, usefulness, and needs; they must also consider how a conflict resolution could become equally, if not more, beneficial for both actors involved. It is essential to recognize that beliefs can be willfully recombined, leading to a higher-order structure that circumvents the existing conflict.

Potential Conflict Resolution for Paulson and Sulinda

How might such conflict resolution manifest for Paulson and Sulinda? First, both individuals need to engage in negotiations to explore potential resolutions. It is inadvisable for management to intervene and present a pre-established solution to settle the conflict. Management inevitably has its own interests, which may not align with those of Paulson and Sulinda. Consequently, if management imposes a strategy or resolution, it might not be useful for both parties. The likelihood is high that the proposed resolution may not capture the usefulness of the conflict for either actor, and as such, the conflict may remain unresolved, even if management asserts that it has been settled. This scenario is common in industrial settings, where management intervenes during an impasse, claiming that issues have been resolved, while in reality, the conflict lingers unnoticed in the daily experiences of the workers (Baldursson & Schmidt, 2024; Valkiainen & Jaakson, 2024).

Second, both Paulson and Sulinda need to become aware of the underlying usefulness of the conflict and the needs tied to that usefulness. With this awareness, management or a psychologist can assist the individuals in recognizing the usefulness of their beliefs for each other while also encouraging them to reflect on the personal significance of the conflict. Once this understanding is achieved, management or the psychologist can help both parties develop a solution that honors the need satisfaction of each, thereby acknowledging the truth of both

perspectives while enabling each individual to move closer to their own needs and goals.

In this context, divergent beliefs that initially appear contradictory can be transformed into a harmonized higher-order structure—a belief system that fulfills the needs of both actors. The usefulness of the conflict is explored and subsequently integrated into an actualized belief system that does not contradict the belief systems of the other but instead operates at a higher hierarchical level. This process allows the psychologist or management to facilitate the actualization of both actors' belief systems and, consequently, their truths. As a result, distinct realities emerge and cease to clash.

By actualizing their belief systems and negotiating a higher-order belief framework that both actors can endorse, they create a joint reality—a shared truth—that can unfold in future interactions. It is crucial to note that both individual truths contribute to this higher-order structure, enriching the joint truth. However, it is equally important to emphasize that the negotiation of a higher-order belief system does not entail the dissolution of separate belief systems. Rather, both actors actively participate in the construction of a higher-order belief system while retaining elements of their individual belief systems. This perspective aligns with gestalt-theoretical concepts articulated by William Stern (1906, 1923), demonstrating that individuals can participate in higher-order structures while preserving their unique self-worth. Participation in a higher-order personal structure does not necessitate relinquishing individuality (von Fircks, 2024a). This notion resonates with James' insights regarding ethical dilemmas in life.

> In point of fact, there are not absolute evils, and there are no non-moral goods; and the highest ethical life – however few may be called to bear its burdens – consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. (…) [The philosopher] [h]e sees, indeed, somewhat better than most men what the question always is, - not a question of this good or that good simply taken, but of the two total universes with which these goods respectively belong. He knows that he must vote always for the richer universe, for the good which seems most organizable, most fit to enter into complex combination, most apt to be a member of a more inclusive whole. (…) Treated in this way ethical treatises may be voluminous and luminous as well; but they can never be final, except in their abstractest and vaguest features; and they must more and more abandon the old-fashioned, clear-cut and would-be 'scientific' form. (James, 2000d, pp. 259-260)

Essentially, what I aimed to advocate with my analysis of the Lewinian case is the notion of enriching the universe. However, we are unable to develop a pre-defined formula for how this enrichment actually occurs. Given that personological needs and goals vary among individuals and are influenced by environmental and cultural demands, it is challenging to establish a specific formula for harmonizing belief

systems and constructing a joint truth that is beneficial not only for one individual but for a diverse range of individuals.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that we cannot support management or psychologists in their efforts to assist employees in negotiating a shared truth. This can be achieved through the formulation of specific open-ended questions that encourage individuals to become aware of the underlying premises of their own perceived truths and realities—essentially, their needs and goals—as well as those of the other person. Once this awareness is established, a foundation is created upon which both individuals can negotiate a mutually beneficial truth for the forthcoming moment, ensuring their need satisfaction in the future without one person becoming a hindrance or obstacle to the other's journey.

A Potential Pragmatic Interview Guide for Conflict Resolution

In the following section, I present an interview guide (Table 1) designed to assist psychologists or management personnel in helping individuals who are entrenched in conflict to renegotiate the terms of the conflict and arrive at a resolution that incorporates a higher-order belief system, thereby establishing a foundation for a joint truth and reality, as articulated by James. It is important to note that this interview guide represents an open field of meaning-making (Valsiner et al., 2005), aimed at restructuring the sign-making processes among the multiple actors involved. As such, it can be also applied to other conflict settings which we will evaluate later on.

Lorino et al. (2011) emphasize that the creation of a shared field of meaning-making that facilitates the evolution of the organization is a fundamental aspect of pragmatism from a psychological perspective. Consequently, the authors argue that psychologists or scientists employing a pragmatic approach should utilize (cultural) artifacts that enable employees to engage with these artifacts from their individual personological perspectives, potentially expanding or restructuring the artifacts and, in doing so, enhancing the intertextual thinking and discourse genre within the organization. Thus, the interview guide is intended to assist management and staff in creating an artifact that can serve as a catalyst for individual meaning-making processes to unfold.

What I envision from researchers who may utilize the interview guide is as follows: Initially, the psychologist or management personnel should work with both actors separately (first row). In this phase, the psychologist can ascertain the individual significance of the conflict (first column) and identify the actions that arise from this meaning-making process (second column). Additionally, the researcher should explore how these actions contribute to pursuing specific goals or satisfying particular needs (third column = working value), highlighting potential connections between the present belief and other beliefs held by the individual (fourth column = connection of beliefs).

Once this initial assessment is completed for both individuals embroiled in the conflict, the psychologist or management personnel can illustrate how these actions

Table 1 Pragmatic interview guide for management in times of conflict

Pragmatic premise	Practical consequences (actions, positioning towards oneself and towards the environmental givens)	Working value (underlying need and usefulness for holding onto a belief, conviction, idea)	Connections of beliefs: Beliefs are connected and combine into a higher-order belief system (hyper-generalized belief system)	Future horizon of the hyper-generalized belief system
What does the conflict mean to you? Which belief or idea do you like to articulate in regard to the conflict?	How do you react towards the conflict? How does the conflict regulate your actions and interactions? How do you position yourself?	Which need do you try to satisfy or goal do you pursue when acting on the basis of this or that belief?	How is your belief connected to other important beliefs in your life? Which role does it play for your work?	How does your belief and your actions might impact your future in the organization?
Can you come up with a joint definition of the problem/conflict? On which meaning of the conflict can you agree upon?	What does this agreement mean for your concrete actions and your position towards each other?	Which needs are satisfied by this joint definition and joint action yet to be taken?	Can you name or label what you have agreed upon so that you can remind yourself of what you have agreed upon?	How does the altered definition of the conflict might impact your future actions in the organization in cooperation?

lead to a specific construction of reality in the near future (fifth column). This process enables the psychologist to identify the different truths and realities that influence one another and investigate the underlying needs and actions that shape this reality construction. This analysis will facilitate an empirical examination of the conflict's depth structure and provide insight into how various actions and needs are negatively interrelated, as well as how the usefulness of the conflict manifests for all parties involved. This sets the foundation for the second phase of the general conflict resolution.

In this phase, the psychologist is encouraged to invite the participants to actualize the meaning of the conflict. This can be achieved by negotiating a definition of the conflict, which can facilitate the establishment of a shared potential meaning determined by both actors (first column, third row). The psychologist can then prompt both participants to reflect on how this altered meaning impacts their actions and their positions toward one another (second column), followed by an exploration of how these potentially actualized actions may satisfy their underlying needs without negatively interfering with each other (third column).

Importantly, the psychologist should encourage the participants to name and label their re-negotiated meaning of the conflict, allowing them to remind each other of the agreement and its practical implications (fourth row). This label and its associated meaning can be internalized by the employees and linked to other higher psychological functions that are essential for their daily work. Finally, the psychologist assists the participants in discovering how this actualized meaning transforms their near future and what potential benefits may arise from it. This step is crucial, as the instantiation of a desired and meaningful future can motivate participants to actively pursue that future (Murphy, 2023).

The reviewers agreed that the manuscript requires clearer application examples, particularly concerning our interview guide. Let us consider an example from my work as a couple's therapist (even if it does not consider the work context): several of my clients needed assistance coordinating their vacation plans. Here, the expectations (camping versus non-camping) were often significantly divergent and contradictory. In the initial step—following the interview guide—I aim to clarify what each individual expects from their vacation and what needs they seek to fulfill through it (relaxation, adventure, curiosity, etc.). Both individuals should have the opportunity to understand what the other needs from the vacation and why the conflict arose—not because one partner intends to harm or deny the other, but because the vacation is essential to both partners concerning their dynamic needs.

In the next step, it is crucial not only to address singular needs but also to explore how multiple needs can be satisfied through a unified action system (relaxation, security, wellness). Once both action systems are laid out in relation to the importance of the needs, a restructuring of the conflict can occur, or a joint action system and a higher-order belief system can be defined. For instance, we might decide to go to a lake in the mountains, where we can enjoy wellness activities while also engaging in sports, either separately or together. If it is also important to the other partner to engage in sports together, then mutual times for shared activities can be negotiated.

It is beneficial to label this joint solution in a subsequent step so that it can be easily referenced should the conflict arise again or be evaluated during or after the vacation. Unlike Deutsch, our conflict resolution strategy aims not only to achieve a win–win situation for both partners or parties but also to allow the other to understand why their respective viewpoints are so vital and significant for their personal development (see below). When this is made phenomenologically tangible, it alters how both partners perceive their individual belief and action systems, coordinate them, and develop a meta-perspective (we want to integrate our action and belief systems).

Ethically speaking, such a pragmatic conflict resolution strategy is valuable because it aligns with the ethos of couples therapists, who strive to avoid taking sides or discrediting one partner over the other. This approach ensures that no party is delegitimized; instead, each individual is taken seriously in their existence and their needs are acknowledged and addressed. Something similar accounts for conflicts happening at the workplace.

Criticizing the Pragmatic Method

We have now reached the conclusion of our article, exploring how pragmatism relates to the inquiry of work psychology, particularly in the resolution of workplace conflicts. It is essential to address some criticisms regarding our Jamesian contemplation.

First, it is important to acknowledge that this study is not empirical; we have not yet tested the interview guide in practice. As articulated by the Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky (1985), the practical aspect of our scientific work allows us to refine our theoretical foundations. This implies that theory must be continuously revised in light of empirical findings. Thus, we must remain open to modifying the interview guide as we implement it in management settings in vivo. A pragmatic attitude entails not abandoning a theoretical construct grounded in experience but enriching it significantly. Nonetheless, philosophical and theoretical work in psychology serves as a crucial foundation for empirical inquiry and holds intrinsic value in its own right (Valsiner, 2017).

Second, a comparison with already existing conflict resolution theories is necessary: To this extent, we will briefly focus on Deutsch's theory (2015a, b) and compare it with our Jamesian perspective. Deutsch defines various classes of conflicts, such as lose-lose, win-lose, and win–win conflicts. In this context, the American conflict researcher seeks to achieve a reinterpretation of conflicts in practice (Deutsch, 1983). He aims to show conflict parties potential untapped opportunities (gains) for conflict resolution, so that both parties can come closer together and reinterpret the conflict (for example, from lose-lose to win–win). To this end, overarching goals should be defined in which both conflict parties are involved and have a vested interest in maintaining the overarching goal. Deutsch relies on the theory of interdependence, which posits that individuals can achieve more through structured cooperation than through chaotic coexistence (Deutsch, 2015b). A central milestone

in Deutsch's theory is dialogue, through which the overarching goals are established and possible gains for both parties are highlighted (Deutsch, 2015a).

However, what I find lacking in Deutsch's theory is the alignment of goals based on overarching worldviews and belief systems. The individual orientation toward goals does not occur in a vacuum but within a cultural framework that influences how we perceive and interact with things. This means that worldviews and belief systems regulate actions concerning the material and social world, as well as toward oneself. I do not wish to claim that there is a lack of cognitive aspects in Deutsch's work; that would be a misrepresentation, as Deutsch aims for the restructuring of conflicts. However, I find a deficiency in addressing the cultural context within which this restructuring occurs. I believe this process is guided by our values and worldviews, which crystallize in certain belief systems and align with our dynamic hierarchy of needs. Future research could explore an appropriate expansion of Deutsch's conflict research with influences from pragmatism; our provisional analysis highlights promising gaps that could be filled.

Third, we have developed our pragmatic understanding of conflict in the workplace from both theoretical and empirical viewpoints. The empirical perspective was informed by historical case material from Kurt Lewin's work in Iowa. This allows us to address the first point of criticism by asserting that our model incorporates empirical features, as it has organically evolved from the conflict situation that Lewin confronted seven decades ago. However, we must recognize that the conflict occurred within the context of the first industrial sector, specifically in a factory setting. Factories are culturally and historically significant environments, characterized by unique myths and rituals that govern interpersonal and intrapersonal conduct (Busemann, 1927). Consequently, we need to assess whether our interview guide and pragmatic method are valid for conflicts arising in a factory context and applicable to more contemporary cultural and historical action fields, such as those in the tertiary sector. Insights gained from understanding conflicts across various cultural and historical contexts will enable us to productively refine our pragmatic perspective on workplace conflicts.

Fourth, we must be prepared to counter criticisms that may arise from structuralists or rationalists. These critics may argue that such an understanding of conflict, or of work in general, is anarchic and chaotic. A leader or manager might contend that they cannot accommodate multiple truths within their organization and must guide employees with a specific conception of truth from which no one is permitted to diverge. Otherwise, they may assert staff will act according to their own inclinations, resulting in a lack of order and structure.

In our pragmatic understanding of work—especially concerning conflicts—we must refute this superficial critique. What we have articulated is not merely a collection of multiple truths and realities chaotically juxtaposed against one another. Instead, we have explained that employees are capable of continuously negotiating and re-negotiating the meaning of a conflict or issue at work. Through this negotiation process, employees can agree on a shared definition of the conflict and synthesize a higher-order belief system that incorporates seemingly contradictory individual beliefs (von Fircks, 2021a, b). This indicates that while individual truths exist, joint truths can also emerge to ensure order and structure in the daily operations of

the enterprise. Various social scientists (Baldursson & Schmidt, 2024; von Fircks, 2023b, c) have demonstrated that when management attempts to impose a specific culture and set of rules, informal networks often develop from the ground up, countering the prescribed definition of culture. Researchers agree that these informal networks are valuable resources for the enterprise. Therefore, it would be prudent to utilize them in an official and pragmatic manner. This approach necessitates that the organization allocate time and space for the ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation of specific conflicts and issues, enabling the actualization of belief systems aligned with both individual needs and organizational objectives.

In this context, I wish to highlight an additional advantage of cultural psychology and its relation to pragmatism. Cultural-psychological scholars extensively explore the concept of space and the demand characteristics of the environment. To facilitate a shift away from conflict, we should consider the spatial arrangements where the conflict occurs and where we might catalyze joint meaning-making. The *Compiègne Wagon* serves as an illustrative example, as it was there that German and French officials signed the final ceasefire, leading to the end of World War I in 1918. The unique spatial characteristics of the train, such as the arrangement of seating and the setting's symbolism, facilitate communication—sitting across from one another, at tables from multiple angles, in the train's confined space, all heading toward a common destination. These (cultural) demand characteristics can foster the construction of joint meaning-making patterns.

In conclusion, the criticisms raised are crucial catalysts for advancing our pragmatic understanding of the psychology of work and workplace conflicts. We must leverage this criticism productively and empirically to enhance our insights and practices in this field.

Setting the Seeds for a Pragmatic Understanding of Work and Conflicts at Work

Work psychology engages with dynamic agents navigating complex environments, particularly in the context of conflict, which has been central to our inquiry. Conflicts are imbued with ambivalent meanings, as many employees perceive their perspectives as the sole valid interpretations. A pragmatic approach to workplace conflicts does not focus on determining who holds the most valid perspective—an endeavor that often leads to resource depletion among employees. Instead, a pragmatic psychologist would inquire about the significance of the conflict for each employee and how this meaning influences their actions and attitudes toward their environment and themselves.

Furthermore, the psychologist is called to investigate the underlying needs that inform these actions and meanings, revealing how the conflict's preservation may serve a purpose for the individual and connect to broader beliefs. This approach highlights that the individual constructions of reality may starkly contradict one another, as illustrated in the Lewinian case example. However, this divergent understanding of conflict can be leveraged by the psychologist to facilitate re-negotiation

among the involved parties, helping them to establish a shared definition of the conflict that fosters actionable solutions.

Through this process, both parties can unify their perspectives and needs within a collaborative meaning-making framework, leading to the development of a higher-order belief structure that resolves the previous conflict and constructs a shared truth beneficial to all participants regarding the fulfillment of pressing needs. To support this process, I have created a dynamic interview guide designed to assist psychologists in pragmatically resolving conflicts through the lens of William James' pluralistic psychology and philosophy.

This article aims to contribute to bridging a significant research gap by using William James' pragmatism in the domain of work psychology and conflict resolution. Now, it is your turn to utilize these insights and enhance the vibrant landscape of dynamic work psychology grounded in James' theories.

Data Availability Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Informed Consent The article is a theoretical article and does not require consent.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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