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Conceptualizing Workplace Conflict and Conflict Management

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Introduction

As Paul Edwards has argued, ‘conflict is one of the major underlying principles of relations between managers and workers’ (1995: 434). A representative survey conducted by the CIPD in 2014 (and discussed in Chap. 4 of this book) found that 38% of people in the UK had experienced some form of conflict at work in the previous 12 months and 28% had ‘ongoing difficult relationships’ (CIPD 2015). Managing conflict is also clearly a central part of the day-to-day activities of employment relations practitioners. In the Workplace Employment Relations Study 2011, more than nine out of ten British HR practitioners reported spending time on disciplinary and grievance issues, a greater proportion than training, diversity, appraisals and pay. Similarly, discipline and grievance were the most common issues to which trade union representatives devoted attention (van Wanrooy et al. 2013).

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One of the defining features of contemporary employment relations has been the rapid decline in the incidence of collective expressions of industrial conflict across developed economies. Academic research and analysis of conflict was traditionally preoccupied with collective industrial action; however, as this has become less frequent, academics have been relatively slow to turn their attention to individualised employment disputes, which, it could be argued, play a significantly greater role in the lives of workers and their organizations. Furthermore, both policy and academic debates over workplace conflict and its management are often plagued by a lack of conceptual precision. Perhaps most importantly, within academic literature the ‘links between wider processes of conflict and overt disputes are rarely discussed’ (Edwards 1995: 434).

Therefore, in this chapter we attempt to lay a basic conceptual foundation for the wide-ranging empirical analyses contained in this book. We start by defining conflict and drawing an important distinction between its manifestations, both informal and formal. We then explore the utility of existing theoretical frameworks before considering the dynamics of conflict formation and escalation. Finally, we examine how processes of dispute resolution and conflict management have been, and can be, understood.

Defining Conflict

A problem with contemporary debates over the management of conflict is a definitional malleability when discussing key concepts. As Belanger and Edwards (2013: 7) have pointed out, conflict can refer to ‘underlying antagonisms or clashes of interests’ and also ‘concrete actions’ such as strikes. However, Dix et al. (2009) draw a sharp and useful distinction between ‘conflict’ and ‘disputes’. Conflict they argue, should be defined as ‘*discontent arising from a perceived clash of interests*’. Irrespective of the underlying causes, conflict can be triggered by a wide range of different factors but, as the definition above suggests, this ‘discontent’ is not always visible. Disputes, however, represent ‘*manifest expressions*’ of that discontent. This is important because it also allows us to make a clear conceptual separation between ‘conflict management’ as an activity designed to address, accommodate and mediate discontent as opposed to ‘dispute resolution’ which describes attempts made to deal with manifest expressions of conflict.

Importantly, conflict can become manifest without necessarily escalating into a 'dispute' and can instead be expressed in a variety of informal and often covert ways. For example, individuals or groups of workers may choose not to voice concerns and/or may indirectly articulate them through absence, quitting or lower levels of performance. Furthermore, discontent can also be realised through petty theft (pilfering), mischief or misbehaviour, where rules are deliberately breached and even through industrial sabotage. Clark Kerr (1964) argued that expressions of conflict:

...are as unlimited as the ingenuity of man. The strike is the most common and visible expression. But conflict with the employer may also take the form of peaceful bargaining and grievance handling, of boycotts, of political action, of restriction of output, of sabotage, of absenteeism, and turnover, may take place on an individual as well as an organized basis and constitute alternatives to collective action (1964: 171)

Despite the increasing influence of unitaristic perspectives within both policy and organizational practice, conflict is rooted in the nature of the employment relationship. Although there are clearly areas in which the interests of workers and employees mesh with those of employers, the logic of production relations within capitalist economies infers a fundamental difference of interests, as Baldamus (1961) argued, '*...as wages are costs to the firm, and the deprivations inherent in effort mean "costs" to the employee, the interests of management and wage earner are diametrically opposed*'. In practice, this means that the balance of wage and effort (see Behrend 1957) is subject to a constant process of negotiation and re-negotiation (Edwards 1994) and it is here where workplace conflict is generated. This may involve discontent over pay but more commonly may revolve around managerial attempts to increase productivity and performance and a desire by workers to control the pace, intensity and autonomy of work.

In this context, it can be argued that, from a Marxist perspective, the key task of capitalist management is the continual control of the labour process in order to extract a maximum of surplus value by transforming labour power into work performance (Braverman 1974). Given the dynamics of exploitation and control, relationships between capital (management) and labour (workers) in the workplace are characterized by what Edwards (1986) termed 'structured antagonism'. Although

management and employers need to control the labour process, they also require some level of co-operation from the workforce.

Accordingly, the outcome of this process is a range of responses from workers; they may give active consent to managerial demands, they might comply reluctantly or, in some circumstances, they resist. Moreover, the balance of control and co-operation will define the conditions for conflict to develop. Where employers seek to prioritize control by, for example, imposing strict workplace rules and rigid performance targets, low-trust relations (see Fox 1974) and conflict are more likely. Of course, in certain contexts, this may be of no great concern to employers as the costs of developing high levels of trust may outweigh any potential benefits in terms of productivity and profit.

It is also important to acknowledge that not all conflict at work originates from the employment relationship; Latreille and Saundry's case study of a large health organization (Chap. 14 of this book), found that a significant proportion of disputes originated from personal differences, which then spilled over into the workplace. Nonetheless, a violent argument between two colleagues may be entirely personal, but if held at work will be seen as having a detrimental impact on performance and consequently subject to organizational discipline. Therefore, what is often termed 'interpersonal conflict' does not take place outside the sphere of managerial control and in managing or adjudicating on such issues, management does not play an impartial role but acts in the interests of the organization.

The Dynamics of Conflict Formation: Informal Action and Resistance

It could be argued that conflict will occur where the implicit contract formed as a result of the effort bargain, described above, is broken or becomes unstable. From a radical perspective, this contract is in a state of perpetual instability as it is based on a relationship which is fundamentally unequal and in which the overriding emphasis is on cost minimization. However, the contract is also negotiated and renegotiated within a dynamic and complex context, which in turn is shaped by societal and organizational norms and also personal characteristics and orientations. For example, the response of individuals to a managerial instruction will

rest on their resources and aspirations, which in turn will be shaped by the class, economic and social structure in which they live and work (Watson 1995). Whether a managerial request to an employee to work additional overtime results in conflict will depend on a range of factors including: their financial security; the impact of overtime on their home life; whether they trust and value their relationship with the manager; the extent to which they feel adequately recognized and rewarded by the company; perceptions of employment security or insecurity; access to representation and support; the broader climate of employment relations in the organization; and underlying attitudes to authority.

Where conflict does occur, it is often expressed in informal and unorganized ways. For example, a basic response to conflict is withdrawal, either of effort or self. Therefore conflict could be expressed in reduced motivation and therefore productivity on an individual level. Furthermore, workers could deliberately attempt to reduce the pace of work and so try to regain some control over the labour process. It could also be reflected in high levels of absence and ultimately turnover. Of course individuals may be absent due to sickness, while turnover may be a result of individual decisions which have nothing to do with underlying discontent. Nonetheless, the increasing use of rigid systems of absence management not only tends to escalate conflict (see Saundry and Wibberley 2014) but is also evidence that absenteeism can be a social as well as an individual expression of conflict (Edwards and Whitston 1989; Watson 1995).

For some commentators, workplace conflict is largely expressed through resistance. Moreover, as Thompson and McHugh (2009) argue there is a dialectical relationship between control and resistance – for example, rules and disciplinary processes are developed in order to control certain aspects of worker behaviour. The application of these rules can then lead to further conflict to which workers respond through organizational misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). Employees may attempt to ‘fiddle’, ‘pilfer’ or ‘steal’ from their employer. It can be argued that by exaggerating expenses or taking home small items, workers are achieving a degree of distributional justice and readjusting the effort bargain (Williams and Adam-Smith 2010). Such misbehaviour could even extend to sabotage, which can take the form of physical destruction or in contemporary workplaces using social media to denigrate a

product, the company and/or colleagues, an increasingly common occurrence in the UK (Broughton 2011). Humour is also one way in which workers can express (and respond to) discontent and a way of developing solidarity and challenging managerial control (Collinson 1992). Williams and Adam-Smith (2010), however, caution against such behaviours necessarily being interpreted as expressions of conflict. In helping workers deal with, and adapt to, the pressures of work they can act as a safety valve, which in essence helps to underpin rather than challenge managerial authority. For example, humour can also be used by management or within an organization to diffuse conflict, divert attention away from failure and deflect criticism (Barsoux 1993, cited in Watson 1995).

From Conflict to Disputes: Escalation and Mobilization

While the expressions of conflict discussed in the previous section are relatively ‘unorganized’, discontent can coalesce and escalate into concrete ‘disputes’ (Dix et al. 2009). At an individual level, these normally take one of two forms: disciplinary action taken by the employer or a grievance or complaint brought by an employee. What begin as individual disputes may take on a collective character as other workers identify a common cause with, and so provide support to, the affected worker. Alternatively, the source of discontent may itself be a collective issue, such as pay. In these circumstances, conflict can be expressed in an ‘organized’ way through strike or other industrial action. In this section we examine the characteristics of these different types of disputes.

Discipline: Correction and Control

The most common individual employment disputes revolve around the disciplinary decisions made by employers. Disciplinary action can take a number of forms – from informal verbal warnings and written warnings to suspension, demotion and ultimately dismissal. Such action is generally taken in response to misconduct, where an employee breaks a specific

rule, or capability where the employer judges that the employee is unable to perform a role to the required standard.

The dominant view of workplace discipline and disciplinary action is that it is a means through which management can ‘correct’ employee behaviours which may impact negatively on organizational performance by applying ‘fair’ and ‘just’ procedures (Edwards and Whitston 1989). Disciplinary procedures are therefore institutions that aim to ‘regularize and cope with potentially disintegrative conflicts of interest’ (Watson 1995: 321). Alternatively, disciplinary action can be conceptualized as a management response to ‘unorganized’ employee expressions of conflict. From this perspective, disciplinary action is a function of the setting of rules and the exercise of managerial authority to exert control over the labour process and maintain order through ‘punishment’ (Jones 1961). The notion of order may be reflected in consistent evidence, which shows that disciplinary action is more likely to occur in larger workplaces and organizations. This could be a function of the impersonal nature of employment relations and the application of standardized rules and procedures. In contrast, in smaller workplaces, close relations between managers and staff can facilitate informal resolution through discussion (Forth et al. 2006).

In the UK, written disciplinary procedures are almost ubiquitous and can be found in nine out of ten workplaces (Wood et al. 2014). However, this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Up until 1970, disciplinary issues were subject to collective bargaining and a major source of industrial action. In terms of the preceding discussion, a decision to dismiss or discipline a fellow worker was generally defined in terms of collective interests. The spread of processes for dealing with disciplinary disputes was therefore seen as a way of removing such issues from the collective arena and bringing them within the ambit of managerial control. This points to the importance of national regulatory institutions in shaping patterns of conflict and resolution (Belanger and Edwards 2013). In the UK, the development of a regime of employment rights in the early 1970s, for example the introduction of a right for employees to challenge the fairness of a dismissal through legal action, triggered the spread and development of disciplinary procedures with elements of due process, such as

appeal and representation (Edwards 1994). Similarly, Friedman and Lee (2010) found evidence that, in China, the development of legal rights for workers has made it more likely that conflict is expressed in an individual form.

In addition to the regulatory context, the nature and extent of disciplinary disputes is likely to be shaped by employer strategies in relation to conduct and performance and the response of trade unions and workers. In short, conflict will inevitably form around managerial attempts to both control the labour process and secure the consent of workers and employees (Hyman 1987). Furthermore, the way in which organizational actors seek to manage conflict will, in part, determine the incidence of individual employment disputes. For example, managers who adopt a 'problem solving' approach are more likely to resolve conflicts. Strong trade union organization is also associated with lower rates of disciplinary sanctions and dismissals, as a result of unions either restraining managerial prerogative or facilitating informal paths of resolution (Edwards 2000; Saundry et al. 2011).

Patterns of disciplinary action also reflect how individual workers respond to structures of managerial control, which will in turn be shaped by the external context. For example, if workers conform to organizational rules and norms, the incidence of discipline will be lower. It has been argued that this is one explanation for lower rates of disciplinary disputes in workplaces employing high proportions of women, older workers and those in more skilled occupational groups (Knight and Latreille 2000). Older workers and those in more senior positions, for example, may have more to lose by being subject to discipline or being dismissed. Alternatively, those in professional occupations and management grades may be able to contest managerial authority more effectively, so limiting the arbitrary use of discipline. In Britain, workplaces with higher proportions of 'non-white' employees have been found to have higher rates of disciplinary sanctions and dismissals. This is perhaps a function of discriminatory behaviour from managers but could also be explained by relatively low levels of knowledge of employment rights (Casebourne et al. 2006), which may make it more difficult to contest disciplinary decisions.

Grievance Formation and Escalation

If workers challenge attempts by managers to exert control and discipline over the labour process, the result may be a formal grievance, whereby a complaint is made to someone of authority within the organization, often within the auspices of a structured procedure. Grievances from individual employees can centre on a wide range of issues. In the UK, the Workplace Employment Relations Study 2011 found that the most common cause, cited by almost 40 % of respondents, was ‘unfair treatment’ by a manager or supervisor – for instance, in relation to performance appraisals or perceived victimization. This compared to ‘terms and conditions and pay’ which was cited by just under one-third of respondents (van Wanrooy et al. 2013). In some senses, formal grievances represent a response to managerial attempts to impose greater control over the labour process leading to a ‘spiral’ of hostility and retaliation (Rapoport 1960).

Olson-Buchanan and Boswell (2008) have explored the dynamic processes through which an individual concludes that they have been mistreated and how they respond to that mistreatment. They argue that the nature or character of the mistreatment as perceived by the individual can shape their response. They suggest that mistreatment related to enactment of organizational policy is less likely to be ‘internalized’ and thus not seen as a personal attack by the employee. In contrast, perceived ‘personalized mistreatment’ can have a far more negative impact on their emotions, which can lead to greater ‘job withdrawal’ (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan 2004). Furthermore, the ‘severity’ or ‘seriousness’ of the perceived injustice (see also Todor and Owen 1991) will shape their response with harsher, socially unacceptable or intentional mistreatment more likely to lead to escalation.

Finally, if the employee feels that they have been denied procedural justice, if the complaint is not seen to have been fairly dealt with or there is a perception of ongoing mistreatment, there is likely to be a negative impact on the long-term performance and attitude of the employee. This may lead to a spiral of conflict in which the withdrawal of the employee is met with further disciplinary sanctions from management which deepens the sense of mistreatment. In contrast, if they perceive that they have

achieved a positive resolution to their complaint then the individual is more likely to feel greater allegiance to the organization.

Lucy and Broughton (2011) (drawing on Korobkin 2006) identify five factors or processes that may shape the extent to which individual employees will seek to escalate a sense of grievance into a formal complaint. First, attribution bias is likely to restrict self-reflection and shift responsibility onto the other party. In short, disputants look for internal explanations of the other's behaviour, while rationalizing their own behaviour in objective terms (Irvine 2014). For example, a common finding in recent qualitative research into mediation revolves around disputes in which an employee accuses their manager of bullying behaviours, while the manager perceives the problem to rest with the attitude and performance of the employee (Saundry et al. 2013). Second, the way in which issues are framed may determine whether an issue is resolved at an early stage. Third, where individuals stand to lose a significant amount from a dispute they are more likely to adopt an adversarial approach.

The fourth factor identified by Lucy and Broughton is 'reactive devaluation' through which a party is less likely to accept a compromise because it comes from the individual or organization with whom the dispute originated. This therefore suggests the benefit of the involvement of third parties who are able to 'unfreeze' particular attitudes. The relatively high success rate of third party conciliation in the UK (Saundry and Dix 2014), workplace mediation (Latreille 2011) and also the constructive role seen to be played by union representatives (Saundry and Wibberley 2014) may suggest that this issue is influential in shaping dispute dynamics. Finally, Lucy and Broughton highlight the role of 'optimistic overconfidence' whereby either party may exaggerate the potential benefits of escalating a grievance, either in terms of improving their situation or winning legal compensation.

While an understanding of the psychology of grievance escalation is valuable, it is also important to place this within a broader context that takes into account the nature of workplace relations. For example, the existence of structures of employee representation and support is likely to influence the course of a grievance. Employee grievances, for instance, are

more likely within unionized workplaces (Kersley et al. 2006), in which employees may well receive support in making formal complaints. There is also evidence to suggest that unrepresented workers are less likely to use formal grievance procedures (Pollert and Charlwood 2009). Moreover, in an adversarial employment relations climate, union representatives may use individual grievances as means through which broader collective issues are raised. Conversely, high trust relations within unionized environments can facilitate informal processes that help to resolve issues that threaten to escalate into formal disputes (Oxenbridge and Brown 2004; Saundry and Wibberley 2014). In these contexts, trade union representatives can play an important role in managing the expectations of members and guarding against 'optimistic overconfidence' (see Wibberley and Saundry in this volume).

Collective Disputes: Mobilizing Employee Discontent

Grievances can also escalate into collective industrial action, which has a number of different forms; groups of workers can take strike action where they withdraw their labour completely for a limited or an indefinite period. In addition, they can take industrial action, short of strike action, by refusing to work overtime, declining to complete certain parts of their normal duties or by strictly limiting their work to the terms of their employment contracts – sometimes known as 'working to rule'.

The question of whether and how conflict becomes manifest through collective disputes such as strikes is addressed to some degree by mobilization theory, developed by Charles Tilly (1978) and used by John Kelly (1998) to develop an account of the changing contours of workplace disputes. In short, mobilization theory suggests that five factors will shape the nature and extent of collective industrial action: interests, organization, mobilization, opportunity, and counter-mobilization.

The extent to which a particular issue is defined in terms of collective rather than individual interests is crucial – for example if an individual is experiencing bullying by management, this will probably become manifest in the form of an employee grievance but if this is part of a wider

pattern of managerial behaviour, then there is the potential for collective action. However, workers must also have the capacity to take action and this in turn is dependent on the nature of union organization. Therefore, where union density is high, collective action is more likely. The sense of grievance must also be mobilized and this normally requires leadership from activists who are able to frame the issue in collective terms and convince workers of the potential benefits that could arise from any action. This is to some extent contingent on opportunity and whether the union has sufficient power to successfully carry out industrial action. Finally, action can be suppressed by the extent to which either the government or employer is prepared to counter-mobilize, for example by taking action against strikers, employing replacement workers or taking legal action against the union.

An analysis of these factors provides an explanation of why, in the UK, conflict is likely to escalate through individual rather than collective channels, as discussed in the following chapter of this book. Rapid industrial restructuring and the increased globalization of production have contributed to the decline of industries that had traditionally experienced relatively high levels of strikes and other industrial action (including coalmining, shipbuilding, and motor manufacturing). This has not only eroded the organizational capacity of unions but also the increased mobility of capital and the consequent threat of organizations relocating production has dramatically reduced union bargaining power and increased the potential risks of industrial action. In short, the capacity of trade unions to organize collective action in the face of conflict has been severely curtailed. This also means that workers may be less likely to see issues facing them or their colleagues in collective terms and union leaders and activists may face much greater difficulty in convincing workers that a collective dispute will yield a positive outcome. Furthermore, in the UK, this is exacerbated by restrictive legislation and the prospect of hostility from both State and employer.

Overall, the discussion above has demonstrated that while different types of disputes are clearly interrelated, a disciplinary decision can lead to an employee grievance and/or assume a collective character as workers

mobilize through strike or other forms of industrial action. However, it is also important to consider their distinct characteristics. The extent to which conflict becomes transmitted as disciplinary action is a function of the degree to which worker behaviour contravenes rules and norms and the consequent managerial response. Furthermore, whereas a grievance is initiated by an employee, disciplinary action is fundamentally subject to managerial prerogative. This distinction is not simply theoretical but is crucial in understanding the way in which different types of disputes are resolved and therefore the efficacy of policy instruments designed to facilitate or encourage resolution. Whether conflict escalates into individual employment disputes, collective industrial action or is expressed through more informal action, it is likely to depend on a number of critical factors:

- (i) *Political and legal context* – If the regulatory framework underpins employment rights and provides a clear route through which rights can be enforced, discontent is more likely to be converted into disputes. Whether this is in the form of individual grievances and litigation or expressed through industrial action will depend on the extent to which collective organization is supported or constrained by legislation and how this is balanced against individual employment protection.
- (ii) *Organizational processes* – If there are accessible processes through which employees can raise concerns and managers can deal with issues of conduct and capability, discontent is likely to be expressed through formal grievances and disciplinary action. Where such processes are not present, conflict is more likely to be either expressed through informal and indirect channels such as quitting, absence and poor performance, or mobilized into collective action.
- (iii) *Employee voice* – While formal processes may act as channels for employee voice, access to representation may be critical in mobilizing discontent and articulating this as an individual or collective grievance. At the same time, effective structures of representation may underpin informal processes of resolution, preventing the escalation of conflict.

- (iv) *Personal characteristics and emotional contexts* – Emotional contexts can influence conflict escalation. Issues outside the workplace often shaped by economic circumstance may affect how individuals respond to conflict. Both manager and managed will rely on ‘attributions’ to make sense of the situation they find themselves in.

From Dispute Resolution to Conflict Management

In considering managerial attempts to resolve conflict, the academic literature has tended to be preoccupied with the relative efficiency of different dispute resolution processes and mechanisms. In the UK, this reflected a dominant pluralist paradigm which was built on the belief that the best way to manage employment relations was through a recognition of differences and structures through which those differences can be resolved. Therefore, governments of all political persuasions supported the idea of collective bargaining and encouraged the use of systematic procedural approaches to discipline and grievance. The role of state agencies such as the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) and the use of conciliation in employment disputes were, and are, an essentially pluralist response to workplace conflict.

More recently, the focus has been on alternative methods of dispute resolution (ADR); however, much of the literature still locates mechanisms such as workplace mediation as a linear, technical process through which organizations are better able to resolve specific disputes. This managerial perspective has tended to focus on a narrow consideration of the benefits of dispute resolution. For example, proponents of mediation have long argued that it offers demonstrable advantages over slow, complex and adversarial grievance and disciplinary procedures, which tend to focus on rights as opposed to interests. In the UK, data suggest resolution rates (full or partial) of around 90% (or more) (Latreille 2011), mirroring US evidence that also points to high levels of participant satisfaction with both process and outcome (Bingham et al. 2009; Kochan et al. 2000). A radical critique of attempts to introduce alternative approaches to dispute resolution, such as mediation, would argue that these are merely

ways in which management reinforces control over the labour process (see Colling 2004). Mediation, in particular, could be seen as means by which managerial oppression and mistreatment is recast as interpersonal conflict.

Commentators in the US have argued for a need to move away from using mediation and other forms of ADR to resolve disputes and towards 'integrated conflict management systems' (ICMS) (see Chap. 14). This, it is claimed, represents a new 'philosophy of organizational life' (Lynch 2001: 208) and a change in organizational 'mind-set' in regards to conflict management (Lipsky and Seeber 1998: 23). Accordingly, ICMS create a 'conflict competent culture' where all conflict may be safely raised and where persons will feel confident that their concerns will be heard, respected, and acted upon... (Lynch 2001: 213) and where 'managers are expected to prevent, manage, contain and resolve all conflict at the earliest time and lowest level possible' (Lynch 2003: 212).

This therefore represents a clear shift from focussing on resolving disputes to developing approaches to manage discontent and conflict. Importantly, it reflects an acceptance of the inevitability of conflict and the importance of developing cultures in which employees feel able to challenge and raise any issues. In addition, it acknowledges the importance of providing employees with access to a rights-based process. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of locating conflict at the centre of organizational priorities and equipping managers with the capability to identify, address and resolve conflict at the earliest possible point (Lipsky and Avgar 2010; Lynch 2003).

The experience of the US suggests that integrated and innovative approaches are more likely to be found in 'high road' organizations which see conflict management as part of human resource strategy designed to maximize employee engagement and maintain competitiveness (Colvin 2014). In such organizations, therefore, the development of conflict management systems may be aligned and integrated with their existing strategy and culture (Lipsky and Avgar 2010). However, the link between the strategic management of conflict and employee engagement is, to date, notably absent from managerial discourses in Great Britain and Ireland. Instead, conflict management remains associated with the administration of disciplinary and grievance procedures and is consequently stereotyped

as a low value and essentially transactional element of the management function. The fact that research points to an aversion among managers – and particularly senior managers – in UK organizations for accepting that conflict is even an issue might therefore militate against the development of more strategic approaches. This in turn highlights the importance of more detailed examination of the role that managers play in the diffusion of conflict management practices and systems in terms of both leadership and ‘front-line’ application.

Evidence also suggests that transforming the culture of conflict management is not straightforward and is critically related to the nature of managerial authority and the dynamics of workplace relations. Accordingly, the changes in the management of work which have increased pressures on managers to increase efficiency and improve performance have also created environments in which conflict is not only inevitable but an increasing feature of organizational life.

In some respects, the development of more strategic and systemic approaches to the management of conflict as opposed to reactive reliance on dispute resolution could be interpreted as a way of employers reasserting some degree of control over an increasingly unstable labour process. However, the most significant barrier to embedding a new culture of conflict management appears to be the attitude of managers themselves. Research points to an antipathy among managers in the UK and Ireland to the idea that conflict is an inevitable feature of organizational life (Teague and Doherty 2011). Indeed, a succession of studies have found the attitudes of line managers to represent a major barrier to the spread of ADR, viewing mediation as both an admission of failure and also a threat to their authority (Saundry and Wibberley 2014), reflecting what Lipsky and Avgar have characterized as the ‘traditional approach to workplace conflict’ (2010: 41).

Conclusion

Any evaluation of the significance of any resolution mechanism inevitably rests on the way in which the employment relationship, and specifically power and conflict, is conceptualized. For example, mediation can

be located within unitary, pluralist and radical frames of reference. In the unitary view, mediation is a mechanism to cure the 'problem' of conflict, often through resolving interpersonal clashes and breakdowns in communication. From a pluralist perspective, mediation represents a classic institutional response – offering a process through which conflict can be regulated and contained. In contrast, a radical analysis would see mediation as a process affording 'bureaucratic control' (Edwards 1979) or what Hyman (1987: 40) refers to as a 'spurious' system of 'humanization and democratization' through which employees can be further co-opted by capital and the 'coercive' nature of work relations can be 'obscured'.

Existing policy debates undoubtedly see the adoption of ADR in unitary terms as a solution to the problem of 'pathological' conflict and its attendant costs, and exhibit a preoccupation with the efficiency of dispute resolution (see, for example, the review by Budd and Colvin 2008). This is problematic in a number of respects. It relies on a simplistic characterization of conventional grievance and disciplinary processes as formal and adversarial. This ignores the way in which formal procedure and informal processes often co-exist. Managers handle individual disputes in multi-faceted ways (Edwards and Whitston 1989) while union representatives not only challenge managerial authority but also often seek to negotiate informal resolutions for their members.

Accordingly, processes of dispute resolution cannot be divorced from the pattern of workplace relations (Colvin 2003). In the absence of strong unions or individuals with significant bargaining power, employers enjoy wide discretion as to how they 'resolve' individual employment disputes. Thus, procedures may be reduced to exercises in legal compliance, affording workers little chance to resolve problems or challenge perceived unfairness (Colling 2004; Pollert and Charlwood 2009). In contrast, effective structures of employee representation may provide a degree of procedural justice and also underpin informal resolution processes (Saundry et al. 2011). Therefore, outcomes of individual disputes are subject to processes of negotiation and renegotiation (Edwards and Whitston 1989) and conditioned by what Edwards (2000) calls the politics of the management of labour.

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