

# “Conflict in organizations: the role of routine”

## AUTHORS

Peter Kesting  
Remigiusz Smolinski  
Ian Speakman

## ARTICLE INFO

Peter Kesting, Remigiusz Smolinski and Ian Speakman (2012). Conflict in organizations: the role of routine. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 10(2)

## RELEASED ON

Friday, 06 July 2012

## JOURNAL

"Problems and Perspectives in Management"

## FOUNDER

LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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Peter Kesting (Denmark), Remigiusz Smolinski (France), Ian Speakman (France)

## Conflict in organizations: the role of routine

### Abstract

The goal of this conceptual paper is to apply the insights of recent routine research in the area of conflict and conflict management. As a result, the authors identify four different types of conflict sources that are rooted in routines and the specific difficulties connected with their change: the repetitive character of routine, disagreement over the “validity” of the existing routines, disagreement concerning the definition of new targets, and resistance towards change processes. Further the authors point to the inherent tendency to routinize conflict management strategies and the risks that are associated with this process. As a result, this paper offers new insights into the causes and structure of conflicts triggered by change processes as well as into the management of repetitive conflicts.

**Keywords:** conflict, routine, organization, conflict management.

**JEL Classification:** M10.

### Introduction

To date there has been little research on routine applied to the analysis of organizational conflicts. This paper proposes that routine is an important element of organizational conflicts for two key reasons. Firstly, irrespectively of its potential to prevent conflicts by coordinating organizational acts (Nelson and Winter, 1982), routine, its characteristics, its persistence and the difficulties connected with its change could be considered to be a potential source of task, affective, and process conflicts within organizations. Secondly, routine is also relevant in conflict resolution since it simplifies processes and improves individual as well as collective conflict resolution abilities. However, at the same time routinization might bring about conflict strategies that are not optimally adapted to the setting where the potential risks and dangers are overlooked.

The basic assumption of this paper is that there are valuable (but so far unutilized) insights in routine research that improve our understanding of conflict and conflict management. In the next two sections we review the literature on routine and conflict before we establish a connection between both. Additionally, we investigate, the influence of routine on conflict management strategies within the organization.

This is a conceptual paper and as such does not present any new empirical data or evidence but does outline the underlying structure of the phenomena. Knowledge of this structure enables researchers and practitioners to go beyond isolated theoretical statements (that are typically subject of empirical investigations), while understanding the ‘big picture’ and all relevant coherences. As Mannix (2003, p. 543) pointed out so nicely in her editor’s comments: “The field of conflict and conflict resolution began with a strong theoretical focus. ... In the last decade or so, however, the balance seems to have shifted overwhelmingly in favor of the

empirical. ... In any case, I would argue that there are several advantages to a return to theory. ... Theory can give scholars a roadmap – a direction for what empirical journey to take.” Therefore this paper focuses primarily on the logical structure of the investigated phenomena drawing on the literature streams concerned with routine, conflict and conflict management.

### 1. Routine

There have been some discussions on how, precisely, routine can be conceptualized and defined. Currently, the most acknowledged approach is perhaps that of Pentland and Feldman, suggesting that routines can be interpreted as ‘generative systems that produce repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent action carried out by multiple participants’ (Pentland and Feldman, 2008, p. 236). This definition fits well with the insights provided in this paper, since organizational conflicts typically relate to interdependent actions carried out by multiple actors. Moreover, the distinction between the ostensive aspect (the abstract pattern) and the actual performance (the specific action) of a routine (Pentland and Feldman, 2008, p. 241) provides a very useful foundation for a more precise conceptualization of conflict sources since conflicts can be explained by contradictions within and between these two aspects.

As Simon (1947) has argued, the existence of powerful routines is particularly vital for complex organizational settings, simply because these settings cannot be controlled by deliberate planning or rational decision making. In this sense, routine can be understood as a strategy for dealing with the given bounds of human rationality. When repeatedly facing the same or a very similar situations, it is rational not to waste limited planning resources to ‘re-invent the wheel,’ but to fall back to previous solutions which have proven to be successful. Routine researchers agree that repetitiveness is vital for the development of routine to ensure the ‘fit’ of the previous solutions to current problems (Pentland and Rueter, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996).

The implication is that routine is an important factor in (the management of) conflict within the organization since it changes the actions adopted in four key respects. Firstly and foremost, routine reduces planning necessities (Simon, 1947; Gersick and Hackman, 1990). This is exactly the core of routine. Instead of establishing new solutions, decision makers can just use the existing ones. In this sense, routine represents nothing but 'the way things have always worked' in a given setting and planning is reduced to minor adaptations and corrections. By their very nature, routine activities are hence not creative, but repetitive. Secondly, with repetition, routines tend to become increasingly efficient. This 'learning curve' effect is not an insight of routine research, but a phenomenon that has been discovered much earlier (Arrow, 1962; Argote, 1999). With repetition, agents continuously learn how to find better solutions and avoid mistakes. Consequently, best practice solutions are only developed gradually through repetition and not once for all. Thirdly and closely related, with repetition, the agents' uncertainty regarding the process and outcome of an act tends to decrease (North, 1990). With repetition, agents become increasingly familiar with the act and the setting in which it is undertaken. Most importantly, they can observe the complete course of decision making, action taking and the outcome. As a consequence, fundamental uncertainty gradually turns into calculable risk. Finally, with repetition the effectiveness of routines tends to decrease (Simon, 1947). This is the 'flip side' of the coin. Best practice by definition means absence of planning therefore adapting an act requires abandoning previous best practice rules and looking for a new solution. Consequently, one core characteristic is that routines are not always perfectly adapted to changes in the environment, but incorporate the environment in which they have been previously developed. Therefore, with repetition acts become increasingly automated and sub-conscious (Winter, 1986; Nightingale, 2003) and hence less controllable. However, the world is not stable and an organization's environment changes over time. As a result previously developed routines might gradually fail to 'fit' to a changing environment (Betsch et al., 1999).

The resulting view of action taking can be characterized as an 'asymmetric flux'. On the one hand, there is the malicious safety of routine; on the other hand, there is the complex and uncertain world outside. Due to the ever changing environment it is vital to adapt and question existing routines from time to time. The outcome of non-routine acts is fundamentally uncertain and it is therefore not always clear when is the right time to question and

abandon the existing routines. Facing this situation, it is not surprising that psychological research has found some biases in human behavior to favor the status quo even in situations where changing would have a more favorable outcome (Bazerman, 1998). The intrinsic link between routine and conflict is that routine changes behavior and social interaction in particular with regard to the asymmetry between continuation and change and the resulting path dependence. Against this background, change always requires involved agents to abandon the relative safety of existing routines. Given that conflict can be considered to be an inherent condition of social interaction (Pondy, 1992) requiring wide and varied behavioral skills in its management, it follows that routine can also have an impact upon the behavioral strategies adopted when handling conflict within the organization. However, before establishing the links between routines and conflicts let us first consider the nature of conflict within the organization.

## 2. Conflict within the organization

Conflict has been defined in many ways, as the process which begins when one individual or groups of individuals feels negatively affected by another individual or group (Thomas, 1992) or the individual perception that two parties have aspirations which cannot be achieved simultaneously (Putnam and Pool, 1987). These definitions are dependent upon both parties having some degree of interdependence and that the incompatibility or opposition is perceived by both parties. Within organizations both individuals and working groups where there are interdependent relationships, may experience conflict related to some degree of negative interdependence, tendencies to differentiate from the group and personal values, competition over scarce resources, role ambiguity and power differentials (Deutsch, 1973; Greenberg, 1993). Conflict in the organizational context refers to the situations which arise when two or more people working within the same organization perceive differences in beliefs, values or goals which impact on their ability to work together and impedes their performance (Jameson, 1999). When occurring within teams or groups, this interpersonal conflict has been defined as an individual's perceptions of incompatibilities, differences in views or interpersonal incompatibility (Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003).

Summarizing research investigating the nature of conflict within the organization, three distinct types of conflict are identified. Affective conflict, associated with the people involved and their interpersonal incompatibilities, the way they feel about the group (Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Task conflict which relates to the issues and work in-

volved (Deutsch, 1973; Reid et al., 2004), where there are disagreements between the group members over the details of the tasks being performed, viewpoints, ideas and methods, it is what the actors know and understand about their roles (Jehn, 1995). Process conflict which centers on the strategies and resource allocation involved, the 'stage' on which the individuals within the organization act, that is the wider influences over which the individuals may have less control (Jehn, and Chatman, 2000). Adding yet another dimension to the perceived nature of conflict within the organization, it has also been suggested that these conflict types are not manifest in isolation, rather all these conflict types comprise any one conflict episode (Euwema et al., 2003; Jehn and Chatman, 2000, Speakman, 2009; Speakman and Ryals, 2010) where any conflict episode has multiple components with different proportions of each conflict type, making any conflict episode unique (Jehn, 1997a; Speakman and Ryals, 2010).

Alongside the research focused on exploring conflict typology further attention has been given to understanding the effects each type of conflict may have on individual and team performance (Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Bandersky, 2003; De Dreu and Weigart, 2003; De Witt and Greer, 2008). This research stream suggests that conflict within the organization can have both functional and dysfunctional effects upon team and individual performance (Bradford, Stringfellow and Weitz, 2004; Jehn, 1997b) and can be perceived and felt in different ways by different actors experiencing the conflict episode (Jehn and Chatman, 2000). Where conflict is defined as the process which begins when one person or group feels negatively affected by another (Thomas, 1992) the perceived obstructions to one party achieving their goals can easily be interpreted negatively. De Dreu (1997) proposed that negative perception can create the desire for individuals to avoid conflict episodes rather than focus on managing the situation, where the suppression or avoidance of conflict leading ultimately has a negative effect on team or individual performance. These resulting negatively perceived conflicts can lead to an increase in tension and result in antagonism between team members leading to the team not focusing on their objectives (Deutsch, 1973; Saavedra, Earley, Wall Jr., and Nolan, 1986, and Van Dyne, 1993). All this negatively has the long term effect of stimulating groupthink, routinizing conflict management behavior and while stifling creativity and the desire to change.

Generally this degree of negative interdependence is where one party wins at the expense of the other and

where conflict is viewed most negatively (Janssen, Van de Vliert, and Veenstra, 1999).

In contrast, another stream of conflict management theory suggests conflict can also have a positive effect group or individual performance where the best route to this positively perceived outcome is through effective management and stimulation rather than avoidance or suppression (De Dreu, 1997). Here the conflict leads to individuals being more creative, seeking different aspects to achieve objectives which ultimately lead to the mitigation of groupthink. Jehn (1995) suggested that task and issue based, cognitive conflict can therefore have a positive effect on team performance. Individuals and groups who experience cognitive conflict tend to have a greater understanding of their objectives and are therefore able to make more constructive decisions in dealing with conflicts as they arise (Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Moreover Schultz-Hardt et al. (2002) suggested that groups made better decisions where they started in disagreement rather than agreement where high positive interdependence or an agreeable outcome for both parties (the win, win), leads to the conflict episode being viewed much more positively (Janssen et al., 1999).

With this positive view of conflict and the recognition that there needs to be a certain degree of conflict to stimulate the best performance and avoid groupthink it is vital that the nature of any conflict and the role of routine is fully understood more specifically the role routine plays on the outcome of any conflict encountered within the organization.

In summary, we have considered three research streams covering conflict within the organization, the definition and conceptualization of the nature of the conflict encountered, the classification of conflict types, and the exploration of the implications of conflicts within the organization. This paper now takes one step further and considers routine both as a potential source of conflict and a potential mitigating factor in the management of conflict.

### **3. Routine as a potential source of conflict**

According to March and Simon (1958) routine has a coordinating and motivating function for organizational processes that prevents conflicts. Nelson and Winter (1982, p. 110) even go so far as to characterize routine as truce "between the supervisor and those supervised at every level of organizational hierarchy". There is similarly a truce in the struggle for advancement, power, and perquisites among high level executives' (a more recent investigation of the explanation power of the truce concept has

been given by Zbaracki and Bergen, 2010). Although we do agree with this statement, in this paper we argue that routine *also* has the potential to generate new conflicts (which is basically the case after the truce has been violated). These conflicts ultimately result from the tension between repetitiveness and tradition, on the one hand, and the (perceived) necessity for change, on the other. In this paper, routine is discussed as a potential source of conflicts in four ways.

Firstly, conflicts can be caused by the repetitive nature of routine itself. High job routinization implies a low individual development and also often career potential. Typically, this has a negative effect on motivation and leads to stress and frustration. These negative emotions may increase the tension in interpersonal relationships within the organization which in turn might escalate in form of overt affective conflicts. Hanlon (1981) described this phenomenon in the context of job satisfaction and his model was supported by extensive empirical research (Davis, 1971; Loher et al., 1985; Rousseau, 1977). There is however also empirical evidence which indicates that this phenomenon is not universal and that there are individuals whose perceived satisfaction and well being is positively influenced by routinized and repetitive work (Turner and Miclette, 1962). Increased level of dissatisfaction with a routinized job, decreased motivation and high level of stress might raise tension in the organizations' interpersonal relationships and increase the probability of rise and escalation of affective conflicts. Against this background, our first proposition is the following.

*P1: An increasing level of job routinization leads to an increase in the number of affective conflicts within an organization.*

These conflicts are considered to be affective since they do not result from concrete disagreements, but from an unspecified dissatisfaction, the way individuals 'feel' about the situation. They are considered to be dysfunctional since they potentially disturb processes, but do not stimulate creativeness or mitigate 'groupthink.' However, it can be expected that P1 only applies above a certain level of job routinization. There are some indications that below this level, job routinization is mostly positively associated with security and cognitive efficiency (De Dreu, 1997).

The second group of conflicts is grounded in the disagreements over the validity of the existing routines. Already Pentland and Feldman (2008) have argued that the ostensive aspect of a routine is not necessarily shared. Accordingly, conflicts can be

caused by different perceptions of the performance of an existing routine in relation to its ostensive aspect, i.e. by different opinions about if the routine is still running smoothly or not. Here relevant insights can be drawn from the path dependence and inertia literature. Firstly, path dependence means nothing more than that the past matters for the future (David, 1985; Arthur, 1989). However, there are also some indications that path dependence causes self-enforcing processes which lead to a dynamic of persistence (Burgelman, 2002; Helfat, 1994). This is particularly the case when past routines have been performed very successfully. In this case, 'such self-reinforcing' processes may establish strategic paths which are prone to dramatically narrowing the scope of strategic management. In the worst case a specific orientation becomes locked, that is, any other strategic alternative is excluded (Schreyögg and Kliesch-Eberl, 2007). Task conflicts might arise when the observable performance of (formerly successful) existing routines experiences a clear decline and the 'establishment' gets increasingly challenged by critics or 'devil's advocates.' This situation very much resembles the revolutionary attack on an established research paradigm, as described by Kuhn (1962). This leads to our next research proposition.

*P2: A decreasing performance of previously highly efficient and effective routines leads to increasing task conflicts relating to the validity of the existing routines.*

It is, therefore, expected that the challenge often stems from a 'newcomer' who has a fresh view on things and recognizes the potential in new routines which the 'blinded' insiders do not see having been subjected to 'groupthink.' Conflicts over the validity of existing routines are referred to as task conflicts since they are concerned goals of the individuals involved and the activities carried out to achieve them. These conflicts have a functional aspect since they might prevent organizations from abandoning the existing routines lightheartedly and overlooking their strengths and advantages (and the difficulties or costs of change).

The third type of conflict connected with routine are the conflicts concerning the definition of new objectives and establishing new routines once the existing organizational routines that have been considered ineffective. In terms of Pentland and Feldman (2008), this type of conflict results from differences regarding the ostensive aspect of the future routine.

Here research insights about conflicts in teams apply, according to which an individual's priorities, assumptions about future events, and understanding of the alternatives is influenced by their functional

background, prior training, and experiences (Wiersema and Bantel, 1992). When considering new strategic paths, differences in individual backgrounds increase the possibility of disagreements over the potential methods for task accomplishment (Goyal et al., 2008; Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Pelled, 1996) since different individuals will see issues and opportunities from their own vantage point (Eisenhardt et al., 1997). Therefore, because of these differences, it is suggested that subgroups could disagree with each other over resource allocation within the team, and place their own specific tasks over those of the larger team resulting in a type of process conflict (Goyal et al., 2008). These insights particular apply to the establishment of new routines for three reasons. Firstly, these necessary decisions are usually made in teams. Secondly, they have a high impact on (and matter for different ideas about) future strategic paths. Thirdly, they leave the solid ground of the familiar routine and expose the firm to the complexity of the so-called 'open world' (Savage, 1954) in that decisions are rather driven by beliefs and intuition than by rational calculation. Against this background, our third set of propositions is the following.

*P3a: An increasing number of ineffective organizational routines and resulting redefinition of organizational objectives increase the frequency of task and process conflicts.*

*P3b: Diversity of group members increases task and process conflicts with respect to the definition of new objectives and establishing new routines once the existing organizational routines have been considered ineffective.*

These conflicts can be highly functional as they lead to a critical discourse about different opportunities and force different individuals or groups to back up their position with good arguments and analyses (De Dreu, 1997; Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Fourthly, conflicts can result from resistance to routine change processes. This is perhaps the most intensively researched type of conflicts about routines (Lawrence, 1954; Rumelt, 1995; Strebel, 1994; Sull, 1999; Waddell & Sohal, 1998). Every radical change of the established routines results in a devaluation of

knowledge, namely the specific knowledge necessary for efficient execution of this very routine. Although in a slightly different context, Schumpeter (1942) has coined the famous expression of 'creative destruction' for this phenomenon. The specific knowledge to perform the existing (and now obsolete) routine is based on the competence of individuals and the devaluation of this knowledge is usually associated with damages in prestige, influence and rank of these individuals (Lawrence, 1954). Moreover, every major change of the established routine results in additional burdens in the transformation stage (in particular for planning and creating new best practice solutions). These burdens are usually distributed unequally and can result in a significant increase of some individuals' workload. Both, the devaluation of individual competences and the additional (and unequally distributed) burdens from transformation can make individuals resist changes and hence become a potential source for affective, task and/or process conflicts in an organization.

*P4: The more developed the existing routine has been and the more the decision leads away from the existing routine, the more affective, target and process conflicts with respect to resistance will arise.*

Resistance causes perhaps the broadest variety of conflicts. These conflicts, however, can be functional when they prevent the implementation of suboptimal decisions.

As a result, it can be argued that routine is particularly relevant for the analysis of the evolution of conflicts connected with change or absence thereof. Routine offers here a foundation for a much more rigorous understanding of the conflict structure. It can be shown that routines as such can become a source of conflict, but that conflicts can also arise from specific constellations that are inherent to routines and their change. Table 1 summarizes the different conflict sources discussed in this paper. Having considered routine as a potential source of conflict we now move on to analyze the implications of applying current research on routine in the area of conflict management.

Table 1. Overview of different conflict sources with respect to routine

Conflict source	Cause	Conflict type	Impact
Conflicts routed in the boredom of performing the best practice	Repetitiveness of the existing routine	Affective conflict	Mostly dysfunctional
Disagreement over the 'validity' of existing routines	Asymmetric flux	Task conflict	Some functional aspects
Disagreement concerning the definition of new objectives	Complexity of the open world outside the familiar routine, diversity	Task and process conflict	Strong functional aspects
Resistance to change	Asymmetric flux	Affective, task and process conflict	Weak functional aspects

#### 4. Conflict management

Conflict management can be defined as the processes and behaviors a person typically engages in response to perceived inter-personal conflict in order to achieve their objectives (Thomas, 1976). Recent research has considered three different approaches; the 'one-best-way' perspective (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984), the contingency or situational perspective (Thomas, 1992), and the complexity perspectives which include the temporal complexity, simultaneous complexity (Munduate et al., 1999), the sequential or conglomerated perspective and a sequential contingency perspective (Olekalns, Smith, and Walsh, 1996; Van de Vliert et al., 1999; Euwema et al., 2003; Speakman and Ryals, 2010).

Early conflict management research suggests that individuals have to some extent a behavioral predisposition (or a reliance upon previously established effective routines), to the way in which they approach conflict suggesting that the manner in which these individuals handle conflict remains consistent across conflict episodes (Sternberg and Soriano, 1984). From this perspective the most constructive solution is considered to be collaborating or problem solving since it is always positively interdependent having a joint best outcome and creates the perception of a functional conflict situation (De Drue, 1997). However when a more aggressive, competitive, negatively interdependent approach is taken the results tend to be perceived more negatively (Janssen et al., 1999) as dysfunctional conflict situations.

Thomas (1992) proposed that any conflict management behavior can only be effective in any given situation, what is appropriate in one situation will not be appropriate in another, the contingency perspective, which in turn fits with what has been said with regard to the role of routine. The 'one best way' and contingency perspectives fail to consider that individuals can frequently change their behavior across and during any conflict episodes they experience based upon any previous encounters with conflict and any 'best practices' learned during those experiences (Medina et al., 2004; Munduate et al., 1999; Van de Vliert et al., 1997). Therefore, the complexity perspectives on conflict management, argue that any reaction to a conflict episode consists of multiple behavioral components rather than one single conflict management behavior which moves beyond the traditional two dimensions of Blake and Moutons (1970) management grid (Euwema et al., 2003; Van de Vliert et al., 1999; Speakman and Ryals, 2010).

In these complexity perspective, using a combination of collaborating, avoiding, competing, compro-

promising and accommodating behaviors while encountering conflict episodes are considered to be the norm rather than the exception (Van de Vliert et al., 1997; Speakman and Ryals, 2010). Research applying the complexity perspectives to the management of conflict within the organization has to date adopted one of four different approaches. Firstly, the temporal perspective considers the behavioral phases through which the participants of a conflict episode pass, exploring the point at which behavioral style is changed and the subsequent effect on the outcome (Olekalns, Smith and Walsh, 1996). Secondly, the simultaneous perspective explores the different combinations of behaviors which can be used during a conflict encounter and the resulting outcome (Munduate et al., 1999). Thirdly, the sequential or conglomerated perspective explores multiple dimensions of the different modes of conflict management behavior; how they are combined and at what point they change during the interaction (Janssen et al., 1999). Finally, Speakman (2009) adds the sequential contingency perspective for the management of multiple simultaneous conflicts which considers different conflict episodes of unique type and composition, occurring simultaneously rather than as discrete isolated incidents where the adopted strategy is contingent upon a number of mitigating factors for each conflict episode.

This paper now takes one step further in considering these perspectives and suggests that routine has an important role in conflict management and self-resolution.

#### 5. Increasing routinization of conflict management

An important precondition for the development of routine in conflict management is that conflicts are repetitive or at least have repetitive elements so that best practice solutions can be developed. Kesting and Smolinski (2007) have argued that two dimensions of repetitiveness can be generally distinguished in negotiations: substance and relationship.

Such repetitiveness exists when there is indeed only 'one best way' to deal with conflicts. In this case, it is highly recommendable to build up a collaborating and problem solving conflict management best practice that can be applied universally in conflicts. In contrast, if the contingency perspective is correct that conflicts are situational so that any conflict management behavior can only be effective in any one given situation; best practice solutions only make sense when situations are repetitive. This can be the case with respect to people when the same individuals or groups within an organization are repeatedly involved in different conflicts and with respect to substance when conflicts arise in an organization repeatedly over the same issues. Examples can be easily found for both so that a

routinization of conflict management also makes sense in the contingency perspective to a certain extent. In the complexity perspective, best practice solutions are also basically consistent with the 'possible behaviors' and their effects, but if we follow Mundunate et al. (1999) their validity is highly restricted by context factors. All in all it can be concluded that the relevance of routine for conflict management depends on the heterogeneity of conflicts with respect to people and substance. This leads to the research proposition.

*P5a: With an increasing repetition of conflicts or elements thereof, conflict management becomes increasingly routinized.*

However, it is important to be aware that increasing routinization as such does not improve the ability to resolve conflicts; it does not even cause that the uncertainty regarding the negative impact of conflicts decreases. To the contrary, both exclusively result from increased knowledge that agents can acquire with repetition (the 'learning-curve effect') and are only slowed down by routinization. Instead the benefit of routine lies in decreasing the deliberation effort necessary to resolve conflicts. With best practice rules, proven solutions are at hand that can shortcut extensive planning and decision making. The effect of routine is hence to prevent that organizations are paralyzed by conflicts, which can be extremely important in crisis situations. As outlined above, however, also the potential risk lies at hand: routinized conflict management is not always optimally adapted. Organizations might fail to recognize relevant changes in the environment and decide for sub-optimal solutions. Our final research proposition is the following.

*P5b: With increasing routinization, conflict management becomes less adapted to the situation and hence less effective.*

This means that routine next the above described benefits ultimately resulting in increased efficiency also bears the risk of ineffectiveness connected with overlooking the changes in the environment of the conflict setting.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this paper is to call the attention on the recently developed concept of routine and the insights of routine research which so far have not been considered by research into conflict and conflict management. It is proposed that routine indeed has a significant implication upon the evolution of organizational conflict and conflict management research. This makes routine an important aspect in the investigation of organizational conflicts and reflects back on the entire body of existing research on organizational conflict management.

What does the concept of routine specifically contribute to conflict research? The most significant contribution is perhaps in the area of the identification of conflict types and the research into the conflict sources. Here the concept of routine allows to distinguish and specify four different conflict sources. The first source, boredom, has already been well researched. Nevertheless, even at this point, routine enhances our understanding of the structure of the situation. It shows that the development of best practice rules is vital for organizations to cope with complexity and gives insights into how to run and – most of all – how to change best practice rules. Conflicts about the 'validity' of best practice rules have been described by research on path dependence and inertia. The most important contribution of the routine concept is to highlight that these conflicts are necessarily caused by divergent beliefs and inherently can only have a very weak rational basis. This highly affects the way of dealing with them. This insight also applies to the third source, conflicts concerning the definition of new objectives. The fourth conflict source, resistance, is perhaps the most intensively researched one. However, here the routine concept suits to distinguish different rational and irrational layers of causes. Finally, routine research points to the tendency to create best practice rules for conflict management and the risks that are associated with it. This highly relevant phenomenon has not been acknowledged by conflict research so far.

The most important practical implication is a contribution to improved and structured understanding of the conflict potential connected with routine and change initiatives in organizations. Major changes almost always affect existing best practice rules. It is important and valuable for managers to be able to realize where and why conflicts can potentially emerge and to know much more how to deal with conflicts over different beliefs. It is also important for shareholders to understand the managements' tiredness of fighting as a major source for the stagnation of structurally healthy companies. This is particular relevant for current times in that "organizations have increasingly become environments of rapid change" (Manix 2003, p. 543). Another important practical implication is that organizations should be aware about the tendency to routinize their conflict management. They might enjoy its advantages but should also be extremely aware about the risks.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the audience of the Fourth International Biennale on Commercial Negotiation in Paris. However, the responsibility for any errors or omissions rests with the authors.



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