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## ANNOTATION

Holey, Linka M. "From Covert to Overt Interpersonal Conflict: An Exploration of the Role of Cognitive Processes Used by Faculty in Liberal Arts Colleges." PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2012. 162 pp.

Holey began her work with some fictional examples of how the academy is represented, particularly with regard to how interpersonal conflict is dealt with. Her work examined the role played by cognitive processes in interpersonal conflict both as part of the ongoing covert life within departments, but also at the point where the interactions become overt. She used a derived, conceptual framework based on various representations of the phase theory of conflict; and her focus was on the administrator's viewpoint for describing overt and covert faculty conflict. Administrators are typically underprepared to handle the variety and number of conflicts they are forced to face, indicating that more in-depth understanding might help institutions do a better job of addressing the learning of students, research expectations and service to the community if collegial critical exchanges could be handled more effectively.

Holey explored the history of organizational conflict and, based upon it, found the following cross-disciplinary definition: "interpersonal conflict is a disagreement or dispute between two or more parties that involves an individual reaction, a social interaction, and an organizational influence." Interpersonal conflict begins in a covert state and might progress to an overt state (4). A conflict situation involves actual or perceived incompatibility in relationship, and the incompatibility can be either in the goals to be achieved or the means to achieve them. Also noted was the fact that the ways conflict situations are handled and resolved impact the emergence and resolution of future conflicts (5). Aspects that can provide fuel for conflict are found within physical, social and issue contexts. Also noted within this review was the essential ingredient of conflict, which is the interdependence of all parties. "A destructive conflict is one that ends with harm to all parties involved, whereas a constructive resolution results in overall well-being. These polar opposites represent the ends of a continuum along which most conflicts can be placed" (5).

Regarding the role of faculty in interpersonal conflict, Holey noted that the nature of academic work and the setting of the academy provide fertile territory for disagreements among faculty. Some factors contributing to these cultural aspects (based upon Berryman-Fink) were expectations of shared governance, high levels of autonomy, longevity based on tenure and a propensity for critical thinking and debate (36), as well as Crews and West's structural loyalties to departments, diversity of roles and peer-based supervision. Also noted within the literature were cases of lack of collegiality, competition for resources, personality clashes, bullying, and personal disrespect in the form of incivility (36-37). Mediating all of this as "a dove of peace intervening among warring factions" (Tucker & Byron, 37), deans were seen to serve as

arbitrators in many of these conflicts working toward maintaining the integrity of the learning environment by creating an environment where positive conflict can happen.

Holey developed a conceptual framework of conflict situations to set the context of her work and applied a set of nine cognitive processes to the data. Each of these is situated within one of the primary perspectives. The data were analyzed and compared to this framework and the attendant processes. From “attribution theory” (individual), the identified processes were: (i) cognitive dissonance, (ii) social inference, and (iii) predication of outcomes. From “equity theory” (social interactional), the processes were: (iv) assessment of status, (v) perception of self-interest, (vi) evaluation of fairness, and (vii) perception of inequality. From “interactional theory” (organizational influences): (viii) assessment of congruence with departmental norms and culture and (ix) awareness of congruence with institutional mission and values.

Methods: The research examined cognitive processes used by faculty while engaged in interpersonal conflicts with other faculty members as described by administrators. The research question was: What roles do cognitive processes play in overt and covert interpersonal conflicts between faculty members at private liberal arts colleges? Five institutions similar in size, mission, and structure were located. These five non-profit liberal arts schools were student centered and focused on underserved populations; and each had administrators with the title of dean. They were dispersed throughout the United States. Sixteen participant deans with a minimum of three years of experience were comprised of eight males and eight females from the disciplinary areas of arts and sciences, business, education, engineering and nursing.

A well-structured interview protocol was pilot tested and used. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. Thirty-two cases of conflict were analyzed, generally moving from overt to covert as the former were thought to be more easily identified. Prompts from the conceptual framework and cognitive processes were used to follow up and obtain greater depth of description. Holely then pushed deeper and asked the deans to compare the two types of conflict (overt and covert). Patterns were compared and contrasted and quotes from participants were placed in each cell to represent the sub-themes. An example of a covert case involved the placement of freshman students in an English class and how this placement was determined. Personnel-related changes resulting from department elimination represented one of the overt cases.

Results: Within the “individual reaction perspective” from “attribution theory,” cognitive dissonance, social inferences and anticipating or predicting a resulting outcome or behavior were found in both covert and overt cases. Cognitive dissonance was found to be the foundation of all faculty-to-faculty conflict, and it was noted that this does not usually lead to overt conflict. Social inferences were both positive and negative often going on behind the scenes. Prediction of outcomes was harder to identify for Holely as most of the disagreements represented professional disagreements rather than personal ones.

From the “social interaction perspective” and “equity theory,” assessment of status, perception of self-interest, evaluation of fairness and perception of inequality were the four cognitive processes examined. All of these were present to a degree within the data. Perception of self-interest characterized most cases of overt conflict. In covert cases, the perception of self-interest was a

factor in retaining the conflict in its covert state. All cases represented an element of the evaluation of fairness (113). Overt cases centered mostly on resource allocation. Faculty looked to one another and to mediators regarding the atmosphere of equity within cases of covert conflict. A perception of inequity and a related distress-oriented response was reported in most overt conflict situations, but this was less obvious in covert ones.

From the “organizational influence perspective” and “interactional theory,” the two cognitive processes were assessment of congruence with departmental norms and value and awareness of congruence with institutional mission and values. The descriptions of these processes in all cases of overt and covert conflict were distinctive. The department’s milieu influenced faculty behavior tempering or exacerbating it. Faculty that engaged in overt conflict used congruence with institutional mission and values to justify their positions as well as having overt conflict regarding the interpretation of these things. In covert conflicts, this cognitive process was minimally evident; and Holey suggested this might be related to who remains at the institution. In this, she seems to be suggesting those that don’t fit don’t last, describing this as “the ultimate awareness of person-situation fit” (125).

The dean’s perspective regarding differences between overt and covert conflict pointed to strong emotions as antecedent to overt conflict and personality traits involved in both types of conflict. Social inference was referred to by the deans relating to overt conflict and not covert. The presence of self-interest was present for the deans in both covert and overt cases. The assessment of the congruence with departmental norms and culture was more prevalent in covert conflict. Based upon the responses from the deans, the role played by institutional mission and vision was not a factor in either overt or covert cases. Holey suggested this indicated that faculty more likely took their cues from departmental norms than from institutional ones.

Discussion: In addition to the identified nine cognitive processes, Holey identified three basic antecedent conditions that affect individual faculty members in their conflictual interactions. These were: (i) the presence of a change from a usual order, (ii) a strong emotion involved in the change situation, and (iii) the personality traits of the faculty. She found differences in their use of cognitive processes between overt and covert instances. Overt conflicts came from cognitive dissonance and were sparked by social inferences regarding intentions. These inferences indicated the intent to force a perspective or action upon the other; and faculty members were then no longer able to predict the outcome of the disagreement. Self-interest and a sense of fairness were present in overt conflicts but were moderated to an extent by the milieu of the department. Distress based on perceived inequity was frequently expressed in overt conflict, particularly if students had been impacted by the inequity. Faculty focused their cognitive assessment of congruence with organizational culture and norms primarily at the departmental level and usually in negative terms. Cognitive dissonance was also a basic factor in covert conflict; but the social inference component, which had frequently ignited overt conflict, was not present. Faculty members were able to predict outcomes of covert conflict resulting from cognitive dissonance. Holey noted that this ability might be a factor in keeping conflicts covert.

The perception of self-interest and evaluation of fairness were aspects of every covert interaction, yet the perception of inequity was not expressed in covert instances. Faculty assessment of congruence with departmental norms and institutional mission and vision had a

positive influence on the conflict situation as if to suggest “that the covert state is the preferred situational value for expressions of faculty disagreements” (133). Holey suggested that her work changes the perspective of conflict as a situation, to one of conflict as a conceptual process. Her revisions to the conceptual framework illustrates conflict as the combination of individual cognitive processes set within the context of social interactions that have organizational influences. Her expanded view indicates that cognitive dissonance assessment of status, perception of self-interest, and evaluation of fairness all share roles leading to overt and covert conflicts. One’s being able to predict the likely outcome of a conflict situation serves to maintain it in the covert state, but a leap to social inference is associated with overt conflict. The roles played by the cognitive processes associated with fairness, self-interest and status are similar in overt and covert situations; but the perception of inequity leads to overt conflict. Congruence within faculty’s perspectives of the norms, culture, vision and values allows conflict to remain covert. Lack of this congruence was seen to elicit overt conflict.

Finally, Holey suggested that her research implies that civility and a culture of civility among faculty should be encouraged, even fostered. Academic leaders need to understand the processes of conflict and be prepared to work with them. She points out that effective teaching and learning involve a commitment to the development of a whole unique and gifted person and that faculty are key players in this process. As such, they model a life of inquiry, an openness to alternatives that suggests a need for balancing conflictual positions. “The nobility of the faculty calling needs to be supported by a dynamic and caring community of learners. This research presents an approach to interpersonal conflict that is based upon understanding the persons involved, taking time to think through their perspectives, motivations, interests and emotions. As faculty demonstrate respect for each other they model respect for their students creating a cycle of authentic lifelong learning” (141).

Holey suggested that further work could be done on the nine cognitive processes using experimental methods and controlled study. Theoretical perspectives such as Jungian or Freudian might provide different perspectives of individuals, and social interaction could be viewed by game theorists. In concluding, Holey summarized her intent “to contribute to developing an appreciation for differences as represented in conflict situations in order to create a milieu of mutual respect around a common mission – the essence of excellent teaching, research and academic administration” (146). This intention was realized.