

Experience of Social Workers in Dealing with Organizational Conflict

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the descriptions of experience made by social workers from different countries regarding workplace conflict and how workplace conflict is dealt with in terms of strategies and methods of resolving it. To address this topic the conflict theory of Lewis Coser is used. The study is conducted by the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews, where the experiences of five social workers in managerial positions are examined. Three of these interviewees were from Sweden and two were from Russia. The results of the study show that the social workers describe their experiences and knowledge about organizational conflict in different ways and to different extents. Both the Russian and Swedish interviewees seemed to be familiar with workplace conflict and the use of different methods and strategies when dealing and preventing conflict at the workplace. The interviewees acknowledge the impact of management and leadership regarding both cause of conflict and the resolving of it.

Key words: organizational conflict, social work, mediation, management of conflict, resolution of organizational conflict

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1. Introduction

Conflicts are an integral part of human relationships, the reality of human lives and affect on all spheres of human activity. Workplace conflicts have been prominently displayed in the public's eye for centuries, in all kinds of organisations and institutions globally. In the profession of social work practice the impact of workplace conflict has been acknowledged by different scientific researchers like for example Hafford-Letchfield (2009). She mentions workplace conflict in social work organisations in terms of stress management, bullying, aggressions and violence. According to Lewis Coser (1957, pp. 200-201):

Each social system contains elements of strain and of potential conflict; if in the analysis of the social structure of a system these elements are ignored, if the adjustment of patterned relations is the only focus of attention, then it is not possible to anticipate basic social change.

According to Edelman (1993) human beings spend a big part of their lives in workplaces: seven to eight hours every day - five days a week. Edelman estimates that people who have a work spend around one hundred thousand hours of their lives working. A big part of this time is spent working with other people sharing interests, activities, commitment, disagreements and conflicts (ibid, 1993). According to Sweeney and McFarlin (2002), managers in social work organisations spend up to 20 percent of their time dealing with organisational conflict, which is equivalent to about one day every week.

Different views on conflict at the workplace

An increase of conflict in workplaces can create different physical, mental and organizational dysfunctional ties such as: stress, anxiety and illnesses (Edelman, 1993). When conflict occurs in workplaces, employees can react to it in different ways - either by acknowledging the conflict and resolving it or by avoiding it. For example, according to Peng and Tjosvold (2011, p.1031) a popular reaction to conflict in China and other Asian countries is avoiding conflict. The authors (ibid, p.1032) states that previous research has argued that:

Chinese people, as collectivists who emphasize group welfare, avoid conflict to maintain their valued relationships; in contrast, Western people, as individualists who value personal achievement, are willing to confront others to further their interests.

Another example from the topic of workplace conflict can also be seen in the United States, where this topic is very common in organizations (Sweeney & McFarlin, 2002). The authors further states that the most common causes for workplace conflict seems to be interpersonal or organizational causes, which both are important aspects to consider because they can serve as guides for diagnosing when and why conflict may get out of hand, before it becomes problematic for the organization at large. It is estimated that managers in the United States spend up to 20 percent of their time dealing with conflict, where conflict are considered both positive as well as negative (ibid, 2002). There are times when conflict can be helpful and beneficial to the organization because it can start different processes and help to renew the work-environment. For example, conflict can bring out into the open what has otherwise been ignored. Conflict can also result in considerations of new ideas and methods which can lead to positive changes and better work-environment (ibid, 2002).

So, organisational conflict occurs within organisation and has both negative and positive impact at the work process.

This raises the questions about how organisational conflict in social work is dealt with in different contexts and how social workers describe their experience of organisational conflict at their workplace.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine the descriptions of experience made by social workers from different countries regarding workplace conflict and how workplace conflict is dealt with in terms of strategies and methods of resolving it.

The research questions are:

- How do social workers describe their experiences of conflict at their workplace?

- What strategies and methods do social workers use when resolving conflict at their workplace?

2. Previous research on organizational conflicts

2.1 Introduction

The field of conflict is partly, or to full extent, touched by many researchers. In social science, there are many different views on the nature of conflict and its social role. Different researchers consider different aspects in the organizational conflict, for example, the influence of the conflict on efficiency of workers, and the role of the leader in the organizational conflict. Even if there are many studies made on organizational conflict at workplace, it is still a subject of interest, because it creates problems for many organizations. To set stage for the aim of the study, the following chapter review literature available on organizational conflict, focusing on defining the concept of organizational conflict, its consequences and what ideas authors put forward in matters of preventing and resolving it. The literature reviewed in this research were retrieved through articles and books found in the data base LIBRIS.

2.2 What is an organizational conflict?

In the literature reviewed, there seems to be a large consensus that organizational conflicts are to be described as misunderstanding and disagreement between two or more groups in organization (Sweeney & McFarlin, 2002; Hatch, 1997; Siddiqui, 2009). Conflicts in workplaces are also described as the friction felt when two individuals or more in the group have a disagreement about some issues (Sweeney & McFarlin, 2002, p.242). This disagreement can exist between two people, a group in a major company (ibid, 2002). The result of conflict often shows through that people get insulted or bullied at, emotions intensifies and results in discord (ibid.) These disagreements among associates (employees) can turn into misunderstandings, these misunderstandings can turn into resentments or fears (ibid, 2002). Hatch (1997, p.234) states that the concept of organizational conflict also can be understood as organizational conflict as “opposition to cooperation, as an open discussion between two or more groups in an organization, reflecting cases in which negative manifestations disrupt cooperation by trust destruction and close communication channels”. This common point of view is supported by Siddiqui (2009): “organizations conflict arises between the employees when their perspectives, values or opinions are disagreeing in relation to the attainment of particular goals or the methods adopted to accomplish them”. In the literature reviewed there are also other understandings of organizational conflict. According to Roloff (1987, p. 496): “organizational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network,

members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization” Pondy (1967, p.296) notes that many researches are interested in the subject of organizational conflict, he underlines that conflict is a social phenomenon and identifies three types among the subunits of format organizations. The units are: “bargaining conflict among the parties to an interest-group relationship, bureaucratic conflict between the parties to a superior-subordinate relationship, and systems conflict among parties to a lateral or working relationship”

Sweeney and McFarlin (2002) define organizational conflict as a condition in which group members have interpersonal clashes characterized by anger, frustration, and other negative feelings. In sum, the most common definition of organizational conflict seems to be the negative relationship between two, three and more employees in organization.

2.3 What are the reasons and consequences of organizational conflicts?

The literature reviewed makes clear that there are many different reasons and consequences of organizational conflicts. Many authors describe that potential and reasons for conflict exists in every organization. For example, Ikeda et.al. (2005, p. 22) notes that: “the potential for conflict exists in every organization”. Sweeney and McFarlin (2002) states that many organizations struggle with chronic patterns of unresolved conflicts at the work place, these conflicts have a huge impact in the functionality of the organization. Gordon (in Ikeda 2005, p.24) cites some reasons for escalation conflict in organizations: “departments grow”, “the increase of emphasis in the financial measures as a tool for motivation for managers and the establishment of different profit”, “the increasing rise of emphasis in functional specialization, politics of promotion and recruiting reinforce the isolation of departments”.

According to the literature reviewed, there seems to be both positive and negative consequences of organizational conflicts. For example, according to Robins (in Ikeda et.al. 2005, p.23) “conflict can provide benefits for innovations and teamwork and can, as a consequence, foster future cooperative acts and build value for diversity”. Siddiqui (2009) sees constructive and destructive function of conflict for organizations, but “organizations conflict arises between the employees when their perspectives, values or opinions are disagreeing in relation to the attainment of particular goals or the methods adopted to accomplish them” and also notes that conflict at the workplace is potentially dangerous and can lead to physical, mental or moral problems of employees.

Other researchers of organizational conflict allocate different types of it. Imazai and Ohbuchi (in Ikeda et.al., 2005) states that: “organizational conflict involves interpersonal conflicts with

colleagues or supervisors, or intergroup conflicts within different sections of an organization here are two essential types of conflict in organizations: vertical and horizontal”. Vertical represents the conflicts between for example employees and management, horizontal represents conflicts between persons working on the same level in the organization.

Also according to Sweeney and McFarlin (2002) there are two different types of work place conflicts: organizational and interpersonal causes. The first type is when people’s actions, behaviors, ideas and decisions relate directly to their work assignments. The second type is when people have difficulties to get along. For example, a cause of argument can be when people have different personalities and different perceptions regarding specific matters. Understanding the range of responses and reactions of the frustrated individual is very complicated. According to Sweeney and McFarlin (2002) this range can appear from mild disappointments which can develop into outrage towards one or more targets.

According to Kaye (1994, p.21): “conflict means opportunity. It gives us reasons not to go on doing the same old things and thinking in the same old ways. Whenever conflicts kick us in the head, it creates an opportunity to exceed our own expectations. Conflicts enhance creativity, personal growth, core of innovations, learning, turning differences into strength, improve communication, develop problem solving skills and adapt the organization to achieve their goal effectively”.

The cost of work place conflicts

According to Denny (2005), conflicts are a major obstacle for productivity, and it creates risks and challenges for the organization and the employees. Denny (2005) also states that when it comes to discrimination cases in the court of the United States, companies spend between 10-50 billion dollars in conflict cases related to work place conflicts. Denny (2005) further emphasizes that the average jury verdict in wrongful termination cases is more than \$640,000 and that companies lose 64 percent of the cases. The average award for a sexual harassment case is \$38,500; however, a recent judgment against Mitsubishi Motors resulted in a \$34 million penalty.

Understanding and dealing with stress

According to Hafford-Letchfield (2007) occupational stress is acknowledged as a crucial factor which contributes to obstacles and difficulties that can affect the professionals and the social work organization. In the profession of social work, 25 percent of the managers reported difficulties and effects which are related to stress. Hafford-Letchfield (2007, p.120-121) also notes

that according to ministerial reports in 2005 from Social Care department in the United Kingdom, there is a high number of absence and sickness in the public sector, all related to the cause of negative stress disorder. Anxiety and depression were estimated to about 30 percent, musculoskeletal disorders were estimated to about 40 percent, violence against staff were estimated to about 14 percent, absence per person every year were estimated to about 16 days and bad performance as a result of physical and mental stress (ibid, 2007).

Definition of stress

According to Hafford-Letchfield (2007) stress can be defined as the different reactions people experience when special excessive demands of pressure are forced to them. The author emphasizes that there are different facts and effects which can affect the coping ability in individuals. These facts are personality, ability of adaption, support, environmental aspects, attitudes, experiences, circumstances and the influence of moderating. According to the British Health and safety Executive (2004), there are six aspects that can identify when stress appears:

Demands - The effect of work aspects, work environment and how the staff deals with it.

Support - How much support and empowerment the staff receive from their manager and their organization.

Control - The capacity and the influence of the staff when they are doing their work assignment.

Rules - The organizations strategy, structure and how they provide staff with guidance and support in conflict aspects.

Relationships - The role of the staff in creating network, communication and interaction to support them to deal with stress and conflicts in the work place.

Change - Creating and developing organizational structure, which can provide the staff with knowledge and strategy in order to change the negative effects of stress.

The cost of stress

The cost of stress is challenging for organizations and their development. According to (Sweeney & McFarlin 2002, p.254):

The U.S. Office of Technology Assessment estimates that stress related illness ends up costing businesses anywhere from \$50 to \$70 billion dollars per year. This includes costs associated with lower productivity, higher absenteeism and turnover, and many other health-related problems such as hypertension, substance abuse, and more.

Bullying at the work place

Bullying is one of the many different and inappropriate forms of behavior, which can occur in the work place. According to Hafford-Letchfield (2007, p.128) the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development states that conflicts in the work place is a result from different personal behaviors, where bullying are defined as:

Bullying at work involves repeated negative actions and practices that are directed at one or more workers. The behaviors are unwelcome to the victim and undertaken in circumstances where the victim has difficulty in defending themselves. Bullying behaviors may be carried out as a deliberate act or unconsciously and cause humiliation, offence and distress to the victim.

How managers in the organization deal with bullying and harassments is very crucial for the development and well-being of the organization. In organizations in the Untied Kingdom bullying are likely to be more caused by men than women. 60 percent of the harassment is related to men, and 40 percent is related to women (ibid, 2007). Managers spend, in average, around five to nine days per year dealing with disciplinary and harassment cases (ibid, 2007). The author further states that bullying appear in the work place in forms of behaviors, such as insults, negative criticism, comments, humiliation, threats, harassments and rejections, which includes the individual in the work environment. This behavior creates imbalance of power, which can be used negatively (ibid, 2007). The reality of work place conflicts includes personal negative effects, which can create impact in the individuals surrounding and create effects, such as family problems, children issues and substance abuse. Organizational factors can be related to management, leadership and budget.

2.4 Conflict in different contexts

Rahim (1994) stated that organizational conflict is handled differently in different countries (and cultures) around the globe. He suggests that there are different strategies and methods used in dealing with organizational conflict in different countries, like for example France, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey. Various social, cultural, and economic forces affect conflict management, managerial styles differ with regard to organizational and interpersonal conflict management, alternative dispute mechanisms are available in each country for the resolution of conflict and general managerial effectiveness can be im-

proved with respect to organizational conflict. To explore how effects of workplace conflict are handled differently in different contexts, Einarsen (2003) describes the concept of bullying. He states that over the last decade different scientific researches have emerged as new fields of study regarding workplace conflict, especially regarding bullying, emotional abuse and harassment at workplace. The European tradition applies the concept of mobbing or bullying while the American tradition identifies the concept as emotional abuse and mistreatment (ibid, 2003). The author further explains that in addition different research in this field has also started in Australia and South Africa. All these countries work towards developing research and analysis of practice in this field, they aim to document the existence and consequences of workplace conflict identifying by bullying, they also work to develop strategies in order to further explore the causes and investigate different effective approaches which help to manage the problem and offer suggestions for further progress in this important new field (ibid, 2003)

2.5 How can organizational conflicts be solved?

Many researches, such as for example Peng and Tjosvold (2011) consider different effective ways of resolving conflict at the workplace. Some author's strategies of resolution of conflict have common points, others highlight different perspectives when it comes to conflict resolution. Most of the researchers of social conflict consider negotiation processes and training as the most effective and successful methods in dealing with organisational conflict. When people encounter conflicts, in many cases they tend to compromise, negotiate, engage or pretend to agree (ibid, 2011). For example, Behfar (2007) allocates more or less successful strategies for resolving conflicts. To the more successful ones she attributes: discuss or debate, open communication, compromise or reach consensus and rotating responsibilities. The less successful strategies are according to her: to avoid or ignore, idiosyncratic and vote.

Cram and MacWilliams (s.a) give advice for reducing the cost of conflict by for example, increasing awareness and training and acknowledge conflict honestly. Fisher, Ury & Patton (1991, p.11) treated the negotiation process as a method of reducing organizational conflict. The authors have developed four steps for principled negotiation. Their four steps are: 1) separate the people from the problem; 2) focus on interests rather than positions; 3) generate a variety of options before settling on an agreement; and 4) insist that the agreement is based on objective criteria. These principles have a great impact in managers dealing with organizational conflicts. Baskov (2011, p.150) also notes an important role of social workers in dealing with conflicts and identifies several phases of work for social workers within the conflict: "the preparatory negotiation, out from the conflict, consensus and control over consistent decisions".

Some researches of organizational conflict, for example, Sorokina (2009, p.5) states that right definition of conflict and education can help in resolution of conflict situations: “the first step in understanding the social worker’s problem field of social conflict, the content of the framework of conflict interaction should be the definition of “conflict””. The author also states that, “the task of social workers within the profession is the direction of the conflict in a positive direction, and that its resolution with minimal losses for all participants” (ibid, 2009).

Management systems

The impact of an ineffective management system that deals with conflicts in organization is considered to have a high cost for the organization. The informal culture system in the organization and how managers, leaders and employees deal with conflicts is very crucial for the organizations functionality. Poor conflict management often proves poor skills and poor engagement in the organization. According to different scientific researches many managers deal with conflict in very limited and negative way and they do not understand the positive sides of conflict. For example, Sweeney & McFarlin (2002) state that this effects the organizations development and if the situation is analyzed correctly or not, which affects if the conflict is solved in the most effective way or not.

According to Siddiqui (2009), the resolving of conflict to suggests the technique of persuasion, which is very effective for managers or people with function of manager.

Rahim (2002, p. 206) reviews strategies of conflict management and mentions the theory of conflict management as an important tool for managers in order to resolve organizational conflicts. “Conflict resolution implies reduction, elimination, or termination of conflict” (ibid, p. 207). According to Rahim (2002, p.222) the management of organizational conflict involves the processes: “Learning & Diagnosis - Intervention - Conflict - Effectiveness and Feedback”.

Other opinion about prevention and resolution of conflict is possible to find in dissertation of Khismatullina (2006). Conflict prevention means measures aimed at the prevention of it. Under the resolution of the conflict he understands the mutual activities of the parties to develop mutually acceptable agreements under control - adoption agreements with third parties (ibid, 2006, p. 57).

Many authors, as for example Peng and Tjosvold (2011) mention avoiding like strategies of conflict resolution. Conflict avoiding is the behavior or the activity which most effectively avoids confrontation with other disputants. Peng & Tjosvold (2011) identifies four different avoiding strategies:

Yielding - a common strategy which is about how to agree with other parties of the conflict without concern for ourselves.

Delay - how to wait for other opportunities and to resolve the conflict.

Outflanking - This is about how to involve a neutral third party in the conflict, as a solution instrument for the conflict.

Passive aggressive - This is about how to tackle individuals with aggressions in the conflict.

Mayer (in Hughes & Wearing, 2007, p.105) summarizes the most common ways of working with conflict according to different scientific research as:

Integrating is usually demonstrated in the scientific research as the most effective conflict style, which have the capacity to maximize performance and reduce absenteeism disruption.

Compromising is about how both parties of the conflict give some ground to deal with the conflict and resolve it.

Obliging means that one person denies their own interest and instead compromise and understand the other party's position.

Avoiding is defined by situations where one of the conflicting persons withdraws from their position in the conflict and gives an opportunity to the other parts position.

Forcing happens when one party of the conflict dominates the other party of the conflict and forces him/her to accepting their interest.

Also, according to different researches, for example Sweeney and McFarlin (2002) humans create different strategies to prevent conflicts, such as using indirect language, develop flexibility, create new ways or develop different views.

In sum, the literature reviewed shows that the resolving and preventing of conflict at the workplace have scientific interest for many authors. Some of them prefer the use of passive strategy like avoiding conflict while others describes the important role of social workers, managers and mediators in dealing with it.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

In pursuit of the aim formulated for the present study, Coser's (1956) conflict theory has been chosen as theoretical framework. Lewis Coser is a sociologist, who has had a great influence on sociological research and the development of new theories, especially in the field of conflict theories and social problems. His aim was to understand human condition and how social life and possibilities had an impact on human behaviour. Coser (1956) stated that conflict could have integrating as well as disintegrating effects. In this study we found Coser's theory interesting because it considers the phenomenon of conflict from different angles and perspectives which could give us opportunity to look at the subject from different aspects in order to get a broader understanding of our research questions. The central ideas from Coser's (1956) theory regarding integrating and disintegrating effects of conflict and external and internal kinds of conflict are used in this study to describe the experiences stated by the social workers in the interviews. The conflict theory of Lewis Coser (1956) highlights the idea of positive and negative aspects of conflict at a workplace. We use conflict theory to analyse and create understanding of the experience of conflict that social workers describe and how they deal with conflict at their workplace.

3.2 Coser's conflict Theory

Conflict theory, according to Coser (1956), seeks to define and explain the conflict in the society by scientific aspects. Coser draws the majority of his theoretical ideas from researchers such as Weber and Simmel who tried to understand conflict in legitimate ways (Coser 1956). They considered conflict as a result of different social factors, such as class, status and inequality. These three aspects all have impact in the process of interaction between individuals in a society. Coser (1956) considers the consequences of conflict and explains that conflict is not just a source of social change but he also acknowledges the natural necessity of conflict for the development of societies. Coser tries to construct better understanding of human condition and explain how human beings interact with each other. Coser (1957) considers conflicts as an instinctual aspect for human life and emphasizes that conflicts can appear everywhere in the human society. Also Coser in (Erickson-Nepstad, 2005, p.335) made the shift in the conflict paradigm by arguing that "conflict is ubiquitous and an inherent part of social relations"

The basic concerns of the conflict theory are how power and resources are unequally distributed. There are three different categories that identifies the resources; class, status and power (Weber in Coser 1956). Who control the power and how it is used is fundamental to the theory. According to Coser, conflicts between human beings are different than the conflicts among other animals because humans can create new goals of conflict and different levels of achievements.

According to Coser conflict have some “latent social functions” (Erickson-Nepstad, 2005), for example, to create new values, norms and institution. It means that conflict can stimulate innovation, progress and changes.

The main idea of Coser as described in the third chapter in his (1956) book “*The Functions of Social Conflict*” is that conflict has not only negative, but also positive functions. Conflict “clears the air” and helps to the free behavioral and emotional expression (Coser, 1956, p.41). Coser (1956) identifies two different types of conflict. The first is when conflict occurs within a group (internal conflict), and the second when conflict occurs outside the group (external conflict).

3.2.1 External conflict

According to Coser the existence of the group always relies on that the group excludes or includes others. This strategy produces and regulates different behaviours, feelings, thoughts and culture values which identify clear boundaries in order to include or exclude. When a group experience external conflict the boundaries which are surrounding the group become stronger and the sense of belonging between the groups members intensifies. When the group experience external conflict they tend to develop a centralized power structure through a governmental form. The more the conflict tends to be violent the functional consequences of awareness and goals automatically increases.

Thus, according to Coser, conflict outside groups tends to increase internal cohesion and contribute to centralization. So, sometimes external conflicts are helped to reduce internal conflicts.

3.2.2 Internal conflict

Internal conflict is a struggle among social groups within the same social system, like in the case of conflict among indigenous populations or between indigenous population and the national government. Coser states that when internal conflicts occurs between different groups in the same social system it can create new norms for dealing with conflict, release hostility and

develop new authority and jurisdiction systems. Coser also notices that not every internal conflict will develop functionality; often the functionality of the internal conflict depends on the type of conflict and the social structure in which it appears. Coser identifies two basic types of internal conflicts, those that threaten the fundamental assumptions of the group relationship and those who do not.

3.2.3. Integrating and disintegrating effects

Integrating effects are according to Coser (1956) the effects which can develop the group and help to create centralised power structure which can function as regulated mechanisms in the organisation and how to deal with conflict in a functional way.

Disintegrating effects of conflict can be identified according to Coser (1956) through that not every internal conflict is functional. The functionality of conflict depends on the social structure which are involved and how power can be practiced.

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the methods used for the conduct of this study are presented. The chapter starts with presenting the research method selected, followed by a description of the sampling method used, description of the conduct of the study, ethical considerations and the validity and reliability of the study.

The aim of this study is to examine the descriptions of experience made by different social workers from different cultures regarding workplace conflict and how workplace conflict is dealt with in terms of strategies and methods of resolving it.

4.2 Research method

The method of semi-structured qualitative interviews is used in this study to examine the various experiences among social workers in dealing with work place conflict. Qualitative methods such as interviews assist the scientist with understanding of social phenomenon on a natural basis rather than experimentally (Pop & Mays in Newman et al. 2005, p.72). Also according to Kvale & Brinkman (2009, p.2), knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the person being interviewed. Qualitative methods such as an interview are an effective method when it comes to investigate how individuals interact in social processes and in their social unit such as the work group (King in Robson, 2002, p. 271).

This study use semi-structured qualitative interviews with social workers from different locations. Semi-structured interview was chosen, because the interviewer can control and develop the dialogue with the interviewee and can manage of conversation with the interviewee and ask additional questions if it necessary. The interviews were based on a so called interview guide which is defined as “[...] a script, which structures the course of the interview more or less tightly” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). For a semi-structured interview, researchers are forming some topics or questions that they want to ask, before the interview takes place (Newman et al, 2005, p. 73). This is very useful for the interviewer, because it help to maintain the focus in the conversation and remembering important aspects which are connected to the main themes.

All the interview questions have been developed according to the aim of the study and the main questions of the research. In order to facilitate the analytic process of the information gathered, the interview guide has been structured and divided into thematic blocks. Each thematic block

has been allocated from the research questions to develop the questions for the interview. The thematic blocks and the structure used in the interview guide are: 1) Background questions (aim: to get general information about the interviewee); 2) Experience questions (aim: to get information about experience with conflict at the workplace); 3) Consequence questions (aim: to get opinion about the effects of conflict); 4) Questions about prevention and resolution of conflict (aim: to know about activity for prevention of conflicts and methods of resolution), 5) Exit from interview.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.134) “the interviewer’s question should be brief and simple”. The study is guided by this statement and all questions were formulated with the aim to become simple and understandable for the interviewees, excluding scientific language. Further, when preparing the interview, the advice regarding interview techniques and scripting the interview described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), was used to create the interview guide with interview questions that consider both thematic and dynamic dimensions. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.131): “an interview question can be evaluated with respect to both thematic and dynamic dimensions: thematically with regard to producing knowledge, and dynamically with regard to the interpersonal relationship in the interview”.

When developing the thematic dimensions, the focus laid on gathering knowledge about how the social workers described their experience of conflict. When developing the interview questions with consideration made to the dynamic dimension, the focus laid on gathering information about the feelings of the interviewees. Therefore, to get answers that would give us information regarding the thematic dimension the questions began with the word “what”. For example, the interview question: “What kinds of organizational conflicts do you meet in your work process?” That question allowed us to get the thematic information about the description of experiences from conflict at the work place. Further, to get answers that would give us information regarding the dynamic dimension the questions began with words like “Why” or “How”. For example, the interview question: “How do you think organizational conflict affects the work process?” That gave us opportunity to understand the feelings of the interviewees regarding organizational conflict.

The interview guide can be found in Appendix 4

4.3 Sample

In pursuit to examine how social workers describe their experience of workplace conflict in different contexts five social workers were selected, three from Sweden and two from Russia. We chose to interview social workers from two different countries. That decision was made

due to the fact that the two of us have citizenship from either Russia or Sweden and therefore previous experience and knowledge about these two contexts that could be beneficial in conducting the study.

The age profile of our participants was from the age of 26 to 59 years, three were females and two males. It must be noticed that their work experience differentiated between 2 to 21 years. They worked in managerial positions in different offices such as social welfare, ministry of social protection, head department of informative, legal ministry of social protection, specialist in social welfare, head of treatment house, family unit, and drug unit. We present the participants in this study by numbers from one to five (Interviewee № 1, 2 are Russian social workers and Interviewee № 3, 4, 5 are Swedish social workers).

In general, sampling is a process of selecting people or a certain category of people from whole population which represent scientific interest for research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The most appropriate way of using sampling in this study was to choose social workers from different social offices, in both Russia and Sweden. After looking for contact information from different social offices in Sweden and Russia on the internet, we sent out fifteen letter of information about the interview to five different social offices in Sweden and ten in Russia (see Appendix 1). Five offices were interested in participating in the study, three offices in Sweden and two in Russia, they were therefore the places where we later conducted the interviews. The time aspect was crucial when choosing the interview targets – we did not have possibility to send out reminders and wait for answers from all the 15 offices. Instead, we chose to conduct the interviews with persons from the offices that had replied within the given time limit. The sampling method used in this study was random sampling and participants for interview were selected in nonrandom manner.

This sampling method could limit and have an impact on the answers considering the possibility that the offices agreed on participating in the study, also could have had previous interest in conflict at the workplace and therefore were willing to participate in the study. It is possible that offices that did not show interest in the study, also is offices were the subject of workplace conflict are considered a sensitive and problematic matter.

4.4 Conduct of the study

We used the qualitative semi-structured interview to confirm the validity and reliability of the study. In this study we used qualitative techniques through that we repeated the questions and if the participants did not understand we made follow-up questions. During the interviews we

asked the interviewees if they understood us clearly and if the questions were clear for them. We used additional follow up questions in order to gain more informative answers.

The interviews in the study were conducted in five different locations, two in Russia and three in Sweden. In all the different locations the profession of social work was represented. We conducted all interviews separately meaning that the both of us never conducted the interviews together. This was due to practical reasons such as our individual skills of mastering the official language at the workplace. We divided the interviews between us, one of us did the two interviews in Russia (in the Russian language) and the other did the three interviews in Sweden (in the Swedish language).

The interviews were conducted as planned, with some minor complications such as disturbing sounds from a fan and in some cases calls to the interviewees' cell-phones. The overall atmosphere of the interviews was, according the experiences of us conducting the interviews, calm and positive. All interviews were conducted in the work room of the social organizations. Every interview remained from 30, up to 60 minutes, were the importance of not conducting too long interviews were considered. An interview that takes a couple of hours can on one hand give more detailed and richer information than an interview that takes, for example, ten minutes (Newman et al, 2005, p. 74). But a very long interview can on the other hand give a lot of unnecessary information and the interviewee can get tired from all the questions.

In our interviews we tried to create relevant and correct questions for the purpose of the study. Correctly formulated questions will help to conduct a discussion (ibid, 2005, p. 73). Also according to Robson (2002, p.230): "questions should be designed to help achieving the goal of the research". Our questions were designed simple and clear without ambiguity in order to avoid misunderstandings and ensure validity and credibility.

In the process of gathering data we recorded the interviews on an audio-recorder, the tapes were afterwards listened to and transcriptions were made. The transcription process were conducted through that the tapes were listened to and all the conversations were written down in complete form and in separate documents for each interview.

The interviews began with a few minutes' long introduction and presentation of ourselves and the aim of our study. We explained that the recorded interviews were to be used only for scientific purposes and that the recorded material would be destroyed after the examination of the report. The interviewees were also informed of the aspects of confidentiality, and that they had the right to not answer to the questions if they did not want to. They were informed of the possibility to withdraw from participating in the study at any given time. The interviewees were also informed about that they would be presented in the report as numbers in order to ensure

the ethical consideration regarding anonymity. We mentioned how long time the interview approximately would take and we also clarified our choice to work with a tape-recorder. We pronounced the time and day of the interview and asked the interviewees if they had any questions before the start of the interview.

In order to get a productive conversation, the interviewer showed interest, listened attentively and expressed understanding during the whole conversation. In the end of the interview the participants were asked if they would like to add something. We also asked if they wished to get a printed version of the interview, which all of the interviewees refrained.

After the process of transcription was done, we prepared the data for analysis. We used the transcription, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.192) suggests, “a tool for interpretation of the contents of the interviews”. Data driven coding, as described by the authors (ibid. p.202), was used, in terms of that we did not make up any codes in advance; instead we developed codes through reading the research material. We coded the material using words and statements which were mentioned in the interviews in order to find connections with relevance to the aim and purpose of this study. We categorized the answers into five categories which all could be linked to the research questions and the concepts presented in the conflict theory of Lewis Coser; *disintegrating* and *integrating* effects of conflict, *internal* and *external* types of conflict and answers related to *strategy methods* for resolving conflict. The aspects of context were also considered in order to look for possible differences or common views in the different contexts represented by the interviewees.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The scientific research on development of individual, groups, society and organizations requires value and ethical considerations. The consideration of value should be involved and considered from the start of the study, until the final report (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Further, the authors state that; “The ethical principal of beneficence means that the risk of harm or damage to a participant should be the lowest possible” (ibid, p.73). It is also important that the researcher becomes aware of his neutrality in relation to the participants, and not subject them to mental or physical stress by violating or exposing their privacy or integrity (ibid, p.74).

The “informed consent” was achieved by that we informed the participants about our aim and giving them holistic knowledge about the true nature of the study. We informed the participants that they had the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time (Appendix 2-3). Their participation was thereby voluntary and we did not subject them to any kind of harm or negative consequences.

To meet what Kvale & Brinkman (2009, p.72) describes as “confidentiality”, and in order to protect the participants from not becoming “disclosed” we do not publish any names of persons, places or organizations. The positions and names of participants in the interviews are kept anonymous and all results of interviews were used only for analysis purposes.

4.6 Validity, reliability and generalization of the study

The importance of conceptualization of reliability and validity in qualitative research is stated by Lincoln and Guba (in Golafshani, 2003) through that there can be no validity without reliability and that a demonstration of validity is sufficient to establishing reliability.

4.6.1 Reliability

In this study our ambition has been to describe in detail as far as possible the research process. We try to formulate our questions as far as possible without subjecting our interviewees to difficulties, because maybe the subject is sensitive to them or if the questions are hard to answer. According to scientific research another researcher should be able to perform the same research with the same instruments (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004). To enhance reliability in the study we therefore used reliable instruments, such as a tape-recorder, when analysing the data.

In the study we followed the aspect of reliability in order to create and relate our study with, as Golafshani (2003, p. 601) describes - “consistency and trustworthiness”. Reliability in qualitative method is often discussed in relation to the conduct of the study and the skills of the interviewers, which of course can be an aspect of discussion even in this study. There were however nothing during the interviews that seemed to have effect on the quality of the interviews in a significant way. After considering the results of the interviews we, regardless of the small sample of participants, gathered all the necessary information in order to complete the study.

4.6.2 Validity

Validity is based on a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability, it is thereby always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront or to arbitrate between them (Golafshani, 1995). One of the strengths of qualitative research is the power to picture and to question that complexity of the social reality in an investigation and thereby get closer to ensuring validity (ibid, 1995). We ensure validity in this study through that we try to make our questions as clear as possible to the interviewees and also through that they understood us and the questions we ask. To ensure that we got the most informative answers in relation to the questions of the study we also used additional follow-up questions. In qualitative methods the re-

searcher is considered as the instrument of the research credibility and validity (Patton, 2002). According Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.247) “validity is often defined by asking the question: Are you measuring what you think you are measuring?” We tried not to involve ourselves emotionally in relation to the interviewees and instead function as instruments of the research in order to enhance credibility, neutrality, conformability and validity. Also, during the interviews, we focused on the subject and the aim of this study which were represented through the interview questions.

4.6.3 Generalizability

According to Franfort-Nachmias & Nachmias: “generalizability: the extent to which the research findings can be generalized to larger populations and applied to different settings” (Franfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p. 102).

In this study it is possible to make generalisations of the results achieved by the support from previous research and theories described in earlier chapters of this essay. The results can be generalized through the use of analytical generalization and can also be used in another similar situation.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the result of the interviews is presented and analysed through the use of ideas found in the conflict theory of Lewis Coser. For prominent themes we have made categories which are connected to concepts found in the theory of Coser, and to the aim and questions of this study. The concepts are; *internal and external conflict*, *integrating* or *disintegrating effects* of conflict and *strategy methods* for resolving conflict, these are used as starting points when answering the research questions. Below we analyse the interview answers in relation to the two research questions the theoretical framework and the literature reviewed. The chapter is divided into two main parts which are the two research questions. Under these headlines we present the results of the interviews in relation to the concepts mentioned, giving quotes from the interviews as well as reflections upon previous research relevant to the specific concepts.

5.2 How do social workers in Russia and Sweden describe their experiences of conflict at their workplace?

The results of the study show that social workers describe their experiences of workplace conflict in many ways, both negative and positive.

Disintegrating effects of conflict

Most of the social workers seem to have negative experiences from conflict at their workplace, and describes conflict as for example “a lot of negative emotions, antipathies, quarrels, tension” (Interviewee № 2). In particular, the impact of workplace conflict on inner emotions and the ability to conduct productive work in the profession were described and as Interviewee №. 2 states:

I felt terrible, I felt chronically tired, it annoyed me, and I could not sleep and constantly screamed at my husband and my mother, every little thing caused panic or apathy. I used the service of specialists and took pills for depression, I am afraid to think about these times, now I try to avoid any conflict, because I am very sensitive to them.

Another interviewee (Interviewee №. 3) also confirms the negative experiences of workplace conflict and states that: “Sometimes I do not want to go to work, I feel like I can not relax, I can not do my work well and I have too much headaches”.

What the social workers describes is confirmed by scientific research which encounters the subject. Siddique (2009) states that conflict at the workplace is potentially dangerous and can

create and lead to different physical, mental and moral problems. Also Sweeney and McFarlin (2002) emphasized the huge impact of social conflict at the workplace, especially on the functionality of the organization.

Integrating effects of conflict

The results of the interviews can be understood as conflicts also can have some positive and integrating effects for the work place. Interviewee № 5, a Swedish social worker, describes conflict at the workplace as a possibility of maintaining productive relations between colleagues: “I think that if conflict are handled in a good an positive way there are no problems with it, because we can develop and create a good relation between us”. Other descriptions of positive effects of organisational conflict are further the example that one interviewee states: “the conflict is a progress for organisations, it often leads to positive change, at least the workers find out the cause of their discontent and it is emotionally easier” (Interview № 2). Another interviewee also describes the effects of conflict as “help [...] develop in their work and do a better job” (Interview № 5).

Rahim (2002, p. 206) notes that a conflict may be “functional for organizations”. The functionality involves “designing effective macro-level strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness in an organization” (ibid, p. 208). Also “conflict can be functional to the extent to which it results in the formulation and creative solution to the right problems or the effective attainment of subsystem or organizational objectives that otherwise would not have been possible” (ibid, 2010, p. 11).

According to De Dreu and Vianen (2001, p.309) conflicts relation within organisational themes can be; “negative consequence, well-being and effectiveness of team work”.

Also some social work researchers describes the complexity of conflict at a workplace in a different way, and describes the positive effects of conflict in the workplace and how conflict can develop organizations and function as an emotional discharge. For example, Robbins (in Ikeda 2005, p.23) states that: “Conflict can provide benefits for innovation and team work and can, as a consequence, foster future corporative acts and build value for diversity”.

The descriptions made by the social workers in this study can be seen in the light of the theory of Coser as conflict can develop the group and help to create more centralized power structure which can response and regulate internal stress, needs, negotiate and empower relations within the group. In the view of Coser's (1956) theory, the findings from the interviews states that conflicts handled in a good and positive way may create a good relation at the workplace, can be

seen as an example of a functional conflict. According to Coser (1957) conflict is a normal instinctual function for human beings; it can provide humans with different ways of thinking, opportunities, possibilities so that they can reach their goal in life. Coser (1957) considers the interaction between groups as a significant role in developing the group values and goals. In this case Coser (1957) sees conflict as an instrument which can develop emotional involvement within a group and create moral boundaries. Coser (1956) states that: “the more involved we are within the group, the greater is our emotional involvement and the greater the likelihood of violent conflict if our group is threatened”. If we look at the descriptions of the social workers experiences in this study through the perspective of Coser’s (1957) theory we find that conflict can create common goals and make the group more directed towards everyday concerns, moderate emotional involvement and slowly conflict thereby are kept on a rational level. Also Coser (1957) sees that individuals or societies need conflict in order to develop and fill their psychological needs, but sometimes these psychological needs can become explosive, which can create negative consequences of conflict. Coser (1956, p.31) stated; “group require disharmony as well harmony, dissociation as well as association, and conflict within them are by no means all together disruptive factors [...] far from being necessarily dysfunctional a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life.

Internal and external conflicts

In the interviews, both the Russian and the Swedish social workers described experiences of different types of organizational conflict. That can also be seen as Coser (1956) describes it, by the existence of two types of conflict, which are; in-group and out-group conflicts (internal and external conflicts). The analyses of the interviews suggest that both types of conflict are represented in the experiences of the interviewees. According to interview № 2, is encountering internal conflicts such as: “conflict between employees of a department, conflict with bosses and the top manager and leaders of department”.

Interviewee № 2 also stated experience from external conflicts as: “conflict may be between organizations”, “between departments”. Both the Russian and the Swedish participants emphasised the external conflicts between departments and between organisations. Swedish interviewees’ in particular also described the conflict with clients and decision makers about lack of resources. Two of the Swedish social workers described the conflict with clients as one of the main conflict issues. They stated (interview № 3 & 5) conflict as being: “between us social workers and clients about decisions or lack of resources” and “conflict with the client”.

This can also be understood through the concept of *integrating effects* of Coser (1956), because he sees conflict between organisations or different departments as external conflicts which can enable the group to develop and experience a higher level of internal solidarity, the members tend to feel greater sense of camaraderie. They will see themselves as more alike, and more part of the familiar existence, participating for the same reasons and goals. Through analysing both Russian and Swedish interviews and the descriptions made regarding internal conflict, it can be understood through Coser's (1957) description of that there are conditions for conflict to be considered functional. First, the conflict should appear more frequent and not be violent, secondly, the conflict should be not threatening the basic assumptions of the group at large. All these conditions are confirmed by the descriptions made in the interviews.

Basic sources of conflict

According to the descriptions found in the interviews conflict with managers is one of the most common forms of conflict in the organisation. Interviewee № 5, from Sweden, states, on the question of what types of conflict they meet in their work process: "Conflicts with a manager are quite common". Further a Russian interviewee (№ 2) answers the same question by: [...] often we have conflicts with the managers, especially about making the right decisions for the clients".

As Coser (1957) describes it conflict can be looked from the view that all the sources of conflict is about the unequal distribution of scarce resources. These resources can be identified by class, status and power. In this case the conflict in the organisation between management and employees maybe come as a result of how managers practice their status position in a negative way which can create different interests in the organisation. Also, conflict can appear as a result of that the status positions of employees and managers are not similar. In Coser's (1957) description, the conflict in the organisation can be seen as a result of maybe the employees experience that the manager controls all the access to all resources. It is likely that the legitimacy of the management system will be questioned, because the employees perceive that their social mobility is hampered. The conflict between management and employees can be seen according to Coser (1957) as when managers represent miss abuse of power and distance themselves from the rest of the organisation as a hierarchical upper class with high status and more privileges, the employees as a result of that maybe can experience that they do not belong to the same class or that they don't have access to power, which can create sense of separation and not belonging in the organisation. The Swedish and Russian interviewees all confirms Coser's (1957) argument about how individuals needs can build up over time and become explosive, disinte-

grative for the system (organisation). Also, according to Coser (1957) it can be seen as conflict involving managers can develop new regulation and positive conflict management which can enhance organisations with strategies and formal authority that can develop societies or organisations. Also, the conflict between employees and management can be explained through Coser's (1957) theory as that conflict can appear for different reasons within the same group or in the same social system. These different reasons can be about financial issues or power resources, but chances are good that none of those will be a threat to the stability of the group. In sum, conflict over resources or power can be functional in the long run if it is handled in a functional way, but conflict maybe become dysfunctional if it is handled in a negative way.

5.3 What strategies and methods do social workers use when resolving conflict at their workplace?

The social workers in this study describe different strategies and methods regarding resolving and preventing conflict at their workplace. Some strategies mentioned are for example the role of the mediator, talks and questionnaires regarding work satisfaction.

In this section we analyse the interviews in relation to the question above and also gives some comparing examples of differences and similarities between the answers given by interviewees from Sweden or Russia.

Strategy methods of resolving conflict

The answers were somewhat different depending on if the interviewee were from Sweden or Russia. For example, did all the Swedish interviewees' point out the role of manager as important in resolution of organizational conflicts, where the main methods were described as: "listening and support" and "talks". Russian interviewees on the other hand noted the roles of psychologists, manager of human resource, head of organization or department and specialists (mediators) as key figures when resolving conflict in the organization.

According to interviewee № 2, "the method of conflict analysis" and "map of the conflict, developed by psychologists Cornelius and Fair" are frequent methods in resolving conflicts. The interviewee also described that managers "attract professionals from training companies" in order to resolve conflicts at the workplace. According to interviewee № 1 conflict were resolved by methods such as:

[...] attract the mediators or organized a meeting with each conflict side separately, during which clarified the causes of conflict and expectations of each side. After that, attempts to organize a "round table" where each side is trying to show without emotion

their point of view, to provide tangible evidence and arguments, sometimes my head [department] personally have a conversation with staff or with a psychologist.

Swedish interviewees used different methods when resolving social conflict. According to interview № 5 conflicts were solved through that: “we get a professional if needed, otherwise we often solve the conflict ourselves. It has always been the arguing group and maybe manager has been resolving their conflict together”. Another Swedish interviewee (№4) states that: “most of the time, when we have conflict, the union are involved and tries to support us to deal with the conflict. There is a guidance group, who work with creating strategies and solutions for conflict”. Interviewee № 2 also mentioned the managers’ role in resolving conflict: “I do not know so much about that but I think that the managers used to talk to the employees who have conflict, and help them. Sometimes we bring specialists to the organization to help us deal with the conflict”. A Russian interviewee describes methods such as: “every three months we have carried out an anonymous questionnaire about work satisfaction [...]”.

Thus, both Russian and Swedish interviewees mention methods of resolution of organization conflict as help of managers. Also Russian interviewees pointed out special methods for working with conflict in the organization; like conflict analysis. Russian interviewees describes that social workers have enough knowledge and possibilities for resolution of conflict and that some of them have these functions.

Preventing workplace conflict

Russian interviewees described prevention of conflicts in organization more clearly and in detail, in opposition to the Swedish interviewees who mentioned a few methods or strategies.

Swedish interviewees did not mention prevention of conflicts in organization frequently, some of them stated that prevention could be reached by; “high knowledge” of managers, “talks” with managers and “bring specialists to the organization”.

According to Russian to interviewees: “every three months we have carried out an anonymous questionnaire about work satisfaction [...] sometimes the psychologist provide tests and questionnaires, I do not remember exactly name of it, may be it is questionnaire Bass-Darko, also very popular is sociograma”. According to interviewee № 2 on the subject of prevention methods: “in organization using the forecasting method”, it means that managers by supervising and carrying out tests and questions which analyzes the occurrence of conflict and how it appears. This is done to create a favorable environment for workers in the organization; fair and transparent distribution of material benefits in the collective, the calming environment surrounding

the person (a convenient lay-out of premises, presence of indoor plants, for example), developing conformity of workers and requirements shown to them, acceptance of optimum administrative decisions and a competent estimation of results of activity of workers (interview № 2).

The integrating effects according to Coser (1957) in this study can be seen as both Russian and Swedish interviewees had developed different strategies and methods to deal with conflict.

5.4 Conclusions

This study suggests that the behaviour of employees within organisations has important implications for the organisations performance and that workplace conflict can affect individual employee's behaviour and thereby their performances. Social work organisations should work towards improving the workplace through strategy practices which can provide employees with tools to cope with conflict at the workplace. This is especially necessary due to the fact that many social workers have different roles and positions at the same time within the same organisation. This study confirms the importance of implementing effective strategies for dealing with workplace conflict which can provide the organisation with necessary tools to cope with different types of conflict.

In sum, the critical lesson to be learned is that insufficient managerial practice can lead to inefficient work environment. This study suggests that the development and implementation of an effective way of dealing with work place conflict is the key to high performance and well-being of the employees. We hope that this study will help to put a light on the issue of workplace conflict in social work organisations and give suggestions for further developments of methods and strategies regarding conflict at the workplace.

The results of this study confirm what other studies also has emphasised about the impact and consequences of conflict in the workplace, concerning for example physical and mental health, stress related problems and low productivity. These similarities further ensure the validity of our study. We think that the differences between this study and other studies on the subject is the aspect of the different roles that social workers has in an organisation and how they can have negative impact on the functionality of the organisation and on conflict management.

6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to examine the descriptions of experience made by different social workers from different countries regarding workplace conflict and how workplace conflict is dealt with in terms of strategies and methods of resolving it. The questions of this study was to examine: How do social workers describe their experiences of conflict at their workplace? And what strategies and methods do social workers use when resolving conflict at their workplace? All the data which we collected shows that the participants, through their experience, had encountered social conflict at their work place. They emphasized and highlighted different aspects in their workplace as effects of conflict.

The participants added different knowledge and experience which they had collected from different occupations. This knowledge provided us with sense of security and confidence that they had the right qualifications for answering our questions in a reliable way. We think that it is interesting that there is a difference in age between the participants, because the participants then looks at conflict from presumably different perspectives. The younger interviewees represent a group which has less work experience and therefore maybe looks at conflict from perspectives obtained from their previous education rather than personal experience. The older participants on the other hand has more years in the profession and thereby also maybe looks at conflict from a perspective more based on their own personal experience.

6.2 The management aspect

The result of this study shows that both Russian and Swedish interviewees confirm the important role of management in resolving and preventing conflict in workplace. The managers' role in conflict resolution requires that managers have knowledge, methods and strategies which can help them to manage different types of conflict. At the same time managers should work consciously to create an environment that allows open and constructive dialogue about conflict issues. We suggest that managers should work towards encouraging and empower employees effectively to resolve disputes and conflict. Managers should avoid blaming interpersonal conflicts on personality clashes. Instead they should focus in addressing the real cause of the conflict and deal with it. Managers should create strategies, awareness, and training to develop the ability in the employees to resolve conflict. Asquith, Clarke & Waterhouse (2005) mentions that, one of the problems with organisational conflict, is that the managers are often responsible for resolving conflicts at their workplace. Asquith, Clarke & Waterhouse (2005,

p.24) states that: “the social workers have around seven roles; one of them is the manager”. Also, other scientific research states that management in social work is to “determine organisational goals acquire resources and allocate them to carry out programs; coordinate, select, monitor, assess and make changes in the structure effectively” (Parker, 1995, p.528). Social workers are often involved in different positions when they solve social conflict. They function as a social worker or as managers for organisations. Different scientific researchers also mention the role of leadership in organisation. According to Nastase (2009, p.1036): “solving conflict is an important part of the leaders activity, it is part of learning process and contribute to the leadership development, adding an important component to the leader competence”. Also Rahim (2002, p.206) notices that a conflict “may be functional for organisation”. Rahim mentions the importance of using the theory of conflict management, as an important tool for managers when resolving social conflict in the organisation.

6.3 Resolving strategies

The Russian interviewees mentioned different methods and strategies used for encouraging employees to speak about conflict. Through questionnaires, which were delivered every three months to the employees they investigated the appearance of conflict and the state of work environment at their work place. They also offered different psychological support. The Swedish interviewees emphasized that they sometimes solved conflict by dealing with it themselves, without involving management or leader of department. That is different from the Russian methods, where they claimed that they more frequently relied on management and outside support when solving conflicts. How Swedish social workers resolve conflict without support can be understood as that they have developed self-management and capacity to deal with conflict autonomously. This capacity is according to us important and should be recognized and supported in social work organisations. We think that both the Russian and the Swedish methods and strategies when dealing and preventing conflict are effective and functional regarding work environment, especially in the field of social work. Social work deals with sensitive matters and work environments where the clients need support and empowerment in order to achieve independency and develop skills to deal with conflict in life.

According to the analysis of interviews it is described that an important aspect in dealing with organizational conflict is the practice of bringing forward the “third side”. We think this can be explained through the fact that the manager in an organization rarely has the possibility to avoid personal involvement in the conflict, especially if it involves his/her subordinates. Con-

sequently, the manager is very important when it comes to weighing the positive and negative aspects of the conflict brewing in each case in order to define the different roles and to find the optimal balance between persuasion and coercion between disputing parties to a desired action. The task of practical help to overcome the conflict, manager is to initiate and organize a constructive dialogue between the opponents as the most effective ways of dealing with the problem. Results of interviews showed that the involvement of a so called “third party”, which were referred to by the participants as a mediator, was an important aspect when dealing with conflict and finding resolution to it.

When it comes to prevention of conflict both the Russian and the Swedish interviewees highlighted and acknowledged different methods, strategies, and roles used. Many of the participants in both groups acknowledged the subject with transparency, understanding and interest, which we think can create possibilities for exchange of knowledge between both contexts regarding preventing methods of conflict.

The response from our participants confirms that work place conflict affects employees physically, mentally and thereby the productivity of the organisation. The disintegrating effects of conflict according to Coser (1957) can in this case be seen in the result of conflict in the organisation and how employees becomes dysfunctional, physically and mentally ill and absent from work.

6.4 Critical comments on the study

To ensure reliability and validity and be able to draw conclusions that could represent a larger group of social workers in general we would have been required to include more participants in our study. The data shown in this study can only let us know what a small group of social workers experience through their personal point of view, an analytical generalisation is that the result of the study has many similarities with other studies in the subject. The result of the interviews could also have been affected to a certain extent by the personal interaction between us as researchers and the interviewees and the fact that the interviews were conducted in the Russian *or* the Swedish language and then were translated into English language. The some things from interviews could be missed or translated the incorrect way.

In three of the interviews with Swedish participants they hesitated and sometimes asked us not to record their answers on particular matters. The hesitant reaction when answering questions about organisational conflict can maybe be explained through circumstances related to personal or organisational aspects in relation to the specific interview situation. The answers may be ex-

plained by our way of formulating our questions or that the subject was sensitive to them. They expressed concerns, that if they answered all our questions about conflict it could jeopardize their working ethics, personal confidentiality and the loyalty towards their colleagues. We explained that we followed the ethical considerations of scientific research and that we would not subject them or their integrity to any harm. Our reflection upon this fact is that it felt like the participants had a high sense of loyalty to their work ethics of their organisation, because they acknowledged the subject and participated with enthusiasm and transparency when answering our questions. There may also be other explanations for this behaviour that lies out of our knowledge.

6.5 Implications for further research

The content of social work can have different traumatising effect on social workers, regardless of how well they are trained to cope with different situations or how well experienced they are. Social work practice demands that social workers use their personal resources and capacity when dealing with different aspects of the profession. The answers collected in this study suggest that further research on the subject would create new possibilities of development and knowledge that social work organisations automatically can benefit from.

In this study we used Coser's conflict theory to explain the phenomenon, how Coser described the functional consequence of conflict, and how he considered conflict as an instinctual, normal part of human life. For further research it would also be possible to use other theoretical framework, like for example the theory of *Power and group interests*, described by Ralph Dahrendorf (1989). He describes where power is located and how it exists in the structure of an organisation. He considers power as an element of social structure, something attached to the position within the structure. An interesting point of departure for future research in this field could thus be to study the subject of conflict and causes of conflict from a perspective of power. That could serve as a possibility to put a light on and creating more knowledge about this sensitive subject. Also, this study expands the knowledge about management methods for the resolution of conflict, helping to prevent destructive conflict processes and considers the effects of conflict. Given study has contributed to the understanding of the role and some positions of social worker in organizational conflict. This study suggests that the topic of the different roles of social workers need to be examined further in order to put a light on conflict and the reasons for it, as well as possible solution strategies. The impact of that social workers sometimes has different roles in the organisation in the same time could also be interesting for further research regarding for example the impact on decision making in social work organisations.

The practical implications of this study show how important it is to have an internalized view when discussing and researching the phenomenon of workplace conflict. Science should highlight and develop debate, knowledge, strategies and transparent ways to acknowledge and deal with conflict at work places. Our study hence shows the importance of acknowledging, including, listening and encouraging the employees in social work services to deal with conflict in a functional way.

7. References

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Appendix 1 – Letter of information (Swedish version)

Hej!

Vi är två studenter från det internationella socionomprogrammet vid Högskolan i Gävle som under våren 2012 ska skriva vårt examensarbete. Inför denna genomför vi nu en studie med titeln: *Experience of social workers in dealing with organizational conflict*.

I samband med denna studie kommer vi att genomföra intervjuer med några social arbetare vid olika arbetsplatser. Vårt mål med denna studie är att undersöka förekomsten av konflikter på arbetet, hur de hanteras och förebyggs på arbetsplatsen.

Intervjuerna består av ett antal frågor som berör olika faktorer knutna till konflikter på arbetsplatsen. Intervjuerna kommer inte att kunna kopplas till någon enskild individ. Det är frivilligt att delta i studien och deltagarna har rätt att när som helst avbryta sin medverkan. Uppgifterna som framkommer i intervjuerna kommer endast användas för det redovisade ändamålet.

Om du har några frågor eller synpunkter hör gärna av dig till: Eisa Ali Awad, telefon nummer: 073-61836 94 eller via epost: vsn09ead@student.hig.se

[Hello!

We are two students from the international social work program of the University of Gävle. In the spring of 2012 we are going to write our thesis. Faced with this, we are conducting the study entitled: "Experience of Social workers in dealing with organizational conflict"

In connection with this study we will conduct interviews with some social workers in different workplaces. The aim of this study is to investigate the occurrence of conflicts at workplace, how they are managed and mitigated at the workplace.

The interviews consist from a number of issues related to various factors linked to conflict at the workplace. The interviews will not be linked to any individual. It is voluntary to participate in the study, and participants have the right at any time to cancel their participation. The data from the interviews will be used only for the aim of study.

If you have any questions or comments please contact with me: Eisa Ali Awad, telephone number: 073-61836 94 or by email: vsn09ead@student.hig.se]

Appendix 2 – Letter of information (Russian version)

Здравствуйте,

Мы два студента международной программы по социальной работе в университете Евле. Весной 2012 года, мы приступили к написанию нашего диплома и в связи с этим проводим исследование об опыте социальных работников с организационными конфликтами.

Целью данного исследования является изучение описания опыта работы социальных работников из разных культур с конфликтов на рабочем месте и ознакомление с методами и стратегиями решения конфликтов на рабочем месте.

Интервью состоит из ряда важных для нас вопросов. Участие в исследовании является не обязательным, и участники имеют право в любое время отменить свое участие. Информация, полученная в процессе интервью, будет использована в обобщенном виде и строго в целях исследования. Анонимность гарантируется.

Если у вас возникли вопросы или замечания, пожалуйста, свяжитесь с нами по телефону: Иса Али Авад, телефон: 073-6183694 или по электронной почте: vsn09oma@student.hig.se

[Hello,

We are two students of the international program of social work of the University of Gävle. In the spring of 2012 we started writing our thesis about experience of social with organizational conflicts. In connection with it we are going to conduct interviews with social workers.

The aim of our study is to examine descriptions of the experience of social workers from different cultures with conflicts at the workplace and become familiar with the methods and strategies of conflict resolving at the workplace.

Interview consists from a number of important questions for us. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants have the right at any time to cancel their participation. The data obtained during the interview will be used in summary form and only for the aim of study. Anonymity is guaranteed.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact us by phone: Isa Ali Awad, phone: 073-6183694 or by email: vsn09oma@student.hig.se]

Appendix 3 – Consent form

Medgivande [Consent]

Jag har fått information om studien och vet att jag när som helst kan avbryta min medverkan i intervjun utan anledning. Jag godkänner att studenterna inblandade i studien har tillgång till materialet som framkommer i denna intervju. Vidare ger jag även min tillåtelse till att denna intervju spelas in som ett hjälpmedel för studenterna.

[I have received information about the study and know that I may at any time cancel my participation in the interview without reason. I agree that the students involved in the study have access to the material that obtained in this interview. I also give my permission that this interview will be recorded as help to students]

Datum [Date]

.....

Underskrift intervjuperson [Signature of interviewee]

.....

Namnförtydligande[Clarification]

.....

Underskrift ansvarig intervjuare

[Signature of responsible interviewer]

.....

Namnförtydligande[Clarification]

.....

Appendix 4 – Interview guide

Background questions

- 1 Gender:
2. Age:
3. Years in this profession:
4. Current position:
5. Earlier positions:

Main questions

6. Have you ever met in your work with organizational conflicts?
7. What kind of organizational conflicts do you meet in your work process?
8. How do you think organizational conflicts affect on the work process?
9. According to your opinion, what are the reasons for organizational conflicts to exist?
10. Who in your organization deals with conflicts and resolutions?
11. What methods do you use in your activities for the prevention of conflicts in organization?
12. What are the resolutions for organizational conflicts you use in your practice?