

## LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

# The good, the bad and the inevitable conflicts in the public service development

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Mary Parker Follett wrote almost one hundred years ago about organizational conflicts stating that “it is [...] to be hoped that we shall always have conflict, the kind which leads to invention, to the emergence of new values” (1925, 7).

Ms. Follet was a social worker, management consultant, philosopher and way ahead of her time in the fields of organizational theory and organizational behavior. Unlike other organizational scholars of Ms. Follett’s time, or even others to come after, one of Follett’s unique contributions is that she accepted conflicts as a fact of life.

Conflicts, being a fact, means, that conflicts are always emerging from human differences and are embedded in interaction. And, indeed, we often stumble across conflicts in our personal as well as in organizational life. Although Ms. Follet knew all this one hundred years ago, it still today seems difficult to address and understand experienced conflicts.

When I refer to myself as a conflict researcher, people often nod their heads and say, that “yes, conflicts could be of good if we only could understand that it’s the things that argue, not people”. To this, I strongly disagree.

Previously in organizational research, various typologies of conflicts have been proposed. For example, we divide conflicts into task conflicts and relationship conflicts, cognitive and affective conflicts, relational and situational, or goal versus emotional conflicts. These typologies often suggest an intra-organizational and rather mechanistic approach to the study of conflicts (Rossi, 2020).

Yet, what has long been an unexplored aspect is the emergence of conflicts as experiences, and understanding conflicts as dynamic processes, contributing to systemic understanding of the everyday organizational life and its complexities.

In this doctoral research my aim is to challenge the current ways of understanding public service development through cooperation and focus on experiences of conflicts. I have explored the concept of conflicts as felt meanings and lived experiences of differences in institutional arrangements of values, beliefs, aims, assumptions, and practices.

This research shows, how reimagining the concept of conflicts enhances our understanding about the systemic change of public services. During the journey of conducting this research, I have been motivated by the questions we all seem to ponder – why and how we seek to understand others and why it is sometimes so profoundly difficult to address the conflict experiences, reach the same page of the story and negotiate our differences. Thus, I was motivated by the need to understand conflicts, and how and why we think, decide, and behave the ways we do in our everyday organizational life and in relationships with others.

Thinking about workplace conflicts, a recent report conducted in the UK, shows how conflicts result to massive costs to organizations through for example resignations, productivity drops and sickness absence. The researchers found out that almost ten million employees experienced conflicts at work, and half of these people suffered stress, anxiety, or depression as a result. The report suggests that effective and early resolution of workplace conflicts saves money, time and promotes better wellbeing. (Saundry & Urwin, 2021.)

In our everyday life, conflicts are often seen either good or bad for people and for organizations. When we treat conflicts as bad, we often understand conflicts as battles. Then, conflict means escalated events or confrontations, in which people fight openly.

Then, the response is often to avoid, tame down or attempt to manage the escalated conflicts. This is understandable, because for organizations, these escalated conflicts can prevent cooperation and goal-achieving and even impact negatively on the organization's performance.

Yet, conflicts are not only a bad thing, but conflicts can be also beneficial. This line of thought focuses on the learning and development which happens in interaction, where people negotiate and integrate their differencing views for the sake of something novel to emerge.

However, seeing conflicts solely as a good thing also entails problems. For example, it might lead to a situation where someone tries to harness the conflicts for the benefit of the organization. This, too, leaves us with a quite single-minded image of conflicts.

To my understanding, conflicts are not solely either good or bad, but instead, conflicts have the potentiality to be both. And, conflicts are, for sure, inevitable and unavoidable. This is because we, as humans, have different values, aims, beliefs, assumptions and practices and we bring these differences into our interactions with others, while we make decisions and act upon these conflicting institutional arrangements.

All of us have experienced conflicts, and those were not always pleasant experiences. It is safe to say that in everyday life, conflicts are something we often want to avoid. In my doctoral research I illustrate, that conflicts as experiences provoke strong and often negative emotional responses in us. This is because our identities – also the professional ones – are threatened when we encounter situations where conflicting understanding emerges.

In addition, it is often difficult to address these differences in an openly manner because we are differently positioned in interaction both within our organizations and as organizations, within the public service ecosystems. Power, by nature, is distributed unequally, and these power relations have a massive impact on how, when and to whom we can express our differencing views and experiences. And, how these are considered when, for example, developing public services with an aim to achieve well-being for the citizens. (Rossi & Tuurnas, 2021.)

Yet, the complexity of the world we live in, and the turbulent challenges such as COVID19

crisis our public service organizations face, place increasing demands for developing the ways we organize and work together. Not any single organization alone is up for the task of addressing the wicked phenomena such as increasing the well-being of the citizens or addressing the COVID19 crisis. And therefore, collaboration and cooperation at all levels of our societies is needed. Paradoxically, the more actors and people are needed to cooperate in order to create well-being, the more there will be conflicts of interests, values, beliefs, aims and practices to be dealt with.

Thinking about well-being as the main goal from the point of view of public social and healthcare reform – *sote-uudistus* – in Finland, or, as in my research, at a smaller scale of the public service development initiatives, much of the ongoing discussion focuses on cooperation and value co-creation between multiple actors.

However, what has long remained to be an unexplored aspect of this cooperation is the emergence of conflicts. My doctoral research focuses especially on understanding the conflicts in public social and healthcare service development initiatives at the local level of public administration, and asks, how conflicts can increase our understanding about systemic change of public services.

My claim is, that conflicts are not only an inseparable part of the everyday organizational life but also necessary drivers for change and novelty. Therefore, revealing the contradictory understandings behind the conflict experiences becomes necessary when the aim is to achieve development of public services, with the well-being and the needs of the citizens at the heart of these initiatives.

In the empirical sub-studies of my article-based doctoral research, conflicts between actors who were developing social and healthcare services for the youth revealed conflicting understanding, for example, which actor had the right to decide what outcomes were understood as value and for whom, how the value was measured, and how and through which practices the service providers sought to address the needs of the youth.

As conflicts are necessities for knowledge creation, it is crucial to explore these different, relational meanings of identities, emotions that

the experienced conflicts arise, as well as power relations underlying the conflict experiences. Through these explorations, the questions of power, politics and ethics with regard to the actions and decisions about the public service development emerge.

Overall, I am suggesting a paradigm shift of public service research from the focus of cooperation, which is inherent in intra- and inter-organizational approaches, to conflicts and a systemic approach. Then, instead of a single service development initiative, the exploration of experienced conflicts draws attention to service ecosystems and systemic change.

The doctoral research of mine concludes with recognizing the need for a conflict-considered paradigm in public services' research and practice. The exploration of experienced conflicts reveals four underlying elements which can help us better understand the systemic change of public services.

First, conflicts reveal the element of polyphony which foregrounds the multi-actor, multi-level and multi-logic service ecosystems. Second, conflicts reveal that development initiatives are always happening in specific contexts and with specific path-dependencies which have led to the situation, suggesting an element of locality. Thirdly, conflicts draw our attention to the element of relationality. It suggests, that as change is an ongoing, relational process, it becomes important to focus on interaction and relations between the multiple actors at the different levels within the service ecosystems. Fourth, the exploration of experienced conflicts draws our attention to sensemaking and reflexivity. Thus, in order to achieve the desired goals, there is a constant need to stop and make sense of the experiences of actors within the service ecosystems as basis for systemic change.

Turning towards the end of this lectio, my response, as an organizational scholar, to people's "if only we could understand that it's the things that argue, not people" is, that instead of this kind of 'thingification' we need to focus on the human aspects of conflicts. With a focus on our emotions, identities and power relations as well as the stories we tell about these when we try to understand the conflict experiences.

Following Follett's contribution, it is precisely our differences we, as humans, bring to the interaction and experience in our thoughts and

bodies when we encounter conflicts. Therefore, instead of separating things from people or task conflicts from relationship conflicts, measuring the amount of conflicts or the impact that conflicts have on the organizations' performance, the focus turns to what it is like being a human. And understanding, how our differences underlying our actions, decisions and behavior shape our attempts to develop public services.

Today, an important personal journey is about to achieve its closure, and yet, this is just another day in life's continuum. Research-wise, my plea with this doctoral research is to rethink the conflicts and the ways of understanding change, adding to the continuum of organizational and conflict research started by Mary Parker Follet hundred years ago.

*The doctoral dissertation of M.Sc. (Admin) Paula Rossi in the field of administrative sciences titled Understanding Systemic Change: Conflicts in the public service development was publicly examined at the Faculty of Management and Business of Tampere University at 12.15 on Thursday 20.5.2021. The Opponent was Doctor Adina Dudau, Glasgow University. The Custos was Professor Jan-Erik Johanson, Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University. The dissertation is available online at <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-1930-4>*

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