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Conflict in Supply Chain Relationships: A Review, Conceptualization, and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

Conflict in buyer–supplier relationships is a regular occurrence and, therefore, understanding its emergence, consequences, management, and resolution is a vital area for academics and managers alike. In recent times, studies have given more consideration to whether and how conflict in these relationships leads to (dys-)functional outcomes, but plenty of questions remain unanswered. Based on an analysis of 124 papers, and drawing upon core assumptions that underpin supply chain relationships, we present descriptive and thematic analyses and synthesis to highlight what has been explored to date. Building on these analyses, we position a future research agenda by outlining key research avenues by which to advance our understanding of and insights into conflicts in supply chain relationships. We focus on four key themes: (i) conflict conceptualization; (ii) conflict antecedents; (iii) conflict management and resolution; (iv) conflict outcomes. For each theme, gaps in prior study are outlined before identifying the opportunities for future research that will serve to address these lacunas in our knowledge and practice. Thus, we articulate fruitful research questions for each of these themes, and discuss the significant managerial implications of current and future research.

Keywords: *Conflict; conflict resolution; conflict management; supply chain relationships; inter-organizational relationships; buyer–supplier relationships; future research; research agenda; literature review*

Introduction

Conflict, defined as “the process that begins when one party perceives that its goal attainment is being impeded by another, with stress or tension the result” (Gaski, 1984: 11), is an inherent characteristic of buyer–supplier relationships. Companies face a variety of major challenges, such as digitalization, global competitiveness, supply chain uncertainty, and shortened time to market, and these provide a ripe environment for conflicts to emerge, as well as impacting the way companies resolve them (Eshghi and Ray, 2020)

Scholars have argued that conflict has a double-edged nature in that it can act as a cohesive force that brings partners closer, or as a disruptive force that threatens the stability of the relationship. Researchers have demonstrated that conflicts among supply chain partners can disrupt their interaction, block their ability to gain the resources that are necessary to advance their goals, and may increase product development time and costs (Lam and Chin, 2004; Leonidou et al., 2006). Contrarily, researchers have also reported that a certain degree of conflict between parties in a relationship may intensify value-creation efforts, provide an opportunity to refine the ongoing relationship, and enhance future purchase intentions (Skarmeas, 2006).

The predominance of conflict in buyer–supplier relationships and the mixed findings regarding its impact require deeper exploration and synthesis of existing knowledge in order to understand the key factors involved in conflict emergence and management. Yet, prior studies largely lack any systematic review of conflict literature. An exception is the study by Lumineau et al. (2015), which provided a narrative review of the conflict literature, focusing particularly on the difference between conflict at the intra- and inter-organizational levels. Yet, as the authors clearly stated, “our intent is not to conduct an exhaustive review of the literature, but rather highlight key studies of inter-organizational conflict” (Lumineau et al., 2015: 45). In addition, Johnsen and Lacoste (2016) developed a systematic review of conflict, power, and dependence, but only examined the downside of these constructs, largely ignoring the more positive aspects of conflict including the stream of prior studies concerned with “conflict management”, considered a crucial component of conflict research.

In order to address this shortfall, this chapter synthesizes and extends understanding of the evolution of conflict within supply chain relationships by considering the following: (i) *What is the current state of buyer–supplier conflict research?*; (ii) *What are the outstanding conceptual and empirical concerns in buyer–supplier conflict research?*; (iii) *What can organizations and managers learn from prior conflict research when seeking to address conflicts in their supply chains?*

To address these questions, we draw on a synthesis of 124 conflict-related articles focusing on inter-organizational relationships. We examine key theoretical, methodological, and empirical aspects of existing research, and build on core assumptions of supply chain relationships (Lumineau

and Oliveira, 2018) to propose areas for research that will help in building, testing, and elaborating theoretical advances, and informing practice, when it comes to conflict. This chapter seeks to serve as a source of reference for future research and engagement, to position the avenues for this future research from a theoretical perspective, and to guide managerial decision-making.

The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows: first, we describe the methodology used for the review of the literature and the descriptive analysis of the papers identified; we then present our synthesis and thematic analysis, before concluding the chapter with a discussion of the managerial implications of our results.

Systematic Review Methodology and Descriptive Analysis

Methodology

The domain for the research synthesis consists of empirical (both qualitative and quantitative) and conceptual papers that examine conflict in supply chain relationships. The substantive relevance of the selected papers was ensured by requiring the presence of the terms “conflict”, “disagreement”, “tension” (De Wit et al., 2012), “conflict management”, “conflict handling”, and “conflict strategy” in the ‘Topic’ category in the ISI Web of Knowledge, combined with at least one of the following terms in the articles’ titles: “cooperat*”, “interfirm/inter-firm”, “inter-organizational/interorganizational/inter-organisational/interorganisational”, “supply chain”, “buyer”, “supplier”. Further, because some supply chain conflict research was initially conducted in a distribution channel context, the term “distribution channel” was also incorporated to fully embrace inter-organizational conflict. Given these elements, more detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria were discussed and agreed among the author team.

Overall, we reviewed 319 abstracts and only retained papers where conflict was the main subject, or where conflict/conflict management had been used as a variable to predict certain attitudinal and behavioral outcomes in supply chain relationships. Articles placed out of scope included mathematical modeling and operational research papers dealing with internal channel conflict, and those concerned with conflicts involving organizational or cross-functional teams, financial decision-making, and dispute management (litigation). The final data set consisted of 124 papers, which was then analyzed through both descriptive and thematic methods.

Descriptive analysis

On the basis of our comprehensive analysis and synthesis, this section draws out key observations in relation to our data set of conflict studies.

In terms of distribution over time, the rate of journal publication has been increasing, which illustrates the growing importance of this research area among scholars and practitioners. Two major periods can be distinguished: 1969–2002 and 2003–2021. Forty of our papers were published in the first of these (over 33 years), with the number increasing by more than 50% in the latter period (just 18 years). The resurgence of interest in the field from 2003 onwards can be explained by the refinement of the conceptualization of the conflict construct, and the emergence of two paradigms for handling conflict: (i) as a problem to be eliminated; (ii) as a resource for improvement (Samaha et al., 2011). This conceptual clarification encouraged a vigorous and renewed attention on the study of the underlying psychological, structural, and environmental factors that induce, support, and diminish conflict.

In terms of the research methods used in prior conflict studies, surveys were the dominant form (75%; see Figure 1). Within the specific context of inter-organizational conflicts, survey research provided insights into antecedents that might explain variance in the amount of conflict within a dyad, as well as conflict outcomes, in a wide range of industrial and national contexts. However, the practicalities of a survey-based methodology also mean that dynamics are overlooked. Thus, surveys provide little insight as to how and why conflict levels change, and do not illustrate how firms make decisions in the course of the conflict resolution process. Moreover, surveys do not indicate the sequence of events, making it impossible to infer causality (Krafft et al., 2015). Case study methods were employed in just 7% of the empirical papers yet, given that conflict is defined as a process, are particularly valuable in substantiating the evolving nature of conflict and unraveling the complexities inherent in its resolution, including the why, what, when, and how. The confidentiality issues that researchers encounter when investigating a sensitive phenomenon such as conflict (Lumineau et al., 2015) may have inhibited the wider use of case studies within this context.

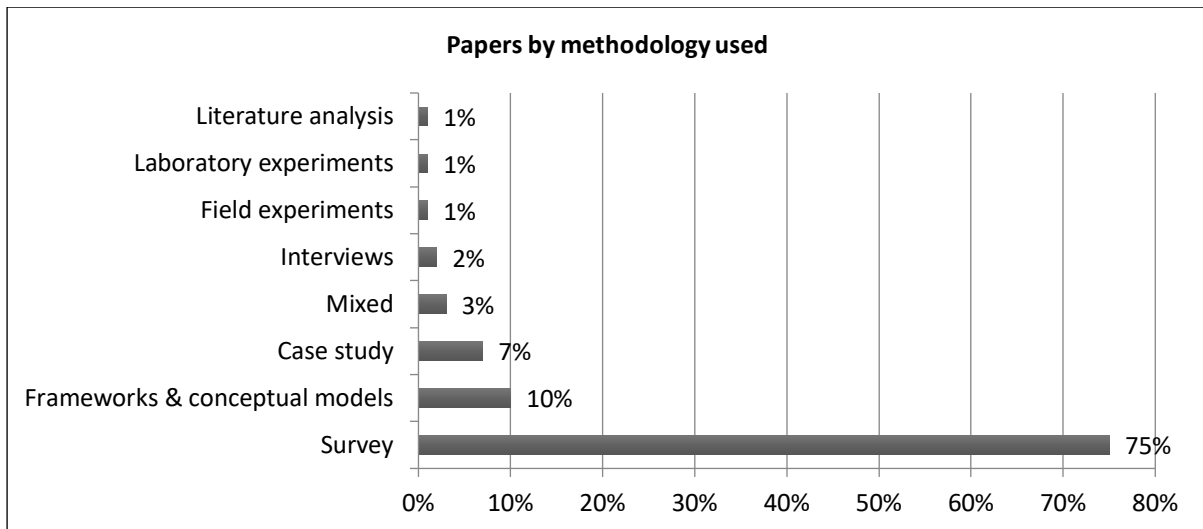


Figure 1 Publications by methodology

Although conflict in buyer–supplier relationships is a dyadic phenomenon, most empirical papers describe studies in which researchers examined the subject from the perspective of a focal company (80%) within the dyad, with the perspective of both sides of the dyad (matched dyads 16%; unmatched dyads 4%) studied to a much lesser extent. This is consistent with the results of Krafft et al. (2015), who found that, in a sample of 362 studies in marketing channels, dyadic empirical research was low in comparison to non-dyadic studies. Dyadic research designs enable researchers to measure both the magnitude of the phenomenon across the dyad and the (a)symmetry in partner perceptions (Liu et al., 2012).

The dyadic studies reviewed in this chapter used dyadic data either for triangulation purposes in understanding different perspectives (e.g., how the position in the dyad impacts the hypothesized relationship), or for determining magnitude by measuring the mean value score from paired dyads (Luo et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2017). This situation means that *conflict asymmetry* has been significantly under-studied. The advancement of conflict research must move beyond the perspective of a single actor because conflict episodes involve partners with different perceptions, in which symmetry is not a typical state (Hingley, 2001).

Of the selected papers, only 37 explicitly referred to theories, meaning that most articles are not grounded in theory. This result is surprising because the need for extensive use of theory in operations and supply chain management research has long been advocated (Harland and Roehrich, 2022). Analysis of theory frequencies indicates that social exchange theory (SET) and transaction cost economics (TCE) provide the dominant theoretical perspectives, which is unsurprising because these two theories have been fundamental in explicating the nature of buyer–supplier relationships.

Synthesis and Thematic Analysis - Emergent Concerns and Gaps in Prior Studies

In order to clarify the state of the art of knowledge on conflict in supply chain relationships, and pave the way for future research efforts and managerial insights and implications, this section provides a synthesis of and critical reflection on the key themes and research gaps identified by the review and analyses. Thus we categorize our analysis and synthesis according to four themes, discussed in turn below: (i) conflict conceptualization; (ii) conflict antecedents; (iii) conflict management and resolution; (iv) conflict outcomes. A final subsection brings together other observations from prior conflict studies to support the synthesis.

Conflict conceptualization

As conflict gained importance as a research area over the last three decades, scholars have sought to refine its conceptualization (Jehn, 1995). Two types of conflict emerged initially, namely task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict refers to “disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions” (Jehn, 1995: 258); relationship conflict, on the other hand, refers to “personal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group” (Jehn, 1995: 258).

Although this categorization has gained resonance in the organizational behavior literature over the last two decades (De Wit et al., 2012), the supply chain conflict literature showed a vast majority of studies still considering conflict as a single construct in which factors pertaining to both task and relationship conflicts were combined. A handful of prior studies have explicitly considered either task conflict or relationship conflict, while others have included both conflict types in one study. Thus, a significant gap exists in this respect because the conceptualization of different conflict types has been recognized as constituting a critical theoretical distinction in several meta-analyses (e.g., De Dreu and Weingart, 2003) because they have differential impacts on conflict outcomes.

Further refinement of the conflict construct has resulted in the addition of a third type of conflict, referred to as process conflict and defined as “controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed (...) pertains to issues of duty and resource delegation, such as who should do what and how much responsibility different people should get” (Jehn and Mannix, 2001, 239). However, to date, this type of conflict has been largely neglected in empirical studies on supply chain conflict. An exception is the recent study by Cai et al. (2020), investigating how the three conflict types impact green supplier integration. In essence, prior studies have failed to obtain discriminant validity because of the strong overlap between task conflict and process conflict, intercorrelation of which is high, ranging from 0.44 to 0.90 (e.g., Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Accordingly, researchers have

argued that process conflict is merely one kind of task conflict (Barki and Hartwick, 2004), and it is the dual distinction, task versus relationship, that has formed the basis of much of the prior conflict research in relation to management.

Conflict antecedents

A considerable amount of literature has been published on conflict antecedents in order to highlight the causes of conflict occurrence, with the *power* antecedent being the most investigated. The relationship between power and conflict was reported in the first studies by Lusch (1976), who found that coercion tends to increase the frequency of conflict, whereas non-coercive power leads to fewer disagreements, although these findings were not consistent across subsequent studies. Inconsistencies in results emerged from differing approaches to measurement of the conflict construct, which could be based on frequency (Lee, 2001), intensity (Zhang and Zhang, 2013), or a combination of frequency and importance (Schul and Babakus, 1988).

Scholars have also studied how buyer–supplier governance mechanisms are associated with conflict, with researchers starting to examine contracts and contract types as conflict antecedents. For instance, when an output-based contract governs the buyer–supplier exchange, a buyer has minimal involvement in the supplier’s processes, which in turn reduces conflict over how to perform the cooperative task. Conversely, the use of behavior-based contracts generates conflict because buyers are given increased power to legitimately monitor a supplier’s operations, which may in some instances be considered inappropriate and lead to conflict (Bai et al., 2016). You et al. (2019) investigated how governance mechanisms are linked to different types of conflicts, and other antecedents that have been investigated include opportunism (Skarmeas, 2006) and environmental dynamism (Cai et al., 2017).

Further research should continue to investigate conflicts and the role and impact of, for instance, different types of contracts (e.g. performance-based contracts), contract clauses (e.g. control vs. coordination), specific boundary objects in the contract (e.g. timelines), and phases of the contracting process (e.g., Roehrich et al., 2021; Karaba et al., 2022), as well as wider market dynamics, and economic, social, and political disruption and change (e.g., BREXIT, the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, climate change, carbon emissions – Phillips et al., 2022a; Phillips et al., 2022b). These factors could variously suppress or support the emergence of conflict in supply chain relationships.

Overall, three major limitations can be distinguished in the stream of antecedent research: the predominance of factors associated with relationship conflict, a tendency to consider each level of analysis in isolation, and a lack of replication across studies. First, conflict involves mechanisms from other levels of analysis besides those at relationship level (Lumineau et al., 2015). By focusing on just

one level of analysis, researchers only provide a partial picture of conflict. Moreover, by considering each level separately, conflict researchers neglect the interaction between levels, and may attribute effects from the dimensions of one level to those of another level, thereby creating a cross-level fallacy (Rousseau, 1985). Accordingly, a multilevel theoretical lens that encompasses the dynamic interplay across levels should provide a more insightful description of the conflict phenomenon. Finally, few replication studies have been published. Yet, replication is essential to the extent that it enables researchers to confirm past findings and to examine a phenomenon from various points of reference—such as different contexts, timing, and/or perspectives—and thereby grant original theories greater legitimacy.

Conflict management and resolution

Conflict management refers to the approaches and strategies used by parties to reduce and manage the tension. Researchers have attempted to classify these strategies, and hence various models have emerged. These frameworks differ in the terms used to describe the strategies, but their classifications are broadly based on two dimensions, which reflect people's concerns for their own interests, and their concerns for those of the other party. Figure 2 illustrates these dimensions and the classifications of the strategies identified in prior studies.

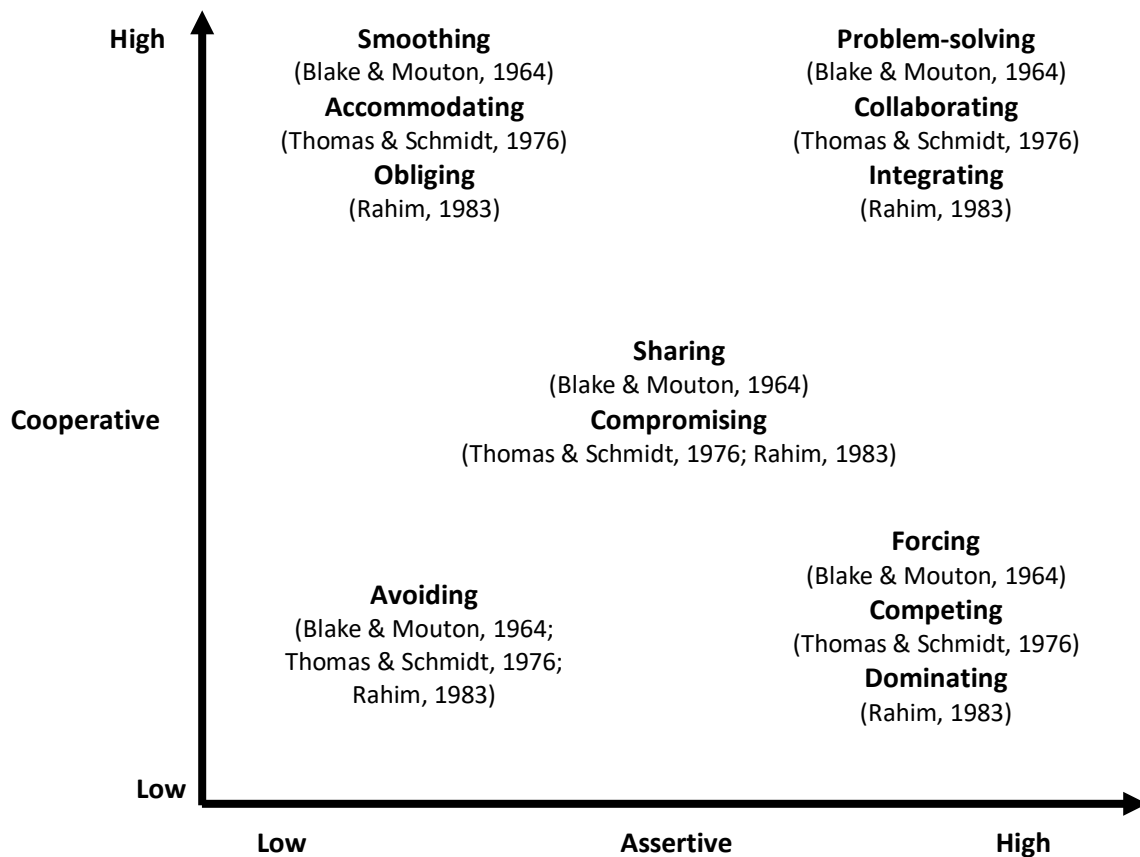


Figure 2 Conflict management strategies and some representative studies

In general terms, five distinct conflict management strategies have been identified, as shown in the figure: (1) *accommodating*, which implies offering help and acceding to the desires of the other party; (2) *collaborating*, which is oriented toward achieving maximum satisfaction of both parties' concerns through high levels of cooperation; (3) *compromising*, which presumes a mutual give and take so as to at least gain partial fulfillment of one's desires; (4) *avoiding*, which involves ignoring the associated concerns and downplaying the importance of the issue; (5) *forcing*, which involves imposing one's will on the other party.

Conflict management has not been sufficiently investigated. Of the 124 papers we reviewed, only 27 recognized conflict management strategies as part of their theoretical framework. Of these 27, the vast majority (73%) explored the direct relationship between strategies and outcomes, followed by a group that incorporated conflict (as a single construct) into their strategy models (19%), and only a few studies that combined conflict management strategies with specific conflict types (8%). This represents a significant limitation, the nature and level of conflict may account for as much variance in outcomes as the conflict management process and strategies.

Studies related to conflict management strategies cover a variety of theoretical domains. Prior research suggests that various factors have a bearing on the use of any given conflict strategy, with determinants including relational aspects such as power (Lam and Chin, 2004), fairness (Strutton et al., 1993), governance mechanisms (Shahzad et al., 2020), and project-related aspects such as product technological complexity (Lam and Chin, 2004).

Another stream of research explores the effectiveness of conflict management strategies through the investigation of their positive or negative outcomes (e.g., Ndubisi, 2011), particularly in terms of relationships. With the exception of a collaborative management strategy that was positively related to relationship outcomes in every such study, the results for other strategies were inconsistent or singular. For instance, while Bobot (2011) reported a negative relationship between *accommodation* and trust and commitment, Ndubisi (2011) demonstrated a positive relationship. Bobot (2011) also reported a negative relationship between a *forcing* strategy and trust and commitment.

Hypotheses concerning the effectiveness of an *avoiding* strategy were not supported in any of the associated studies, which might be explained by the fact that an avoidance strategy fails to address the root causes of a conflict, with the conflict problem persisting if parties choose to ignore it (Le Nguyen et al., 2016). Moreover, this strategy tends to undermine a relationship's goal of mutual

gain, and thus seems inconsistent with the norms and values advocated in supply chain relationships (Mohr and Spekman, 1994).

Other factors involved in the process of conflict management were investigated without testing the direct relationship of a conflict management strategy. For instance, Pulles and Loohuis (2020) examined how buyer openness and directness impact a supplier's willingness to adapt during a conflict episode.

Although this body of research has provided insights into conflict management, several limitations can be noted. First, few studies investigated the conditions (moderators) that might influence the relationship between a conflict management strategy and conflict outcomes. Similarly, few papers considered conflict types in conjunction with conflict management strategies, even though a small number of studies provided strong evidence of the necessity to combine them in order to understand conflict outcomes. For instance, Bobot (2011) found that when retailers use collaboration, rather than confrontation, the relationship between task conflict and relationship quality is amplified. One further limitation of existing studies is their cross-sectional nature, which largely overlooks changes in conflict intensity and the consequent changes required in conflict management. Finally, while a *strategic* approach to conflict can be useful, recent studies have criticized its applicability in practice, and have advocated the use of a more fine-grained approach based on specific tactics oriented toward conflict resolution (Carton and Tewfik, 2016).

Conflict outcomes

Researchers distinguish between the functional outcomes of conflict, which are the positive performance results that conflict generates, and dysfunctional ones, which are adverse effects on the performance of partners and are the more evident. Murfield et al. (2016) found that conflict is associated with the perception of lower levels of relationship quality on the part of suppliers, with a reduced motivation to accommodate buyers' request in the future. Other detrimental effects of conflict include relational betrayal (Leonidou et al., 2017), lack of cooperation and flexibility (Samaha et al., 2011), decreased relational investment (Luo et al., 2009), and reduced trust and commitment (Leonidou et al., 2006). Conversely, a few studies have shown that a certain degree of conflict between parties in a relationship may strengthen partner efforts toward value-creation, provide an opportunity to refine the ongoing relationship, and decrease switching intentions (Skarmeeas, 2006).

Following analysis of conflict outcomes in the extant literature, two main observations can be made: 1) the predominance of conflict dysfunctionality, and 2) the focus on firm or dyadic outcomes. Empirical evidence about the benefits of conflict in supply chains is limited, and this could be explained by the conceptualization of the conflict construct. Researchers typically used a unidimensional

conceptualization incorporating “conflict”, “incompatibilities”, and “tensions”, which tend to be interpreted negatively by respondents (O’Neill et al., 2015). These conceptualizations are not only indicative of a degree of conflict between partners, but also imply dysfunctional outcomes. Moreover, a one-dimensional conceptualization of conflict fails to capture the true effect of conflict on relationship outcomes (Ren et al., 2009). In addition, prior studies have very often theorized the conflict–outcome link as linear, and hence there has been little investigation of the mechanisms through which conflict gives rise to (dys)functional outcomes (mediating variables), and of the contextual factors that could moderate these relationships.

Lastly, conflict outcome measures considered in existing research focus largely on firm or dyadic outcomes. However, as previously discussed, supply chain relationships are nested in other relationships involving a variety of levels (e.g., individual, dyad, network), and conflict outcomes could very well pertain to inter-organizational issues, and to other levels, lower and higher.

Other observations from prior conflict studies

Figure 3 summarizes the key research themes discussed in the preceding sections. We also derived three other observations from our analysis, concerning: (1) time insensitivity; (2) lack of cross-level analysis; (3) focus on a single point of view.

First, the majority of supply chain conflict research is time-insensitive. This means that prior studies appear to consider conflict episodes to be invariant over time, particularly in their use of cross-sectional surveys. Despite the long-term nature of inter-organizational relationships, and the importance of investigating conflict dynamics over time, few publications apply a longitudinal or a processual perspective to the subject. However, “if we want to acknowledge the dynamic nature of conflict, our theorization must allow for time and not ignore it” (Mikkelsen and Clegg, 2017: 9).

Second, supply chain conflicts are considered to be inherently cross-level phenomena (Lumineau et al., 2015). Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of [conflict] dynamics may further add to our current understanding and mitigate against “cross-level fallacy” (Rousseau, 1985). However, prior studies have largely ignored more than one level of analysis when investigating relationship conflicts.

Third, supply chain relationships “undergo a continual balancing act where symmetry is not a typical state” (Hingley, 2001: 850). Yet, most of the empirical papers included in this review represent studies in which researchers examined the perspective of one focal company (80%) within a dyad, and to a far lesser extent the perspective of both sides of a dyad (matched dyads 16%; unmatched dyads 4%). Typically, exchange partners exhibit asymmetry in their perceptions of various relational constructs such as trust, dependence, justice, and knowledge, and these asymmetries have been

argued to be significant determinants of the behaviors of relationship partners (Gundlach and Cadotte, 1994).

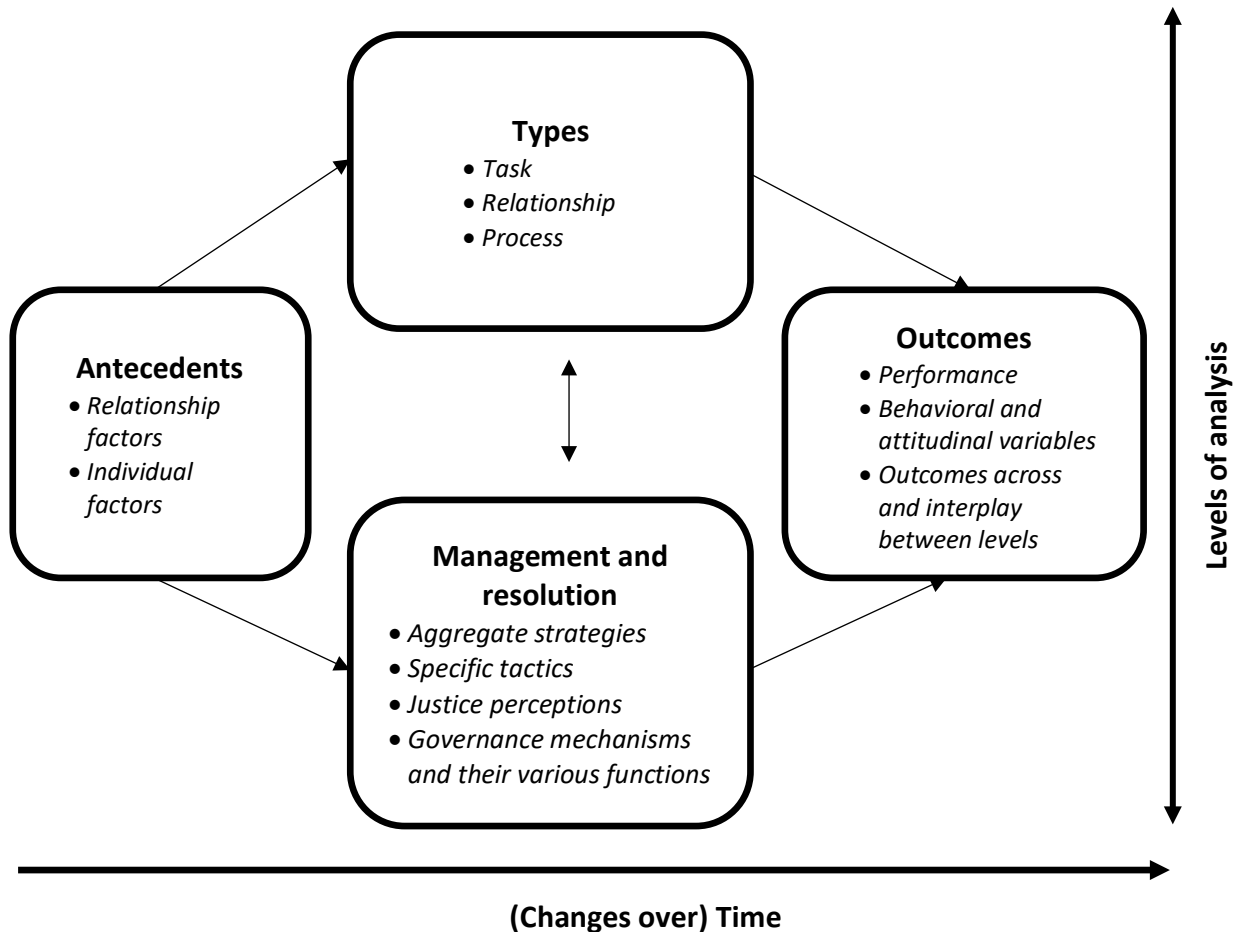


Figure 3 Conflict research - Summary of key research themes and their relationships

Emerging Research Directions

Through our descriptive and thematic analyses we identified and categorized gaps in terms of the major assumptions underlying conflict research in supply chain relationships. The following subsections outline the most significant areas in need of further investigation, setting the foundations for a research agenda to support advances in our understanding of and insight into such conflict. These emerging research directions are presented according to the same four key themes previously identified: (i) conflict conceptualization and the evolution and interplay of conflict types; (ii) conflict antecedents; (iii) conflict management and resolution; (iv) conflict outcomes.

Conceptualization and evolution and interplay of conflict types

Existing conflict research has demonstrated that conflict types are interrelated. However, their patterns of temporal change have not yet been investigated. One approach to investigating conflict type patterns is to use the concept of *velocity*. Velocity represents the rate and direction of change over a specified period of time. While the rate of change refers to the amount of change, the direction of change refers to its degree of continuity/discontinuity, where continuity reflects an extension of past change, and discontinuity represents a shift in direction (McCarthy et al., 2010).

Building on the multi-dimensional conceptualization of conflict and on the concept of velocity, each type of conflict could exhibit a particular velocity at a specific point in time. Accordingly, scholars could study the differences and relationships between *task* and *relationship conflict velocities*. Researchers could follow McCarthy et al. (2010) and study three dimensions of velocity: velocity homology—the similarity between the rate and direction of change of conflict types; velocity coupling—the extent to which the velocities of conflict types are causally connected; velocity regimes—the various patterns that emerge from differences in velocity homology and velocity coupling.

Integrating a temporal perspective would enable understanding of periods of time in a conflict situation when task and relationship conflicts prevail and those when they do not occur simultaneously. These patterns could be linked to particular mechanisms throughout the conflict process. Examining changes in conflict types will advance our understanding of how these types emerge in supply chain relationships and how they evolve – either singularly, in parallel, or interactively – during the conflict episode. It would also inform conflict theory by explicating the direction and rate of change in conflict types in temporal terms, which could eventually lead to a better understanding of (dys)functional outcomes.

Conflict antecedents

Human agency plays a major role in explaining idiosyncratic behaviors in buyer–supplier relationships, specifically in terms of developing trust, exercising power, reducing opportunism, and preventing relationship dissolution. For instance, Tangpong et al. (2010) found that the interaction of agent cooperativeness (an individual personality trait) and relationship norms (an organizational-level factor) mitigates opportunism in buyer–supplier relationships. These findings demonstrate that individuals at the interfaces of supply chain relationships can have an essential impact on conflict. A study by Cai et al. (2017) demonstrated how *guanxi* between boundary-spanners mitigates inter-organizational conflict through the reciprocal exchange of favors between exchange partners. Besides

the impacts of such interpersonal relationships, another fertile research opportunity relates to the characteristics of individuals and their impact on the conflict management process. For example, by applying personality trait theory (Weiss and Adler, 1984), conflict scholars could investigate how different traits or characteristics that explain behavioral difference among individuals—for example, cooperativeness, temporal orientation, attitude toward risk—interact with other inter-organizational factors to mitigate or amplify conflict.

A further research opportunity is to theorize the role of the relationship network in dyadic conflict. For instance, in the context of multinational corporations (MNCs) with centralized purchasing and sales centers, relationships in a given country are embedded within the relationship between the regional offices. An interesting research avenue is therefore to investigate how multiple ties operate and constrain relationship management in general, and conflict in particular. Team conflict research has embraced such reasoning. For instance, Ren (2008) demonstrated that network bridging ties act as a buffer against conflict. Along similar lines, Li and Hambrick (2005) investigated international joint-venture groups and found that parent company affiliations can generate fault lines—dividing lines that can split a group into subgroups—that lead to relationship conflict. Apart from the embeddedness of relationships in a wider network, the nature of the product/service being procured—such as its complexity or servitization (Johnson et al., 2021)—may have an impact on how conflicts emerge and are subsequently managed.

Finally, relationships are influenced by the external environment, including institutional, political, economic, cultural, environmental, and historical contexts (Lumineau et al., 2015; Zhu and Sarkis, 2007). Therefore, the study of conflict between organizations should take into consideration the environment in which the relationship is embedded. An exemplary study by Bai et al. (2016) integrated the macro-level (institutional environment: legal enforceability and government support), with the inter-organizational level (contract structure) to provide a more refined picture of the impact of contracts on conflict, thereby circumventing the single-level-of-analysis limitation. The researchers found that inter-organizational control grounded in an output-based contract was negatively related to buyer–supplier conflict when legal enforceability was high but not when it was low. An extension of this research would consider other institutional characteristics, including stringency of environmental control, regulatory ambiguity, and regulatory interference (Luo et al., 2009) such as experienced in public–private partnerships and/or other relationships with public sector involvement. Relationships between public and private organizations may be particularly subject to conflict and coordination failures as a result of, for instance, divergent objectives, values, and aims (Roehrich et al., 2014; Caldwell et al., 2017; Kalra et al., 2021; Roehrich and Kivleniece, 2022). In addition, future

research might also explore how the characteristics of a competitive business environment, including complexity and dynamism, impact conflict in supply chain relationships.

Conflict management and resolution

As already discussed, conflict management and resolution has mainly been researched from the perspective of strategies. Although enlightening, this approach is limited in not offering tangible tactics that can be used in practice. To circumvent this limitation, researchers could employ a justice theory lens (Bouazzaoui et al., 2020). Four justice dimensions have been identified in the existing literature (Liu et al., 2012): *distributive* justice ensures that parties to an exchange receive benefits that are commensurate with their inputs into the relationship; *procedural* justice refers to the process of resource allocation, and is evaluated on the basis of six rules covering consistency, bias-suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality; *interpersonal* justice refers to the interpersonal treatment received during the enactment of procedures; finally, *informational* justice is concerned with the accuracy and adequacy of the information provided. Future conflict studies could investigate how perceptions of justice drive the conflict management process—such as the efficacy of tactics associated with each justice dimension in relation to the intensity and type(s) of conflict.

Conflict management and resolution could also be investigated from a governance perspective. Scholars distinguish between relational (e.g., trust) and contractual mechanisms (Roehrich et al., 2020). While a few prior studies have started to investigate how both mechanisms prevent or trigger conflict—see the preceding subsection on *antecedents*—how governance mechanisms are used when conflict emerges requires further investigation. Shazad et al. (2020) found that contract completeness is positively associated with problem-solving and legalistic conflict management strategies and inversely related to a compromising strategy. Moreover, the investigators found that when trust exists between partnering organizations, they tend to adopt problem-solving and compromising strategies rather than legalistic ones. A further exploration of governance mechanisms could involve the use of contractual functions (coordination vs. control) when invoking or managing conflict.

Future conflict research should consider conflict episodes as being embedded in a relationship context. Accounting for the simultaneous existence of conflict and collaboration may bolster relationship ambivalence (e.g., Rees et al., 2013), impact how partners work out their disagreements, and, potentially, produce different ranges of conflict management strategies than those so far considered in the conflict management and resolution literature. For instance, an anticipation of future collaboration, foreshadowing the future, should create a disincentive to further escalate conflict, because it could substantially diminish access to partner resources and threaten the

continuity of the exchange. In essence, the simultaneous experience of both the valence and ambivalence that emerges invites further investigation of the antecedents, forms, and consequences of conflict–collaboration coexistence.

The tendency in conflict management and resolution research has been to analyze conflict strategies at a single point in time. However, conflict management is characterized by an interaction process in which two parties react to one another, wherein individuals alter their behavior to adapt to the situation, to achieve the best possible outcomes. An effective management tactic might not emerge in the immediate aftermath of conflict (Olekalns et al., 2020), and when an initial tactic is unsuccessful in providing a fair response to conflict, an alternative is required.

Integrating a temporal perspective into the conflict management process will provide a more fine-grained understanding of precisely what happens in a conflict situation in terms of partnering parties' behaviors and conflict intensities. It will also allow evaluation of how these dynamics evolve within the buyer–supplier relationship during the conflict situation and over the relationship life cycle. This temporal evaluation should allow researchers to better concentrate on conflict management strategies, and their utility within different organizational settings. Understanding conflict management as it occurs would draw a more complete picture of its trajectory by highlighting factors that contribute to conflict resolution or, in its absence, the migration of the relationship toward termination (Johnsen and Lacoste, 2016).

Conflict outcomes

Conflict outcomes may pertain to various levels. While supply chain conflicts are often conceptualized at firm level, their management is an inherently individual-level activity with potential consequences for the managers involved. There is a research opportunity to investigate whether successful conflict management is prized by the executive and leads to professional advancement. Service recovery research has embraced this perspective in exploring the combination of recovery metrics with employee reward systems (Michel et al., 2009), and could provide a template for developing research propositions in the context of supply chain conflict.

Another research direction worth exploring is *conflict contagion* (Sinha et al., 2016). For instance, utilizing emotional contagion theory, organizational team researchers demonstrated that dyadic conflict spills over to the teams involved (Jehn et al., 2013). Given that supply chain relationships are embedded within a network of relationships, this *spillover* or *contagion* process is worthy of further investigation; for example, it would be interesting to investigate conflict contagion across tiers of the supply chain over time.

Debate around conflict outcomes has been ongoing for decades in intra- and inter-organizational conflict research. Results among studies have been inconsistent – sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Researchers have incorporated a variety of factors to try and unpack this paradox, including conflict types and conflict management strategies. However, a universal conclusion has not been achieved. De Wit et al. (2012) suggested that one way to further decode conflict outcomes is to distinguish between those that are distal and those that are proximal. Proximal outcomes refer to short-term effects—that is, emergent states, which include the cognitive, motivational, and affective states of individuals. Distal outcomes refer to long-term effects, and include performance outcomes such as innovation, productivity, and effectiveness. Consequently, one way to advance theory on conflict outcomes is to conduct studies through a temporal lens and assess both the short- and long-term effects of different conflict types. This approach could better explain how conflict disrupts relationship function, and how partners might overcome conflict to improve relationship performance.

Supply chain partners can exhibit perceptual differences with regard to a conflict situation. Recent organizational studies have touched upon this aspect under the theme of *conflict about conflict* to describe situations where there is a perceptual incongruity among team members about the conflict episode (De Wit et al., 2012). Two types of asymmetries might emerge: (1) *within-conflict types*, wherein partners do not share the same perception of the *intensity* of task (relationship) conflict; (2) *across-conflict types*, wherein partners perceive the *nature* of the conflict differently—one party perceives the conflict to be task-related and the other perceives it to be relationship-related.

Past studies of conflict in supply chain relationships have often ignored such notions of asymmetry and assumed that buyers and suppliers work together on a task as if they had similar perceptions. Consequently, we still do not know much about the *perceptual convergence/divergence* regarding conflict within supply chain relationships. This line of study is particularly significant because researchers have argued that perceptual conflict asymmetry predicts conflict outcomes (Ma et al., 2018). Empirical results have demonstrated that asymmetrical task conflict perceptions decrease both performance and the creativity of interacting employees (Jehn et al., 2010).

Consequently, to advance research in conflicts in supply chain relationships, a rich area for research is that of understanding the antecedents of conflict asymmetry, particularly the factors that amplify, attenuate, or obfuscate incongruence in conflict perceptions among exchange partners. The investigation of asymmetry is also important because its existence may drive inappropriate and/or inefficient conflict management processes; for example, if a supplier perceives a conflict as task-related, it will deploy tactics targeted at managing the task, but if the buyer perceives the same conflict

as relationship-based, it may perceive the supplier's actions as inappropriate, exacerbating the situation and making dysfunctional outcomes more likely.

In addition to understanding the antecedents of asymmetry, further research could explore the specific impacts of asymmetries on conflict outcomes, particularly in the context of different conflict types; for example, is high task-conflict asymmetry more or less related to specific outcomes than high relationship-conflict asymmetry? Another fertile research direction would involve study of the impact of asymmetry on the features (including intensity and duration) and outcomes of conflict, using a magnitude–symmetry approach (Liu et al., 2012). The study of asymmetries in relation to time is another promising area; specifically, the timing of their emergence, as well as their dynamics over time.

We have highlighted a rich future research agenda for scholars on the topic of conflict in supply chain relationships. Broadly taken, this research agenda covers many aspects, exploring the nature and dimensions of key constructs (the “what”), actors (the “who”), contextual and environmental conditions (the “where”), temporal or change-related dimensions (the “when”), and process or dynamic development aspects (the “how”). Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the opportunities we have identified to advance our understanding of and insights into conflict in supply chain relationships. Pursuing these various questions in future research will help address the fundamental gaps identified and discussed in this chapter.

	What?	Who?	Where?	When?	How?
Key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dimensions and characteristics of different conflict types and levels • How to measure and operationalize conflict valence and asymmetries • Characteristics of different supply chain relationships • Nature and boundaries of inter-organizational relationships (dyad, triad, network) • Characteristics and degree of conflict in goals/objectives between public and private actors, and their impact on conflict emergence and management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals and teams: job roles, personal and professional interests, cognitive orientation, experience, bargaining power • (Public and private) organizations as part of the relationship: size, contracting capabilities, relational capabilities, degrees of public- and private-ness of the collaboration, parties' (lack of) prior experience; foreshadowing the future • Supply chains and networks (including size, nature, structure) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual factors: socio-economic dimensions, informal institutions, political and legal institutions, environmental and market dynamism • Impact of specific political, environmental or social events (e.g., BREXIT, pandemics) on conflicts in supply chain relationships • Impact of diverse forms of environmental uncertainty • Micro-foundational and entrepreneurial aspects of the collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporal considerations: timing of collaboration establishment, phases/lifecycle of the cooperation, contract management phases • Investigating conflict episodes (start, middle, end), and the differences between conflict types, as well as the impact of different resolution strategies • Differences between distal and proximal outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies and practices to minimize and address conflict in different types of supply chain relationships • Gaining benefits from conflicts in supply chain relationships • The role of relational and contractual governance mechanisms to suppress or manage conflicts • The role of different types of contracts (e.g., performance-based) on conflict emergence and resolution
Potential research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the differences in conflict valences between exchange partners? • How do parties react to mixed conflict valences (ambivalence)? • What are the factors that affect the impact and occurrence of asymmetries? • What are the antecedents of conflict asymmetries in supply chain relationships? • How do asymmetries impact conflict outcomes? • Do relationship and task conflicts act as substitutes or complements in a conflict episode, and what is the impact on performance? • What is the impact of different levels of conflict perception 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does managers' conflict valence weighting bias impact conflict outcomes at the buyer-supplier relationship level? • What are cross-level factors that impact conflict and conflict resolution? • What is the impact of dyadic conflict on different layers of the supply chain relationship? • How do different dimensions of supply chain relationships (e.g., shadow of the past/future; product/service complexity) influence conflict emergence and resolution? • How do private/public employees' (individual actors such as managers, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the influence of critical events in the wider supply network or market on conflict in buyer-supplier relationships? • How do events at multiple levels and their timing over the conflict episode impact conflict dynamics? • How do characteristics of the specific environmental context, such as the legal system (e.g. maturity, enforceability) influence conflict emergence and resolution? • How do regulatory and normative features facilitate or hinder conflict emergence and resolution? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do different relationship phases influence different conflict types? • How does the relationship length (and/or prior experience) impact conflict management? • When are relationships more (or less) resilient to surviving different types and levels of conflicts? • When do conflict asymmetries occur and when do they matter between partnering organizations? • What are the dynamics of conflict asymmetries over time? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are relational and contractual governance mechanisms used in practice to suppress or manage conflicts in supply chain relationships? • How do different types of contracts (e.g., performance-based) impact conflict emergence and resolution? • How can organizations coordinate and control activities and actions during a conflict episode? • How can conflicts in supply chain relationships be resolved fairly and justly, and which

	What?	Who?	Where?	When?	How?
	<p>between public and private actors in a relationship?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of contract framing (e.g. promotion vs. prevention) on conflict emergence and management? • How can (degrees of) collaboration increase/decrease the emergence of different conflict types? 	<p>consultants, engineers or lawyers) preferences in managing conflicts impact conflict resolution?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does (degrees of) interpersonal and inter-organizational conflict emerge? • How does the involvement of specific (public and private) actors in the wider supply network impact conflict emergence and resolution? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the temporal transitions of conflict valence patterns? • What are the patterns of conflict types over time? • What is the effectiveness of conflict resolution tactics over time? • What are the short- and long-term consequences of a conflict episode? 	<p>resolution strategies are most appropriate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of the conflict episode on the buyer–supplier relationship in terms of, for instance, information exchange and trust? Does one (or multiple) conflict episode(s) lead to reduced information sharing between formerly trusting organizations? • Are idiosyncratic public, non-profit, and private sector capabilities and resources complements or substitutes when resolving conflicts?
Possible theoretical lenses	Framing theory, information processing theory, regulatory focus theory	Information economics, attribution theory, real options theory, strategic choice theory, prospect theory, reputation and power dependency theory, self-determination theory, relational exchange, (extended) resource-based view, social network theory/analysis, stakeholder theory	Institutional theory, weak ties theory, complexity theory, complex adaptive systems	Dynamic capabilities, organizational learning theory / knowledge-based view	Justice theory, fairness theory, capabilities, (extended) resource-based view, resource orchestration theory

Table 1 A research agenda for conflict in supply chain relationships

Managerial Implications

Conflict resolution represents a core obligation and responsibility for managers. Moreover, supply chain scholars have indicated that supply chain agents spend one in every six hours of their time dealing with conflict (Bobot, 2011). Therefore, it is critical that managers understand how and under what conditions conflict can emerge, escalate, and be resolved.

This chapter is useful to managers because it reveals the complexities inherent in conflict and the variety of challenges that need to be addressed when it arises within supply chain relationships. The identified themes can help practitioners develop a fuller understanding of the various dimensions of conflict, the relevant topics (and issues) for practice, and how they may be addressed. For instance, the theme of conflict asymmetry is particularly useful to managers in enabling them to comprehend the perspective of the other party in relation to a conflict situation and thus work to ensure mutual understanding. Being on the same page in this way helps managers to deal better with conflict by crafting resolution approaches that are tailored to the specifics of the situation.

Managers should understand that a conflict with a buyer or supplier is embedded in the bigger picture of the relationship, and that conflict dynamics, resolutions, and outcomes can involve factors beyond the dyadic relationship. Moreover, understanding the dynamics of conflict resolution should enable managers to avoid negative inflection points in the resolution process, to assuage the severity of conflict impact on buyers and suppliers, and to build long-lasting collaborative relationships. Managers should not only understand different resolution strategies and tactics, but also appreciate how these strategies are likely to work across a wide variety of conflict situations of differing intensities.

Much is already known about conflict management in the supply chain as a result of the many studies conducted to date. Organizations and managers should find this resource valuable to them as they develop training programs and effective implementations of some of the research observations. Given different contextual situations, organizations may wish to experiment with a variety of considerations and strategies. The antecedents of conflict are also significant in that managers should encourage enablers of effective management of conflict when it does arise, and seek to eliminate its dysfunctional antecedents. The consequences and outcomes of supply chain conflicts—although by no means fully understood—do, nevertheless, provide insights into potential practical solutions for managing them.

Conclusion

Although we have learned much about conflict in supply chain relationships, its various antecedents and outcomes, and its management and resolution, there remains much that needs further

exploration if we are to advance our understanding and gain new insights. In this chapter, we have proposed multiple research areas that will help advance conflict theory, particularly as it pertains to conflict types, their antecedents, their outcomes, and the process of their management and resolution. We suggest specific research questions and position a detailed agenda for further research efforts. We hope this chapter both motivates such research and informs business practice so as to augment our understanding and management of conflict in supply chain relationships.

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