

The Movement
of Conflict in
Organizations: The Joint
Dynamics of Splitting
and Triangulation

Kenwyn K. Smith
University of Pennsylvania

This paper examines the sociopsychological processes through which conflicts move around in organizations and become expressed at locations quite removed from their places of origin. This conceptualization draws on two major theoretical contributions: (1) "triangulation" from social psychology and family therapy and (2) "splitting," as developed in anthropology and clinical psychology. With these sociopsychological processes linked, it is possible to understand how conflicts are transported from one location to another. These processes are illustrated with intensive case material from a long-term participant observation study of a public school system in which the relationships between the community, the elected board of education, the superintendent's office, the principals, teachers, and students in the high school were examined.

A White House staff member of the Kennedy administration once commented that it was always clear when the president and the First Lady were fighting and when they were relating amicably. Responding to an expression of surprise that their relationship would be so transparent, the staff member replied, "they actually were quite private about their struggles, but we knew when they were fighting simply by watching the interactions of their personal staffs. When the hairdressers and the transport people were arguing we knew this was because JFK and Jackie were in conflict. When these groups had their act together we knew the first couple was getting on OK."

This commentary contains a complex thesis about human behavior in organizations: conflicts "belonging" at one location are often displaced and enacted elsewhere, there being a parallelism between the conflicts at the place of origin and the place of expression. In this brief vignette from the Kennedy Administration we see the intergroup relations at the lowest level of the White House having enfolded into them the unresolved interpersonal conflicts at the highest level (Smith, 1984). The goal of this paper is to explicate a set of sociopsychological processes through which movement of such conflict in organizations may occur.

Three preliminary considerations about the relocating of conflict set the frame for the theorizing in this paper. First, two settings may be connected in such a way that conflicts can be passed from one to the other, making it possible for all the tension to be released at one place on behalf of both parties. Or the two settings may swap them around so that each expresses the conflicts "belonging" to the other location. Second, conflicts can be moved from multiple locations, like tributaries feeding into a river, and become joined together, producing pressures that are released at a weak point, like the walls of a dam giving way or a river breaking its banks. The point where the conflicts are released can be understood as giving expression to all the tensions exported from elsewhere. Third, as conflict moves, it can both jump levels of the system and change form. In the Kennedy example, what started as interpersonal, marital tensions became an intergroup struggle over whose scheduling priorities were to prevail, the beauticians' or the limousine drivers'.

Setting the Frame

There have been many major theoretical contributions to understanding conflict within organizations. Numerous writers have indicated that the very process of being human, of living in interdependent conditions, of organizing disparate units into one whole, creates conflict and the attendant need to manage it (Boulding, 1957; Sarason, 1972; Wilden, 1972). Conflict within organizations can result from many forces, such as intrapersonal struggles (Erikson, 1964; Lidz, 1968), interpersonal relationships (Walton, 1969; Glidewell, 1970), group dynamics (Redl, 1942; Bion, 1961), status and authority (Kabanoff, 1985), or structural characteristics (Weber, 1947; Dahl, 1970; Oshry, 1977). **While conflict itself is neutral, it can be very disruptive or extremely enhancing depending on how it is used** (Walton, 1969; Wall and Nolan, 1986; Lynch, 1987). It can be dealt with in ways that produce very negative outcomes, ranging from the extremes of withdrawal to attack (Mitchell and Mitchell, 1984). It can also be treated as a revitalizing opportunity to change that which has become entrenched and stagnant (Stamatis, 1987).

The findings of many empirical studies of organizational conflict have led authors to imply, though not state explicitly, that conflicts do get moved from one location to another and expressed at the secondary setting in some transposed form. At the group-dynamic level a good example is the often reported phenomenon of scapegoating, an ancient religious ritual (Wells, 1980), which is now used as a term to summarize the displacement of tensions that "belong" to the group as a whole and their relocation in one individual member who "takes on" the conflict and enacts it on behalf of all group members (Slater, 1966; Yeargan and Nehemkis, 1983; Oehler and Perault, 1986).

At the intergroup level, there is substantial evidence about movement of conflict. Alderfer and Smith's (1982) two studies of intergroup dynamics illustrate how the conflicts among groups at the lower levels of an organization (between different organizational divisions in one study and between groups of black and white workers in the other) can be understood as a parallel enactment of the intergroup relationships of the larger context in which they are embedded. Gemmill (1986) similarly reported that the group dynamics observed during a medical case conference were a micro-cosmic portrayal of system forces imported from the larger context of the medical profession as a whole. Friedkin and Simpson (1985) found that unmanageable intermember relationships within groups became more collaborative and less tension filled when there was conflict with other groups.

Similarly, the work of Coser (1956) and Sherif (1958) showed that relations between groups in conflict become much more congenial when the groups are confronted with a mutual enemy or a superordinate goal. In fact, Simmel (1955) argued that groups in conflict often seek out, or create, enemies so that the tensions that exist in their internal relationships can be exported into their interactions with the enemy. Brown et al. (1986) reported an added dimension. Having an enemy can help a group develop a sense of its own identity, yet again illustrating displacement, for under these circumstances the

tensions associated with identity formation are being played out as a battle with an enemy.

Conflict between an organization and its environment is often reported as being accompanied by internal struggles, such as scapegoating of leaders, blocked creativity, and lowered morale (Sarason, 1972; Cameron, Kim, and Whetten, 1987). Thompson (1967) indicated that organizations facing external threats attempt to protect internal units from disturbance. This is done by creating regulatory mechanisms to absorb the external perturbations as much as possible and to minimize their effects when total absorption is impossible (Ashby, 1956). This sets in place a new domain of conflict, between the pre-existing internal patterns and the systems of regulation designed to protect the organization from the effects of external disruptions (Dunbar and Wasilewski, 1985).

From a more macro perspective, Carroll, Goodstein, and Gyenes (1988) reported that conflict at the level of the state, in this case, fragmentation in the decision-making process in Hungary over agricultural producer cooperatives, gets translated into an increase in the level of conflict and competitiveness among the cooperatives at the more micro level.

Despite the many contributions theoreticians have made to understanding conflict, the issue of how conflict moves remains unexplored. To date, we have developed only the most rudimentary conceptual tools to investigate the processes by which conflict moves, especially (1) when it surfaces at a location removed from its point of origin, (2) when there are few or no visible signs of the tension where it began, and (3) when there is no readily identifiable pathway by which the conflict was transported. I am not claiming that conflict will always be displaced, for it clearly can be dealt with at its local setting. This paper is not concerned with whether conflict moves, or under what conditions. Rather, my purpose is to understand how it moves when it does.

The theoretical basis of this paper rests on two major processes and their links: splitting and triangulation, two processes that are mutually sustaining. The process of splitting creates the conditions that promote triangulation, and the process of triangulation fosters splitting. In this paper I examine the impact of these two processes operating in tandem and open up a new way to understand how conflict in organizations might move around. My claim is not that this is the only way to understand the movement of conflict. My goal is simply to develop some fresh tools for our thinking about this issue that, to date, has remained unexplicated. To illustrate, I discuss a set of events that constituted one segment of an intensive study of Ashgrove's public school system, the full report of which is recorded in Smith (1982).

SPLITTING AND TRIANGULATION

Research Setting

Ashgrove (a pseudonym) was a small New England town of Protestant, Republican, farming origins that had become a Catholic, Democratic, bedroom community for nearby, larger industrial cities. Overall, the quality of education was very good. Ashgrove embraced educational innovations regularly, willingly spending money on programs nearby school

systems shunned. The town politicians were careful financial custodians, underwriting school improvements through industrial developments rather than increasing property taxes.

I was investigating the group relationships among the community, the town politicians, the elected board of education, the superintendent's office, the school principals, and the teachers and students in the one high school in Ashgrove, using participant observation methods (as explicated in Whyte, 1984; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Berg and Smith, 1988). My agreement with the school system was (1) that I would be as unobtrusive as possible, (2) that I would discuss none of my findings with anyone while gathering data, and (3) that at the conclusion I would provide oral feedback based on my research to all who had participated.

I report some of my findings here, for purely illustrative purposes. While the whole study lasted six months, the material presented here was gathered during the first three months. During my field work in Ashgrove I spent about 25 hours a week for the first three months and six hours a week for the last three months, for a total of approximately 400 hours of direct data gathering, about 100 on each of the following activities: (1) archival research, (2) individual interviewing, (3) observing group meetings, and (4) watching direct encounters between groups.

During the first three months, I interviewed the following 16 people twice and some of them three times: all nine board members, the superintendent and his two assistants, and the principal and his three assistant principals in the high school. I also interviewed 10 teachers and approximately 50 students once. I observed all the groups working in their natural settings. This included, for example, 40 hours of silently observing the board of education conducting its public and secret board meetings or the Democratic board members during their late-night, clandestine caucuses. I observed groups interacting with each other, such as when the board of education met with the town finance committee, both in public and secret settings, and the weekly encounters between the board and the teachers' contract negotiation team, both during their direct negotiations and when they met to caucus privately.

There were several principles I adopted while gathering data: (1) I would vary the source of my data as frequently as possible. For example, if I interviewed the superintendent or one of his assistants one day, I would make sure that before I spoke to anyone from the superintendent's office again, usually two or three weeks later, I interviewed and observed members of other groups, such as teachers or the board. (2) I varied, on a regular basis, the forms of my data gathering. For example, I would follow my observations of group or intergroup events by a series of interviews or intensive archival searches to see whether claims made during meetings could be confirmed by other sources. (3) I treated only the information that I got from three independent sources as data worth considering. (4) Whenever I came to feel one group's "reality" was "right" and another's was "wrong," I would then go and observe the second group and stay there until its experience seemed as palatable as the perspectives of the first

group. (5) I sought information about Ashgrove's history and its politics, but always so that I could give context to my main focus, which steadfastly remained understanding the relationships among the groups within the school system.

In this paper I describe a set of complex organizational processes, observed in the Ashgrove school system that illustrate the real-life, human interactions that can be meaningfully understood via the joint dynamics of "triangulation" and "splitting." While this case material includes the relationships with the school system's community, it is the organizational conflict that is of primary concern to me.

Triangulation and the Movement of Conflict

Bowen (1978) argued that it is often most useful to conceptualize relationships between two parties, be they individuals, groups or organizations, in triangular rather than diadic terms. He based this on the observation that whenever tension emerges in the relationship between two parties (X and Y), there is a tendency for one of them (say X) to draw a third party (A) into the encounter, forming a triangle with one insider pair (X-A) and isolating Y from the original bond with X. The pairing strengthens X but puts Y into a comparatively powerless position, destabilizing the original X-Y relationship.

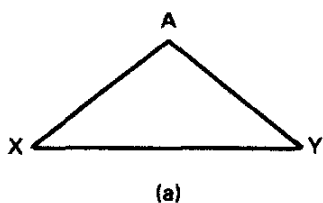
Y may retaliate by trying to break the X-A bond, either to reconnect with X or alternatively to link up with A, isolating X in a kind of "payback" for abandoning Y in the first place. Y's actions are likely to provoke a counteraction from X, triggering a protracted cyclical struggle that results in A being made into a pawn of X-Y's interactions. This is referred to as primary triangulation. Another option for Y, in the face of the triangle created by X's bonding with A, is to pull in another outside party (B) and build a (Y-B) coalition as a counter to X-A's power. This may be described as secondary triangulation.

When such coalitions are built, there are certain rules of interaction that are commonly observed. These were explicated by the balance theorists (Cartwright and Harary, 1956; Heider, 1958), who asserted that the set of relationships among all pairs in a triad moves toward a state of internal congruence. For example, "the enemy of my friend becomes my enemy," and "the enemy of my enemy becomes my friend." There are two forms of balance or congruence, as represented in Figures 1, a and b, below: (1) when all pairs of relationships are allies or (2) when two parties are allied and both are adversaries of the third party. There are also two forms of imbalance or incongruence, as represented in Figure 1, c and d, below: (3) when two pairs are allies, but the third association is adversarial or (4) when all parties are adversaries.

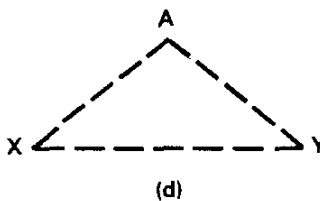
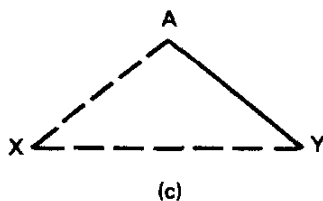
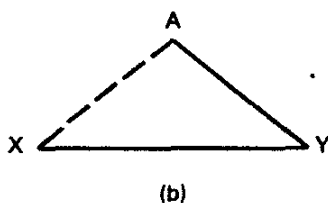
In the case of secondary triangulation, if Y reacts to X's bonding with A by pulling in a second external party (B), and does this in a way that keeps all interlocked triangles congruent in the sense meant by the balance theorists, the result will be conflict between two pairs (X-A and Y-B) in place of the original X and Y struggle. If the X-A and Y-B pairs then deal with the strains in their interactions by drawing in further allies, each time following the rules of congruence, no matter how many extra parties are included (with only one exception referred to as the case of scapegoating), the result will be

Figure 1. Typology of triadic relationships.

Balanced/Congruent Triads



Unbalanced/Incongruent Triads



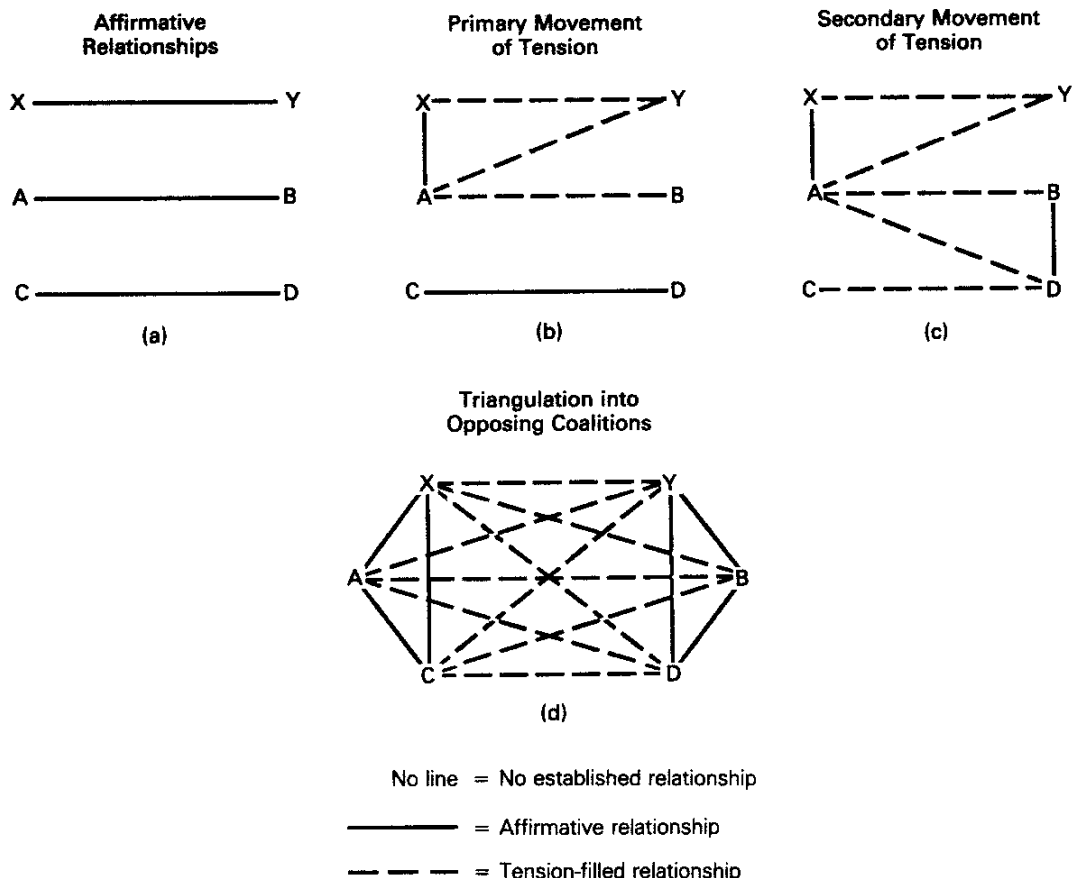
———— = Affirmative relationship
 - - - - = Tension-filled relationship

two, and only two, opposing groups (Hoffman, 1981). Hence, the most common consequence of repeated secondary triangulation is that what started as a conflict between X and Y becomes quickly transformed into a conflict between two opposing coalitions, as in my opening illustration of President and Mrs. Kennedy. This basic process is referred to as triangulation into opposing coalitions.

To illustrate how the processes of triangulation can get played out, consider the case in which there are three pairs of affirmative relationships in a particular setting (X-Y, A-B, and C-D). If conflict emerges between X and Y, and X responds by drawing A into an X-A pairing, thereby fracturing A's previous bond with B (as represented in Figure 2, b), the question is what happens to B? If B, now isolated from A, responds by pulling D, in turn, from an affirmative relationship with C, the overall effect will be the impairment of the C-D relationship (as represented in Figure 2, c). Assuming all these parties then interact with each other and the rules of triangular congruence are maintained, a very typical pattern will be that represented in Figure 2, d, a replica of the two-coalition pattern discussed previously. Whatever way it plays out, the central issue is that pathways get established by which the conflict can be displaced.

Another option for Y, confronted with X's pairing with A is to break up the X-A coalition in such a destructive way that afterwards no connecting of X, Y, or A is possible, resulting in an incongruent triangle. It would be natural for X, Y, and A then to split apart and simply terminate their relationships. However, this is often not possible, as in family situations in which members feel emotionally locked in or with groups in organizations that simply are not free to cease interacting. One way to deal with this is for each party (X, Y, and A) to pull in external allies. If this is repeated over and over, each time

Figure 2. Transforming affirmative relationships into opposing coalitions.



obeying the rules of congruence, the consequence will be the creation of three adversarial coalitions, each forming around X, Y, and A. This pattern is often seen with families engaged in domestic violence, where the local police, the school system, and the community welfare agency are respectively drawn in on behalf of the abused member, the acting-out child, and the spouse contending with the family finances (Bowen, 1978). These three agencies then end up in a struggle with each other that parallels that of the individual family members. The results are twofold. Either the agencies become so combative with each other that another system such as the judiciary has to be brought in so that the family's problems do not get buried beneath the institutional battles of these "helping" agencies, or a new form of triangulation develops among these agencies, replicating the patterns discussed earlier.

Splitting and Its Relationship to Triangulation

The concept of splitting, defined by Laing (1969) as the partitioning of a set into two subsets, emerged in parallel forms in both the clinical (Klein, 1975) and anthropological (Bateson, 1936) literatures. In the clinical tradition, splitting describes the actions of infants struggling to deal with early ambivalences such as the desire to be fused with mother and the wish to be separated from her. Such ambivalences create strong love/hate reactions toward the mother which then have to be managed. To maintain a sense of psychological

equilibrium, the infant splits the feelings of good and bad, feelings that emanate from a common source, and projects them into different "objects," for example, creating a "good mommy" and a "bad daddy" (Klein, 1975; Wells, 1980), thereby enabling these "apparently contradictory" feelings to be experienced as having come from different places (Smith and Berg, 1987). The management of this splitting leads directly to the generation of a triangle with the three prongs being (1) self, with deeply ambivalent feelings, (2) an external person (object) who is made into the repository of the "good" projections, and (3) another person who becomes the repository of the "bad," enabling the self to be experienced as whole.

Bateson (1936) conceptualized a social version of splitting while observing tribal rituals. He noted that the whole often became partitioned into two units in such a way that one part "took on" certain attributes on behalf of the whole, while others adopted different traits, again on behalf of the whole. For example, during tribal rituals some members became dancers while others became observers, and the actions of each part heightened the differentiation of the other. The audience behavior reinforced the dancers' exhibitionism which, conversely, induced the observers into more passionate levels of spectatorship, and vice versa (Lipset, 1980).

Bateson saw splitting as a process of oscillation and vibration that intensifies role differentiation. It emerges in either of two forms, complementary or symmetrical. With complementary splitting, the parts take on different roles that together make up a whole, such as leader-followers, master-apprentices, or exhibitionists-spectators. With symmetrical splitting, the whole is partitioned in such a way that each part competes for the same or similar roles. Once role delineation has begun, if both parties fully engage, the process intensifies. For example, with complementary exchanges, as the submissive becomes more passive, the dominant becomes more assertive, and vice versa. In symmetrical exchanges, cycles of escalation are set off, such as price wars in economics and armament races in international relations (Hoffman, 1981).

Bateson noted that symmetrical struggles often occur within the same level of a system, while tensions between levels usually take on a complementary form. He also observed that symmetrical interactions within one level of a system can be swapped with complementary ones across levels, and vice versa. He illustrated this with his observations of tribal initiation rites. Bateson suggested that during such rituals the relationship between the men as a whole and the initiates could be viewed as complementary in that, as part of the rites of passage, the boys have to submit to the dominance of the adult males. However, when the adult males were divided into two rival factions, each struggling to be the most influential in the tribe (a symmetrical split), the novices would be bullied more ferociously than usual. It occurred as follows: When the men were expected to act in a unified way during these initiation rituals, the rival factions would place their direct conflicts with each other on hold and engage the other faction indirectly via the initiates. Each faction would be extra abusive to the boys and then taunt its rival into bullying the initiates even further. In the process, a triangle would be cre-

Movement of Conflict

ated, the three prongs being the boys and the two rival factions of men. The symmetrical conflicts among the dominant males can be understood as being displaced into the complementary relationships across levels of the system.

Using these concepts, Bateson (1972) provided a number of observations about how a system stabilizes itself as conflict escalates. With the intensification of internal symmetrical struggles, a portion of the rival factions often splits off to "colonize" elsewhere, resulting in a new organization or a satellite village that ends up being a "carbon copy" of the original. The symmetrical divisions within it turn out to be similar to those at the first location; however, the conflicts in both settings are more subdued.

Another version of this displacement in the face of symmetrical splitting is what has become known as heresy. Here one faction is labelled as threatening to the established order and is expelled. It colonizes elsewhere, with its new setting embodying that which was not tolerable to the earlier community. But the old community seems reluctant to let go and instead tries to control the satellite, creating a complementary struggle. The resultant across-level complementary conflict can be seen as an expression of the earlier within-system symmetrical tensions.

Movement of Conflict in Full Bloom

The central thesis of this paper is that conflict from one setting is often "dealt with" by being passed to another location, with the form of the tensions being altered as they are shifted across levels of the system. The key question associated with this is how might we understand the sociopsychological processes by which such conflicts are transported. To address this, I use the Ashgrove story to illustrate how splitting and triangulation, operating in tandem, make possible the movement of organizational conflict. I discuss splitting in a generic way, drawing upon Bateson's ideas, but for my purposes I discuss these in terms of within-unit splits, which Bateson labelled symmetrical and which I call horizontal, and between-level splits, which Bateson called complementary and I call vertical. In organizations in which there are hierarchies, vertical tensions are of the complementary form.

There are three major points illustrated by the Ashgrove case: (1) The splittings and triangulations from separate settings often spill over into each other, creating pathways that consistently channel the tensions into particular places; (2) This channeling may be repeated so often that the actual conflicts appear to be and are treated as an attribute of that part of the system giving expression to it; and (3) The linking of triangles such that the horizontal splits at one level of analysis become dovetailed into vertical splits with those above and below, and vice versa, create an interlocking grid where attempts to break out of the prevailing dynamic trigger a lot of movement within the grid but little change in the grid itself.

For almost five years, one very stressful theme had dominated the attention of Ashgrove's board of education: where to locate the ninth grade students. They were building a new middle school to replace the dilapidated junior high and to relieve overcrowding at the senior high school and several

elementary schools. There were good educational reasons to keep the ninth grade students in the high school and good fiscal reasons to move them to the middle school.

When it came to its school system, the Ashgrove community as a whole had two strong values, a progressive educational philosophy and a conservative approach to town finances. Most community members expressed both these values. Virtually everyone voiced his or her support for educational innovations and yet voiced concerns about wasting money on changes that promised little of worth. There was an almost universal willingness to spend money on anything that would clearly contribute to the children's development. However, when these two values, which seemed to exist side by side within most individuals, were expressed publicly in the community, they were embodied in the actions of two camps, the "educational progressives" and the "fiscal conservatives."

The debate over where the ninth grade should be located pulled powerfully on the strings of both these community camps, who of course pressured the board members to represent their interests. On numerous occasions the board had tried to decide what to do with the ninth grade, but each time they had ended up with a deadlocked 4-4 vote. When such deadlocks arose, the chairman was expected to cast a tie-breaking vote. This created two problems, one for the board and one for the chairman. From the board's point of view, breaking the deadlock meant it had sided with one of the community camps, risking a backlash from the other. The chairman's concern was that as a prominent lawyer in Ashgrove, whichever way he voted risked alienating a substantial portion of his legal clients.

The chairman tried to orchestrate not having to vote, so he could avoid having his legal practice turned into a forum for the enactment of the community's conflicting values. One method he used was to invite further community input, which repetitively got played out as follows. Representatives of the two community camps would attend the board meeting, and each would pick on the subgroup within the board most like the part of the community it opposed. The fiscal conservatives from the community would attack the board members who had voted for the educational innovation, to the accompaniment of the public sympathy and private delight of the board progressives, and vice versa.

Board members seemed to revel in these "community input" sessions, for, during them, each faction within the board would have its opponents attacked without bloodying its own hands. The board subgroups might have waged this battle directly with each other, were it possible to do so without creating a civil war within its own ranks. But this "external" arrangement was "ideal," for it set up the kind of triangle that enabled the adversarial factions within the board, after the community attacks, to act like good colleagues by mutually agreeing about the brutality of the community members and thereby helping to heal each others' wounds. In their shared reaction to the volatility of the public, board members reported feeling united, of course overlooking the fact that just prior to this event they had been deadlocked with equally hostile divisions in their own group and that they had sought

this "special community input" as a means of dealing with their own internal divisions.

After these community "input" sessions, the board was of course still split with 4-4 deadlocks, but by then emotions would have been stirred to such a level that diffusing the incubating tensions became the highest priority. Sometimes this would be done by the chairman simply voting and getting it all over with. But often the board would seek some respite by asking the superintendent or the high school principal to stand in the firing line of the community factions' hostilities for a while. On one of these occasions, in a public setting, while being subjected to intense personal and professional abuse by the warring community factions, the principal, aged 48, suffered a massive heart attack and died.

At this point, the tensions that had been cascading down from the community to the board to the principal were returned to the board in an even more complex form. The board was left confronting not only the problem of where to locate the ninth grade but also the need to find a new principal. There were two assistant principals in the high school at that time, Brendan Collier and Lewis Brook. Collier, the senior assistant, indicated that he didn't want the job under any circumstances. So Lewis Brook was appointed acting principal and the board returned, undaunted, to its ongoing struggle over the ninth grade location, virtually ignoring the battle casualties being strewn by the wayside.

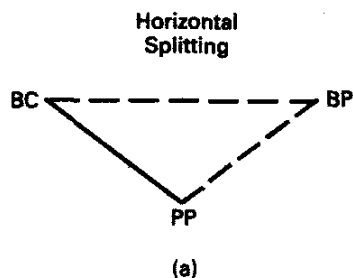
For several weeks Lewis Brook heard nothing from the board, no indication as to how long he would be acting principal, no indication about procedures for making a permanent appointment, no concern that he and Collier were now doing the work that had long outgrown the capacities of three people. The board was simply ignoring the principals' situation while it attended to other concerns. Then, without warning, Brook's position was made permanent. No national search. No interviews. No discussion. The job was his.

Brook experienced the board as behaving erratically. He asked them to make a quick appointment of a new assistant principal, a request that was ignored. Weeks went by, and then three board members made a bold move, arguing that they should appoint two new assistant principals, not just one. Their reasoning was that running the high school had become too burdensome for one principal and two assistants, as the recent death of their principal had clearly indicated. Several board members rallied in opposition, arguing such an action would be fiscally reckless. Debate raged again, and another 4-4 deadlock seemed likely.

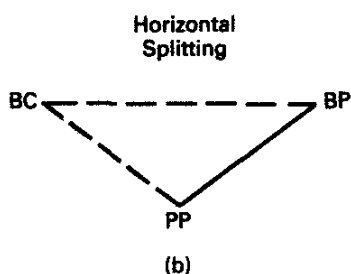
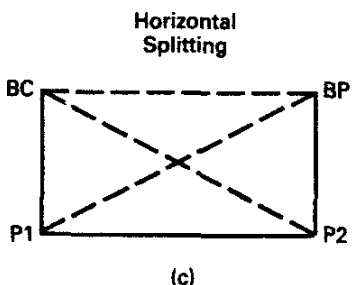
Again there was a horizontal split within the board, and the approach of the factions toward the high school principals can be fruitfully examined in terms of triangulation. The principals were being made into a third leg of a triangle that could be constructed in either of two ways, the key question being which subgroup, the board conservatives (BC) or the board progressives (BP), would get its way with the principals (PP) by being affirmatively paired with them, i.e., versions a or b of Figure 3. From previous events, it was clear what would happen. The progressives would attempt to bond with the principals by suggesting that a third assistant would ease the

Figure 3. The displacement of the board's horizontal splits.

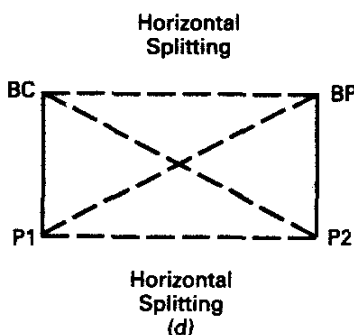
**Incongruent Triangles between
Board Factions and Principals**



**A Mixture of Congruent and
Incongruent Triangles**



**A Balanced System of
Congruent Triangles**



———— = Affirmative relationships

- - - - = Conflictual relationships

BC = Board Conservatives, BP = Board Progressives,
PP = Principals, P1 = Principal Lewis Brook, P2 = Principal
Brendan Collier

excessive administrative demands in the high school. The conservatives would counter, suggesting that saving funds by not appointing an extra assistant principal would enable those special innovations, dear to the hearts of the principals, to be protected from the budgetary axe.

This set the stage for the struggle over which of the triangles (a or b in Figure 3) was to prevail, thereby making these triangles linked (as in Figure 3, c), so that the affirmative bond between Principal Lewis Brook (P1) and his assistant, Brendan Collier (P2), would be placed under severe threat. Should the pattern represented in Figure 3, c be maintained, there would be two congruent triangles (BC-P1-BP and BC-P2-BP) and two incongruent triangles (BC-P1-P2 and BP-P1-P2) that would have to co-exist. But all triangular incongruence would disappear if the two principals were to become horizontally split, as represented in Figure 3, d. Typically this would mean one principal taking on the concerns about protecting their hard-earned innovations and not risking them by asking for another assistant, with the other principal arguing that the innovations would not be worth continuing unless they could be adequately administered, an impossibility

without an extra principalship. Of course, the bond between the principals (PP) would have to be extraordinarily strong to resist the pressures coming from the board, especially given that the principals were subordinate to the board. On the other hand, by PP's splitting, both triangles a and b in Figure 3 could prevail, and the principals' relationship with each other would become horizontally split, with each being affirmatively linked to one board faction and locked into a vertical split (due to the superior-subordinate relationship) with the other board faction.

The board chairman was determined to avoid getting in the middle of this 4-4 split. He privately indicated to board members that if the motion for the extra principal did deadlock at 4-4, he would vote against it, and he successfully used this threat as leverage to orchestrate the defeat of the extra assistant principal motion without it ever coming to a public vote.

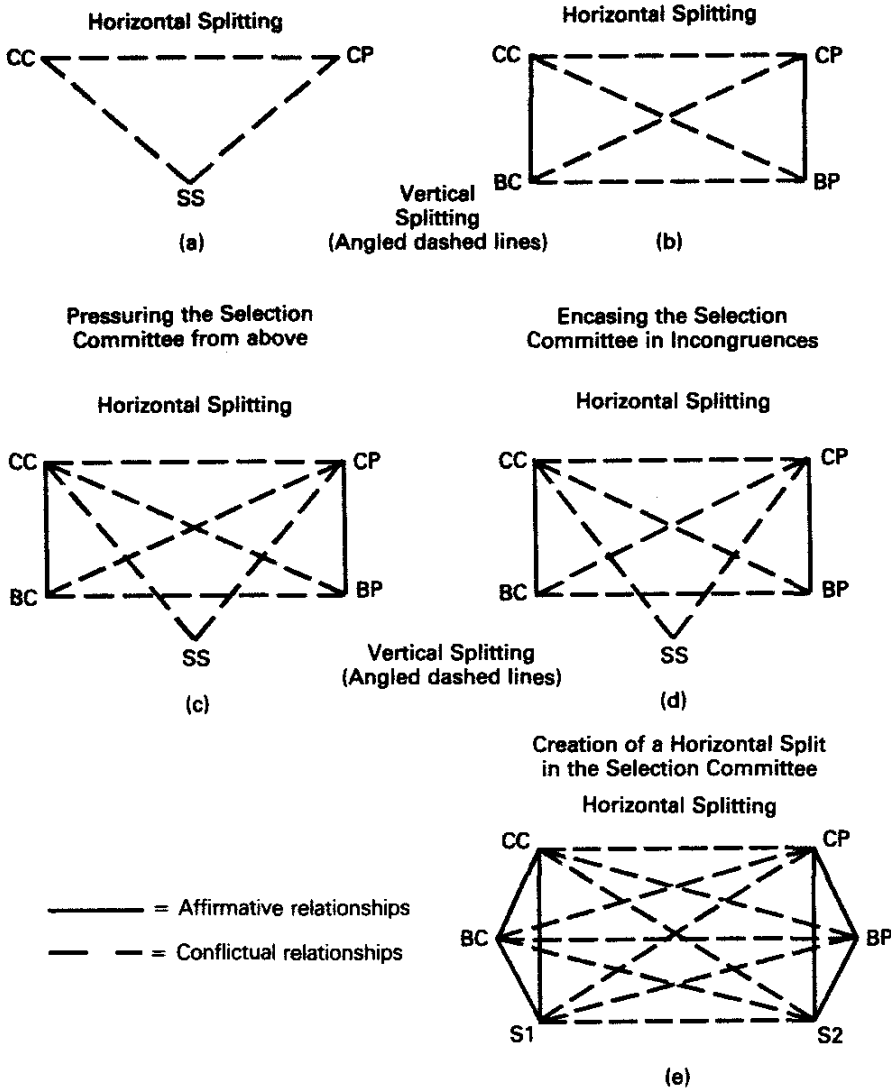
A committee of the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and Principal Lewis Brook was appointed to select one new assistant principal from the current ranks of Ashgrove's high school teachers. They were asked to screen all applicants and present to the board, in rank order, the names of three people they deemed appropriate for the job.

The selection committee set to its task. Four current teachers were singled out and rank-ordered, with Peter Maher being labelled the number one candidate and Bob Walder number four. While this was supposedly "confidential" information, members of the community quickly heard it, and it became entangled in the ongoing clashes between the fiscal conservative and educational progressive camps in the community. One camp wanted Bob Walder, for, in their words, he was "a strong disciplinarian, liked and respected by both teachers and students." The other camp wanted Peter Maher, a man with strong ties to the town's political underground streams and viewed as someone who could "break through administrative hurdles" and "get things done," as his supporters phrased it. No one seemed to care about the candidates ranked two and three.

Influential members of both community camps began to barrage the selection committee with phone calls. Some lobbied for Walder, while others supported Maher. As shown in Figure 4, relationships were being aligned in ways that can be represented by triangles, as in Figure 3, only now the key adversaries were the community conservatives (CC) and the community progressives (CP), with the superintendent's selection committee (SS) being made the third leg (triangle a). The community camps were again involved in a horizontal split, and each camp was trying to get the selection committee into a submissive role, thereby setting up a vertical conflict between levels of the system.

The selection committee held firm and refused to buckle under this political pressure. This provoked the community factions to circumvent it and directly pressure the board of education, which had ultimate appointing power of all assistant principals. Three board members were quickly corralled into supporting Walder, while three others declared they would vote for Maher. That left two swing votes and the

Figure 4. Making horizontal into vertical splits and vice versa.



BC = Board Conservatives, BP = Board Progressives, CC = Community Conservatives, CP = Community Progressives, SS = Superintendent's Selection Committee, S1 = Faction 1 of SS, S2 = Faction 2 of SS

chairman. Sure enough, one went for Walder, the other for Maher, creating the inevitable deadlock, as represented in Figure 4, b (similar to Figure 3, d). Combining, then, the forces represented in a and b, the situation represented in Figure 4, c was as follows. The community and board conservatives were in coalition, as were the community and board progressives. This meant that the triangle between the community camps and the superintendent's selection committee continued to be incongruent. If the board factions supported the selection committee, this would make for incongruent triangular relationships between the board and the community factions. However, if they adopted a relationship-negating posture toward the selection committee, as in Figure 4, d, the triangles associated with board and community relationships would be congruent.

Yet another 4-4 deadlock appeared inevitable. The chairman again looked for a way out, but he needed time to orchestrate it, so he encouraged the board to postpone the decision. It so happened that those board members supporting Walder had been the ones who had voted against the original proposal to create a third assistant principalship. It suddenly dawned on them that had they supported the third assistant principalship proposal earlier, they would now have a perfect solution. Both Walder and Maher could be appointed. The problem with this idea was that they had rejected it originally on the grounds of fiscal irresponsibility. Since they were aligned to the community's fiscal conservative camp, to reverse this now would be politically very costly. But it still seemed worth a try, so they made their move.

Predictably, those who had initially favored the creation of the third principalship, and who were the same people now supporting Maher and aligned with the educational progressive camp, felt insulted by the blatant politics of this maneuver and vowed to vote against it. Equally predictably, the probability of another 4-4 deadlock was very high. However, the chairman was determined to orchestrate a back-room decision, which he eventually did, leading, after several weeks, to the creation of the third assistant principalship.

The way was then clear for the appointments of both Peter Maher and Bob Walder to be made, except for one further obstacle. By law, the board could only ratify someone the superintendent nominated. When they called for his nominations, the superintendent indicated he would recommend Maher, who had been candidate number one, and the number-two candidate. This was not Bob Walder, who had been ranked fourth. The board members for Walder were outraged. Board members had gone through all this political pain to create a solution, and the superintendent seemed ready to thwart their efforts. No one had been paying attention to the fact that the pressures on the selection committee that emanated from the triangular dynamics created thus far (as in Figure 4) had reinforced that committee's sense of unanimity.

The board moved quickly. Those for Bob Walder made it clear that they would not be blocked on this. They did it by dividing the selection committee. The move was baldly political and quite blatant. The superintendent could nominate Maher and whomever else he chose, but the board would keep rejecting his second candidate until Walder's name was presented. If he refused ever to present Walder's name, he could expect to have his contract terminated at renewal time. They also made it clear that if this happened, the assistant superintendent, who was serving on this selection committee, would be promoted to the superintendency. Using the old administrative trick of splitting the subordinates created the pattern of Figure 4, e, which is the triangulation into two coalitions discussed earlier and represented in Figure 2, d. Now all triangles were congruent, with intense horizontal splits within each level (in the community, within the board, and in the superintendent's office), two strong coalitions, and many vertical splits across levels of the hierarchy. There were a few more weeks of battles before this was all settled, but even-

tually the superintendent capitulated and both Maher and Walder were appointed.

The importance of the processes described above can be underscored by how the principals at Ashgrove high school operated in the wake of these events. Three years after the joint appointments of Maher and Walder, the most dominant observation made by virtually everyone was "the principal group is a group divided against itself." Two factions were visible to all, one consisting of Principal Lewis Brook and Assistant Principal Peter Maher, the other being made up of assistant principals Bob Walder and Brendan Collier, who were seen as bonding to cope with the intense Brook-Maher alliance. The clearest evidence cited for this split was that after this group of four principals made a collective decision, it always appeared that two contradictory conclusions had been reached, for Brook and Maher would implement it one way, while Walder and Collier did the opposite.

In their internal relationships there was also a clear split between Maher and Walder. Peter Maher reported, "I feel buried in administrative duties, which is necessary to compensate for Bob Walder who simply refuses to do his share of the administrative tasks." On the other hand, Walder spent all his energy attending to the concerns of students and teachers, as he reported, "to balance Peter Maher's total preoccupation with administration." Principal Brook saw Maher as heroically compensating for Walder's shortcomings, while Collier argued Walder was the one correcting for Maher's weaknesses. Numerous attempts had been made to negotiate a more balanced relationship between Maher and Walder, but they constantly returned to this same position, as if pulled by a gravitational force.

These internal group relationships were embedded in a context that had superiors and subordinates also intensely split. Those above, the board of education and the superintendent's office, viewed the problem of the principal group as resulting from what they described as "Maher's excellence" and "Walder's incompetence." However, those subordinate to the principal group, the teachers and the students, held the opposite perspective, describing Maher as "filling his and others' lives with administrative trivia," while Walder was seen as "deeply committed to education, balancing the concerns of teachers and students in an understanding and effective way."

The question is how did this situation emerge? If we go back to the appointment process and add one further layer on what happened in terms of splitting and triangulation, it becomes possible to see the evolution of these above observations. When Principal Lewis Brook had asked the board to make a quick appointment of a new assistant principal and when the board had ignored his request, Brook looked around the school to see whom he could appoint on a temporary basis. Bob Walder, senior English teacher and baseball coach had a light workload. Putting him into this role on a temporary basis made sense at that time. However, when the superintendent's selection committee ranked the candidates, Peter Maher was first and Bob Walder fourth. Lewis Brook was on this committee, and he concurred with this ranking of Walder.

Hence, he was invested in resisting the community's and the board's attempts to get Walder appointed.

Brook, however, was in the awkward position of having given Walder the acting appointment initially. Others started dismissing Brook's opinion, insinuating that he must have made a mistake in choosing Walder in the first place, so why should anyone believe he was being any more competent in now arguing for Maher? Brook countered by discussing what a disappointment Walder had proved to be. He bolstered Maher's case by diminishing Walder, claiming he had been a poor acting assistant principal. The dilemma was that others had experienced Walder as having done well. Brook endlessly sang Maher's praises and argued against Walder. Those above him heard only what he wanted them to hear, and those below, the teachers and students, thought Brook was silly to denigrate Walder, for they had direct experience of how skilled Walder really was. So even in these early days, before the assistant principalship situation was "resolved," the seeding of the split opinion about these two men had occurred.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Ashgrove case illustrates three dominant patterns of how conflicts move in organizations. Each pattern is characterized by a dynamic that can be described in terms of the joint operation of splitting and triangulation.

First, each of the key groups in Ashgrove developed intense splits within its ranks. Once these splittings had occurred (for example, the two factions in the board of education or the two subgroups of principals), they engaged in endless struggles over which side was to dominate. Yet no party was ever able to gain the upper hand, leaving these units caught in a cycle of horizontal splits. In Ashgrove, all groups seemed unable to contain their own conflicts. As a result, the horizontal tensions within units were moved into the relationships between levels of the organization, either creating new vertical conflicts or joining with and augmenting established ones. This can be described through the following dynamic:

Dynamic 1: *From horizontal to vertical splits via triangulation.* When an organizational unit becomes partitioned, horizontal tensions are created. If these are not resolved within the unit, and one faction, in an attempt to move the unit, brings in a third party from either above or below in the hierarchy, a triangle of the kind discussed in this paper becomes created. Then what started as a horizontal conflict internal to the unit will become part of, or create, a vertical struggle between parties not originally involved.

Second, in the hierarchy of the school system, certain groups answered to others. Conflict often existed between levels as a result of the different functions the respective parties carried (for example, the board had a role in ensuring budgetary realism, while the principals were responsible for encouraging educational innovations). In Ashgrove, vertical conflicts between levels of the system often moved into the established horizontal tensions at one of those levels. Sometimes new horizontal conflicts appeared to be created simply as a way of

dealing with what seemed like unresolvable vertical tensions. One additional problem was what happened with vertical tensions when there were horizontal conflicts in the ranks of those with authority. Which part of the authority was the subordinate group to bow to, since responsible followership is ambiguous when the leadership is split? In Ashgrove there were extreme horizontal splits within authority groups, which heightened the degree of triangulation, setting the stage for the vertical tensions between levels to spill over constantly into the horizontal tensions within levels. These movements of conflict can be described by the following dynamic:

Dynamic 2: *From vertical to horizontal splits via triangulation.* When an organization has vertical conflicts between levels of its hierarchy, interdependencies necessary to the organization come under threat. If these conflicts are dealt with by triangulation, instead of revising, restoring, or recreating interdependencies that are mutually acceptable, then the vertical tensions get moved into alternate locations, either augmenting established horizontal splits or creating new ones.

The third pattern emerges as a consequence of the first two operating together. The process that switched horizontal tensions into vertical ones created a pathway by which the conflicts within the community became manifest as horizontal splits within the board of education, and so on, down the line, until they ended up being enacted within the ranks of the high school principals. In each case, the horizontal tensions at one level were grafted onto the vertical conflicts between two levels and then back into the horizontal form at the adjacent level. This pattern was often repeated across many levels of the system, and it could go up or down the tiers of the hierarchy. Likewise, the vertical conflicts that existed between the groups at juxtaposed levels (for example, the community and the board), were switched into the horizontal splits at the neighboring level (within the board of education) and then converted back into the vertical form and passed into the relationship with the next level (the superintendent's office), and so on. So, ultimately, the vertical tensions between the principals and the superintendent's office, for example, contained many of those vertical struggles that rightfully belonged to the relationship between the community and the board. These more complex movements are described by the following dynamic:

Dynamic 3: *Swapping horizontal and vertical splits and having each encased in the other.* Combining dynamics 1 and 2, above, a unit having no internal tension can be provoked into horizontal conflicts by the triangulations of a superior or subordinate party with which it is vertically struggling. Similarly, nonconflictual relationships between units in a hierarchy can be induced into vertical splits by the triangulations of a unit embroiled in horizontal conflicts. Hence, unresolved horizontal splits can be transformed into vertical tensions that become horizontal conflicts at the next level up or down the system. Unresolved vertical conflicts can trigger horizontal splits at another level, which actors deal with by further catalyzing a vertical conflict at the next level. These patterns can be repeated until there is no further unit to which to pass the conflicts. Then the conflicts will either (1) be enacted by that

last unit on behalf of all the others or (2) be passed back via the established triangular pathways in the search for some other unit to provide an outlet for their expression. This can leave horizontal tensions within units encased in vertical conflicts with parties above and below them and vertical tensions between units encased in horizontal conflicts with the parties with whom they interact.

Since conflict tends to move around in organizations in ways that are not readily noticeable, it is easy to overlook the fact that where the conflict becomes manifest may be quite removed from where it originates. Our dilemma is that if we are not looking for the possibility of this displacement we are unlikely to see it. Hence, we all need alternative ways of looking and alternative ways of understanding what we think we see. In conclusion, I suggest that all organizational members think carefully when the units they belong to become split or when interdependent relationships with other units become polarized. When a horizontal conflict surfaces, there is a distinct possibility that it is being fueled by an unrecognized vertical conflict. And when a vertical conflict emerges it may well be the result of a hidden horizontal conflict that is being displaced.

This is of special importance to managers because of the inordinate energy they devote both to keeping conflicts contained and to resolving them when they arise. However, the exclusive focus on the point of manifestation means that the forces creating and fueling the conflicts remain unaddressed. Hence "solutions" end up being partial and temporary, and the conflicts get driven underground, to incubate and surface again at some other time, in some other form. In addition, the very attention invested in dealing with conflict at the location where it has become manifest may distract managers from recognizing the conflict's etiology and the pathways by which it moves. Managers are also prone to develop strategies that unwittingly seed the very conflicts that render the strategies impossible to implement. A strategy that seems ideal during planning can fail because it creates new conflicts the organization knows nothing about managing, setting up the probability that the conflicts will be pushed underground or seen as being caused by some dynamic other than the strategy. Organizational strategists need to plan with an appreciation of the conflicts their strategies will create and to consider this as part of the planning process instead of ignoring it and discovering too late that implementation was not possible.

REFERENCES

- Alderfer, Clayton P., and Kenwyn K. Smith
1982 "Studying intergroup relations embedded in organizations." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 27: 35-65.
- Ashby, W. Ross
1956 *An Introduction to Cybernetics*. New York: Wiley.
- Bateson, Gregory
1936 *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
1972 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Berg, David N., and Kenwyn K. Smith (eds.)
1988 *The Self in Social Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Bion, Wilfred R.
1961 *Experiences in Groups*. London: Tavistock.
- Boulding, Kenneth E.
1957 "Organization and conflict." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1: 122-134.
- Bowen, Murray
1978 *Family Therapy and Clinical Practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.

- Brown, Rupert, Susan Condor, Audrey Mathews, Gillian Wade, and Jennifer Williams**
1986 "Explaining intergroup differentiation in an industrial organization." *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 59: 273-286.
- Cameron, Kim S., Myung U. Kim, and David A. Whetten**
1987 "Organizational effects of decline and turbulence." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 32: 222-240.
- Carroll, Glenn R., Jerry Goodstein, and Antal Gyenes**
1988 "Organizations and the state: Effects of the institutional environment on agricultural co-operatives in Hungary." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 33: 233-256.
- Cartwright, Dorwin, and Frank Harary**
1956 "Structural balance: A generalization of Heider's theory." *Psychological Review*, 63: 277-293.
- Coser, Lewis A.**
1956 *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: Free Press.
- Dahl, Robert A.**
1970 *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dunbar, Roger L. M., and Nikolai Wasilewski**
1985 "Regulating external threats in the cigarette industry." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30: 540-559.
- Erikson, Erik H.**
1964 *Insight and Responsibility*. New York: Norton.
- Friedkin Noah E., and Michael J. Simpson**
1985 "Effects of competition on members' identification with their subunits." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30: 377-394.
- Gemmill, Garry**
1986 "The bomb drops in 1 1/2 hours: A medical case conference as pedagogical ritual and the compulsion to repeat." *Journal of Psychoanalytical Anthropology*, 9: 55-66.
- Glidewell, Jack**
1970 *Choicepoints*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Heider, Fritz**
1958 *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Hoffman, Lynn**
1981 *Foundations of Family Therapy: A Conceptual Framework for Systems Change*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kabanoff, Boris**
1985 "Potential influence structures as sources of interpersonal conflict in groups and organizations." *Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 36: 113-141.
- Klein, Melanie**
1975 "Notes on some schizoid mechanisms." In *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946-1963*, reprint ed.: 1-24. (Originally published in 1946.) New York: Delcorte Press/Seymour Lawrence.
- Laing, Ronald D.**
1969 *The Politics of the Family*. New York: Vintage.
- Lidz, Theodore**
1968 *The Person*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lipset, David**
1980 *Gregory Bateson: The Legacy of a Scientist*. Boston: Beacon.
- Lynch, Robert**
1987 "The shootout among the nonteam players." *Management Solutions*, 32: 5-12.
- Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman**
1984 *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mitchell, Rex C., and Rie R. Mitchell**
1984 "Constructive management of conflict in groups." *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 9: 137-144.
- Oehler, Jerri M., and Peter Z. Perault**
1986 "The process of scapegoating in a neonatal nurses' group." *Group*, 10: 74-84.
- Oshry, Barry**
1977 *Power and Position*. Boston: Power and Systems, Inc.
- Redl, Fritz**
1942 "Group emotion and leadership." *Psychiatry*, 5: 573-596.
- Sarason, Seymour B.**
1972 *The Creation of Settings and Future Societies*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sherif, Muzafer**
1958 "Superordinate goals in reduction of intergroup conflict." *American Journal of Sociology*, 63: 349-358.
- Simmel, Georg**
1955 *Conflict and the Web of Group-affiliations*. Translated by K. H. Wolff and R. Bendix. New York: Free Press.
- Slater, Philip E.**
1966 *Microcosm: Structural, Psychological and Religious Evolution in Groups*. New York: Wiley.
- Smith, Kenwyn K.**
1982 *Groups in Conflict: Prisons in Disguise*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- 1984 "Rabbits, lynxes and organizational transitions." In John R. Kimberly and Robert E. Quinn (eds.), *Managing Organizational Transitions*: 267-294. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Smith, Kenwyn K., and David N. Berg**
1987 *Paradoxes of Group Life: Understanding Conflict, Paralysis, and Movement in Group Dynamics*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stamatis, D. H.**
1987 "You've got to accentuate the positive." *Personnel*, 64: 47-50.
- Thompson, James D.**
1967 *Organizations in Action*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wall, Victor D., and Linda L. Nolan**
1986 "Perceptions of inequity, satisfaction, and conflict in task-oriented groups." *Human Relations*, 39: 1033-1051.
- Walton, Richard**
1969 *Interpersonal Peacemaking: Confrontations and Third-party Consultation*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Weber, Max**
1947 *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Free Press.
- Wells, Leroy**
1980 "The group as a whole: A systemic socio-analytic perspective on group relations." In Clayton P. Alderfer and Carey Cooper (eds.), *Advances in Social Experiential Processes*, 2: 165-199. New York: Wiley.
- Whyte, William F.**
1984 *Learning from the Field*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Wilden, Anthony**
1972 *System and Social Structure*. London: Tavistock.
- Yeargan, Linda D., and Alexis M. Nehemkis**
1983 "The cancer ward: Scapegoating revisited." *Death Education*, 7: 1-7.

Copyright of Administrative Science Quarterly is the property of Administrative Science Quarterly and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.