

*Regular Research Paper*

# Conflict management in social work: The challenges of clients' interpersonal and cultural differences

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**Conflict management in social work, defined as the systematic and ethical handling of disagreements among clients, professionals, agencies, and communities, is increasingly challenged by diverse interpersonal styles, value systems, and cultural worldviews. While conflict is often attributed to interpersonal and cultural differences, it is also shaped by structural and institutional conditions that organize professional–client relationships. This study situates conflict within broader social policy frameworks, bureaucratic mandates, and structural inequalities. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 500 practicing social workers across child protection, welfare, migration, and community sectors, followed by qualitative interviews with 28 participants. Findings indicate moderate-to-high levels of professional–client conflict ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), with policy-induced conflict reporting the highest mean ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). Institutional pressure ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ), resource constraints ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ), and perceived structural inequality ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) were strongly endorsed. Regression analysis revealed that institutional pressure ( $\beta = .31$ ), moral distress ( $\beta = .29$ ), and resource constraints ( $\beta = .24$ ) significantly predicted conflict intensity, explaining 54% of the variance. The study recommends a structurally informed, critically reflexive reconceptualization of conflict management in social work practice.**

**Key words:** Conflict management, institutional pressure, moral distress, social work practice, structural inequality.

## INTRODUCTION

Conflict frequently manifests in social work practice as disagreements between clients and professionals, cultural misunderstandings, or interpersonal tensions among diverse service users. Traditional approaches emphasize communication skills and cultural competence, but these risks overlooking broader structural forces that generate conflict (Healy, 2018; Ferguson and Woodward, 2019). Social work operates at the intersection of personal and public troubles (Mills, 1959/2020 reprint), but contemporary practice contexts

are deeply shaped by policies and institutional logics that condition conflict. In social work, conflict refers to a state of tension, disagreement, or opposition that arises when individuals (client and social workers), groups, or systems have incompatible goals, values or interests, or expectations within the helping relationship or the broader social context. Conflict occurs when the needs, rights, or perspectives of one-party clash with those of another, for instance between a social worker and client, between professionals in an agency, or between

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marginalised communities and social institutions. Social work professionals routinely encounter interpersonal and cultural conflicts in their practice. Whether in child protection, community services, or clinical settings, practitioners engage clients whose behaviours, communication patterns, and expectations are shaped by distinct cultural values and lived experiences. These differences can give rise to tension, misunderstanding, and mistrust between clients and practitioners, particularly when social work interventions touch upon deeply held beliefs about family, authority, or wellbeing (Sue et al., 2019). According to Payne (2021), conflict in social work is a process in which people perceive that their interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party, often reflecting deeper power imbalances in social systems. Dominelli (2002) argues that conflict in social work is both interpersonal and structural, rooted in unequal power relations, discrimination, and oppression. Since social work often deals with diverse people, complex problems, and unequal power dynamics, managing conflict effectively becomes essentially a core professional skill.

Conflict, in this context, is not inherently negative, but can reveal problems that need addressing. When managed constructively, it can foster growth, promote social change, strengthen relationships, and lead to improved mutual understanding. However, unmanaged or poorly handled conflict, especially when rooted in cultural misunderstandings, can compromise service effectiveness and ethical practice (Furlong, 2020). Several scholarly works have done on conflict in social work. Fook (2016) argues that conflict is an inevitable part of social work practice, shaped by power and ideology; and offers strategies for critically reflecting on how practitioners' own positions influence conflict resolution. Dominelli (2002), on the other hand argues that social work conflict often stems from systemic oppression (e.g., classism, racism, patriarchy), linking it to structural inequalities. He further argues that conflict in social work is not merely an interpersonal problem but a manifestation of deeper structural inequalities. Analysing it requires attention to both micro-level interaction and macro-level systems of power. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), social work conflict should be understood as a product of interactions between individuals and multiple environmental systems. In the views of Payne (2021), conflict in social work is a matter of power imbalance (especially in feminist and anti-oppressive practice contexts); while Ruch (2012), explores emotional conflict within practitioners and organisations, advocating for reflection and emotional intelligence in managing it. Healy (2014) integrates theory and case examples to show how conflict emerges from policy contradictions, competing professional roles and institutional power. This study therefore, examines the intersection between conflict management and cultural

diversity in social work, emphasizing the managerial responsibilities involved in building culturally responsive conflict management systems. It argues that interpersonal and cultural differences pose a challenge in conflict management in social work practice. Managing conflicts in social work has become very necessary amidst the multifaceted factors, such as cultural differences, interpersonal issues, and variability of human behaviour (Dominelli, 2017). When conflicts are not managed, it aggravates negative effects on the desired outcomes; especially in rehabilitation, treatment, social welfare and counselling services. This may cause the social worker's client to reject medication, treatments and other social welfare services. Conflict in social work arises from multiple sources: interpersonal differences (e.g., personality clashes or communication styles), structural inequalities, competing values, and systemic constraints (Barsky, 2017). When clients' cultural backgrounds influence perceptions of authority, privacy, or decision-making, these conflicts can become particularly complex. For example, in collectivist cultures, family decision-making may take precedence over individual autonomy—posing a challenge to social workers trained in Western individualistic paradigms. Similarly, clients from hierarchical cultures may perceive direct questioning by social workers as disrespectful (Lum, 2011). Such dynamics create tensions that require both interpersonal sensitivity and organizational support. Conflict arising from interpersonal and cultural differences poses a continuing challenge in social work practice. Many practitioners lack culturally responsive conflict management competencies, and agencies often do not provide supportive organisational structures that foster reflective and culturally competent responses to conflict. This gap undermines effective service delivery and client-worker relationships. It is against this backdrop: This study contends that conflict management must be reconceptualized beyond micro-level mediation skills to encompass structural and institutional analysis. By situating professional–client relationships within socio-political contexts, practitioners can better navigate ethical dilemmas, resource constraints, and competing mandates (Lonne et al., 2020; Ife, 2019). The study therefore, is guided by these research questions:

### Research questions

- 1) How do social policies shape conflictual interactions between social workers and clients?
- 2) What institutional pressures contribute to professional–client conflict?
- 3) How do structural inequalities intersect with interpersonal and cultural differences in producing conflict?
- 4) How do social workers negotiate professional identity

and ethical dilemmas in conflict management?

### Highlights of conflict in social work

Conflict in social work is both interpersonal and structural, rooted in unequal power relations, discrimination, and oppression (Dominelli, 2002). It is a dynamic process of opposition or tension arising from differing needs, values, or power relations between individuals or systems, which when handled constructively can promote growth, reflection, and social justice. They manifest at different level, for instance, Intrapersonal- internal value clashes or role stress within a worker (guilt, burnout, moral distress); Interpersonal- miscommunication, unmet expectations, or differing goals between a social worker and client, or between colleagues; Organisational- competing demands, unclear roles, or ethical dilemmas within social service agencies; and Structural- inequality, oppression, resource scarcity, or conflicting policies that create systemic injustice. It can as well be value-based and cultural disparity between social workers and clients, or between marginalised communities and social institutions. When conflict in social work is reflective of power dynamics, it exposes who holds authority and whose voices are marginalised. Therefore, social workers are not only expected to be mediators but also agents of change: identifying underlying causes of conflict (personal, cultural, structural), use communication and negotiation to de-escalate disputes, advocate for justice when conflict stems from systemic imbalance, and reflect critically on their own role, biases, and power in conflict situations. Social work, on the other hand, is an academic discipline and practice-based profession concerned with the basic needs of individuals, families, groups, communities, and society as a whole to enhance their individual and collective well-being (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2017). It aims to help people develop skills and their ability to use their resources and those of the community to resolve problems. Social work is not only concerned with individual and personal problems, but with broader social issues, such as poverty, unemployment and domestic violence (Canadian Association of Social workers, 2016). Social work practice “aimed at bringing about improvement and changes in the general society. Such activities include: some types of political action, community organization, public education campaigning, and the administration of broad-based social services agencies or public welfare departments” (Barker, 2013: 253).

Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion; and the empowerment and liberation of people (Thakore, 2013). The principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work

practice (IASSW, 2014). The ultimate goals of social work include: the improvement of people’s lives, alleviation of bio-psychological concerns, empowerment of individuals and communities; and the achievement of social justice (Zastrow, 2013). Social workers help to relieve the sufferings of people, fight for social justice, and improve individual lives and communities. Poverty alleviation and social welfare (Child welfare) are pivotal in social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014). Social work also, engages in crisis intervention and cross-cultural mediation. Social work promotes explicit social justice, human rights-based and anti-oppressive lens and practices in the disaster management sector (Alston et al., 2019, Harms et al., 2022; Rusconi and Boetto, 2024). According to Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2017), social work operates at 3 levels; it undertakes case work and counselling with individuals and families (micro practice); community engagement and community development (meso practice), and advocacy, policy and inter-agency practices (macro practice). Marlowe and Amadasun (2021) argue that micro social work practice which is primarily trauma informed and person-centred, adopts a strengths-based and solution-focused approach in therapeutic techniques, complimentary to the bio-medical professions. Social work at all 3 levels fundamentally addresses the structural systems that cause harm to the wellbeing of the people (Barker, 2013). Okoye (2019) enumerates the roles of clinical social workers to include: the provision of counselling services for psychologically depressed patients, engaging in palliative care, sourcing for financial aid for indigent patients, working to repatriate abandoned patients, creating contributory fund projects and encouraging blood donors, as well as going for home visits and follow-up in special cases. She adds other responsibilities to include public sensitization toward public health, Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and other related disease campaigns, supervision of student generalist practitioners/social workers with regards to field work practice and internships, communication of policies and practices of the medical facility to patients and their support networks, recommendation of policies and practices to the facility’s management that will enhance the wellbeing of patients, participation in ward rounds to ascertain the psychosocial conditions of patients and exchange ideas with other professionals, [and] provide friendship to patients and their support networks (p. 158). Social work practice consists of the professional application of social principles and techniques to one or more of the followings: helping people obtain tangible services; Counselling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or

improve social and health services, and participating in legislative processes. The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behaviour; of social and economic, and cultural institutions; and the interactions of all these factors (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Thus: the need for conflict management skills by the social workers to address these cultural and interpersonal differences. For instance, a social worker may experience conflict when a client refuses medical treatment for religious or cultural reasons. The social worker must balance respect for the client's autonomy with professional and legal obligations to ensure safety, and this is a classic ethical and value-based conflict. Social workers work with individuals and families to help improve outcomes in their lives. This may entail helping to protect vulnerable people from harm or abuse, and supporting people to live independently. Social workers support people, act as advocates and direct people the services they may need. Social workers often work in multidisciplinary teams, both in health and educational professions (British Association of Social Workers, 2018). Social workers in hospitals help patients and families understand and make difficult care choices. A social worker acts as a link between individual and resources in the community. They address poverty, addiction, unemployment, abuse, mental illness and disability. Social workers role in society is vital as they can help communities thrive (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2017). Social work is based on scientific knowledge and skill in human relations to help individuals, groups or communities obtain social and personal independence. It is both a science and an art. It draws scientific knowledge and insight (theories) from sociology, anthropology, biology, education, economics, history, law, philosophy and psychology synthesized into social theory or treatment. Social work is social interventions to encourage, enrich, and increase the ability of individuals or groups to socially function (Barker, 2013). It addresses individual's challenges in attaining social performance due to physical, psychological and socioeconomic disadvantages, and vulnerabilities. Knowing that clients have interpersonal and cultural differences will help social workers to develop conflict management skills so that the professional practices will not be impaired.

### **Problematising structural and institutional dimensions of conflict**

#### ***Social policies as frameworks of intervention***

Social policies (e.g., welfare conditionality, child protection laws, disability access legislation) structure the intervention context for social workers. Neoliberal approaches to welfare have prioritized risk management, surveillance, and performance measurement, often narrowing professional discretion (Munford and Sanders,

2020). This can transform relationships into regulatory compliance interactions, intensifying conflict when clients experience policies as punitive or alienating (Ferguson, 2018a). For example, conditional benefits systems may generate conflict when service users perceive policy enforcement as moral judgment rather than supportive care (MacLeod and Narges, 2021).

#### ***Institutional rules and bureaucratic pressures***

Institutional protocols including documentation, risk assessments, and outcome metrics aim to ensure accountability. However, they also constrain relational practice and reduce opportunities for meaningful engagement (Gray and Schubert, 2023). These bureaucratic pressures intersect with resource scarcity, leading to: decreased time per client, competition among service users for limited services, and reduced professional autonomy. Practitioners report moral distress when institutional demands conflict with ethical commitments to dignity and self-determination (Banks et al., 2020; Alsop, 2019).

#### ***Structural inequalities and conflict production***

Conflict in social service settings cannot be disconnected from structural inequality. Poverty, racism, and housing insecurity create chronic stressors that increase interpersonal tensions among clients and between clients and institutions (Taylor et al., 2022; Brown and Jones, 2024). A structural lens clarifies that conflict is not merely a breakdown in interpersonal communication, but a symptom of systemic inequities (Lynch and Smith, 2025).

#### ***Professional identity and ethical dilemmas***

Social workers occupy dual roles: advocates for clients and agents of institutions (Healy, 2018; Ife, 2019). Ethical dilemmas arise when statutory obligations such as mandatory reporting contradict relational commitments to trust and self-determination (Regehr, 2021). Professionals may experience value conflicts between institutional expectations and ethical codes (Barry and Jenkins, 2022). Critical reflexivity which is examining one's own positionality and power is essential for ethical practice (Fook et al., 2019).

#### ***Integrating scientific knowledge and practice realities***

A conflict management model must integrate scientific evidence, practice realities, and critical reflexivity: Empirical Evidence: Evidence-based conflict resolution models (e.g., restorative approaches) must be contextualized to structural realities (Casey and Bauman,

2021); Practice Realities: Organizational constraints and policy frameworks shape possibilities for conflict engagement (Gray and Schubert, 2023); and Critical Reflexivity: Practitioners must continually examine how power, policy, and institutional affiliation shape conflict dynamics (Fook, 2018).

### ***Anti-oppressive and structural perspective of conflict in social work***

An anti-oppressive and structural perspective reframes conflict in social work as a manifestation of unequal power relations embedded within institutional, policy, and socio-economic systems rather than merely interpersonal or cultural misunderstanding. Within this framework, conflict is understood as socially produced through structural inequalities, neoliberal welfare regimes, bureaucratic governance, and professional authority (Dominelli, 2021; Baines, 2022). The study's findings, particularly the strong predictive effects of institutional pressure ( $\beta = 0.31$ ), moral distress ( $\beta = 0.29$ ), and resource constraints ( $\beta = 0.24$ ) are consistent with structural social work theory, which argues that social problems are rooted in systemic inequality rather than individual deficits (Mullaly and Dupré, 2019).

### ***Structural social work perspective***

Structural social work draws from Marxist and conflict theory traditions, asserting that capitalist and neoliberal systems reproduce inequality and shape welfare institutions (Mullaly and Dupré, 2019). From this standpoint: Policy-induced conflict ( $M = 3.74$ ) reflects contradictions between welfare regulation and human need, resource scarcity ( $M = 4.01$ ) is not accidental but structurally produced through austerity governance, and moral distress mediating institutional pressure suggests the internalization of systemic contradictions by practitioners. Structural theory thus interprets professional–client conflict as a site where macro-level power arrangements are enacted at the micro-level (Ferguson, 2018b; Baines, 2022).

### ***Anti-oppressive practice (AOP)***

Anti-Oppressive Practice, developed extensively by Lena Dominelli, emphasizes challenging institutional discrimination, redistributing power, and centering marginalized voices (Dominelli, 2021). Engaging this study through AOP, these highlights are prominent: Power Asymmetry in Professional–Client Relationships–Conflict is intensified when social workers function as policy enforcers. The qualitative theme of “bureaucratic

identity shift” reflects how institutional authority may reproduce domination, even unintentionally. Intersectionality and Structural Inequality- The high mean for perceived structural inequality ( $M = 4.23$ ) aligns with intersectional analysis (Collins, 2019), which emphasizes that race, class; migration status, gender, and disability intersect in shaping experiences of institutional conflict. Resistance and Reflexivity- The theme of “reflexive resistance strategies” reflects anti-oppressive commitments to advocacy and relational repair. AOP positions conflict not as dysfunction but as an opportunity to challenge injustice (Baines, 2022). Reframing Conflict Management- From an anti-oppressive structural perspective, conflict management should: Shift from individual blame to systemic analysis, recognize social workers as “street-level bureaucrats” navigating structural contradiction (Lipsky, 2010/2018 edition), integrate advocacy into conflict resolution, and address institutional policies that generate recurring conflict. Conflict becomes a diagnostic indicator of structural tension rather than merely a relational failure.

### ***Neoliberalism and managerialism***

Critical scholars argue that neoliberal governance transforms social workers into risk managers and compliance agents (Ferguson, 2018b; Gray and Webb, 2020). The findings of the study that institutional pressure strongly predicts conflict support this claim. Managerialism introduces: Performance metrics over relational care, Standardization over contextual judgment, and Surveillance over empowerment. From an anti-oppressive lens, such transformations shift conflict from interpersonal miscommunication to structural alienation.

### ***Theoretical framework***

This study adopts a structural conflict theoretical framework grounded in: Conflict Theory; Critical Social Work Theory, and Intersectionality theory.

### ***Conflict theory (Cosser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959)***

Conflict theory is a sociological framework that views society as structured by unequal distributions of power, resources, and authority. Rather than assuming social harmony, it posits that social order is maintained through domination and control, and that conflict arises from structural inequalities embedded in economic, political, and institutional systems. Classically associated with Karl Marx, conflict theory argues that social institutions reflect and reproduce the interests of dominant groups. Later scholars such as Ralf Dahrendorf extended the theory to

modern bureaucratic societies, emphasizing authority relations within institutions. In contemporary sociology, Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated how symbolic power and institutional norms reproduce inequality through everyday practices. The core assumptions of conflict theory include: Society is characterized by structural inequality; Power differentials shape access to resources; Institutions reproduce dominant interests; and Conflict is normal and socially, does not produced deviant. Conflict theory is highly appropriate and foundational to your study because the research demonstrates that professional–client conflict is significantly predicted by: Institutional pressure ( $\beta = 0.31$ ), Moral distress ( $\beta = 0.29$ ), Resource constraints ( $\beta = 0.24$ ), and Structural inequality (high mean endorsement). These findings align directly with conflict theory in the following ways:

**i) Conflict as structurally produced:** The results of the study show that policy-induced conflict ( $M = 3.74$ ) is higher than cultural conflict ( $M = 3.11$ ). This supports the conflict-theoretical claim that structural arrangements, rather than individual differences generate tension.

**ii) Institutions as sites of power:** Conflict theory emphasizes authority structures within bureaucracies. Social workers function within institutional hierarchies, often acting as agents of policy enforcement. This reflects Dahrendorf's argument that modern conflict centres around authority relations.

**iii) Resource scarcity and competition:** The high resource constraint mean ( $M = 4.01$ ) mirrors Marxian ideas about scarcity and competition under unequal economic systems.

**iv) Moral distress as structural contradiction:** The mediation effect of moral distress suggests that professionals internalize systemic contradictions between ethical commitments and institutional mandates—consistent with structural conflict analysis. Conflict Theory strengthens the study by: moving analysis beyond interpersonal misunderstanding, framing conflict as a product of policy, governance, and inequality, providing macro-level explanation for micro-level tensions, and it theoretically justifies the mixed-methods design linking structural variables to lived experience. In summary, conflict theory does not merely “fit” the study; it provides the structural backbone for interpreting the findings of the study. It explains why conflict is patterned, predictable, and institutionally mediated rather than incidental or purely relational.

### **Critical social work theory (Fook, 2018; Dominelli, 2021)**

Critical Social Work Theory is an umbrella framework that

situates social work practice within broader analyses of power, inequality, ideology, and institutional governance. It draws from Marxism, feminism, anti-racist theory, postcolonial theory, and critical pedagogy to examine how social problems are socially constructed and how welfare institutions may reproduce structural oppression highlights how power, oppression, and institutional logic shape professional roles and social problems (Fook, 2018; Dominelli, 2021). Core assumptions of critical social work theory include: Power is embedded in social institutions, including welfare systems; Social problems are structurally produced, not simply individual failings; Professional practice is shaped by ideology, policy, and governance; Reflexivity is essential to avoid reproducing oppression; and social work has an explicit commitment to social justice and transformation. Unlike traditional problem-solving models, critical social work does not treat conflict as dysfunction. Instead, it asks: Whose interests are being served? How do policies shape this interaction? How does institutional power structure the professional–client relationship? Critical social work theory is applicable to the study both conceptually and empirically through structural framing of conflict, as the study problematizes conflict beyond interpersonal and cultural differences, situating it within: Social policy frameworks; Bureaucratic pressures; Resource constraints; and Structural inequalities. This therefore, aligns directly with critical social work's structural analysis.

**i) Institutional power and professional identity:** The findings of the study indicate that: Institutional pressure significantly predicts conflict ( $\beta = .31$ ), Moral distress mediates institutional effects, and social workers experience a “bureaucratic identity shift.” They reflect the critical claim that professionals operate within “ruling relations” shape practice (Fook, 2018; Dominelli, 2021). The study demonstrates how practitioners are positioned as both helpers and agents of institutional control an explicitly critical insight.

**ii) Moral distress as structural contradiction:** Critical social work interprets moral distress not as individual weakness but as evidence of systemic contradiction between professional ethics and institutional mandates. The mediation findings empirically support this theoretical position.

**iii) Reflexivity and resistance:** The qualitative theme of “reflexive resistance strategies” aligns with critical social work's emphasis on: Reflexivity; Advocacy; Challenging oppressive policy; and Transformative practice. This indicates that the study is not merely descriptive but normatively aligned with social justice commitments. The study demonstrates critical social work engagement through: multi-level analysis (micro–meso–macro),

attention to structural inequality ( $M = 4.23$ ), examination of neoliberal bureaucratic pressures, linking empirical findings to power structures, and calling for structurally informed conflict management. In summary, Critical Social Work Theory is not peripheral to the study, rather it is central. The study empirically demonstrates how institutional governance and structural inequality shape professional–client conflict, thereby reinforcing critical social work’s core claims about power, oppression, and the need for reflexive, justice-oriented practice.

### **Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 2018; Collins, 2019)**

Intersectionality theory is a critical framework that examines how multiple social identities such as race, class, gender, migration status, disability, sexuality, and age, intersect to shape experiences of privilege, marginalization, and power. The concept was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how systems of oppression overlap and produce distinct forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood through single-category analysis (e.g., race or gender alone). Intersectionality recognizes that intersecting inequalities (race, class, gender) shape experiences of conflict and service access (Crenshaw, 2018; Collins, 2019). Expanded by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality argues that: Social inequalities are interlocking and mutually constitutive, Institutions reproduce layered systems of oppression, Power operates across structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels, and Experiences of conflict or marginalization differ depending on positionality within these intersecting systems. Intersectionality therefore moves beyond additive models of inequality and emphasizes structural complexity. Intersectionality is highly applicable and strengthens the theoretical depth of the study. The findings of the study demonstrate that: Structural inequality was strongly endorsed ( $M = 4.23$ ), Policy-induced conflict ( $M = 3.74$ ) exceeded purely cultural conflict ( $M = 3.11$ ), Institutional pressure and moral distress significantly predicted conflict intensity. These results suggest that conflict is not merely about cultural difference but about how institutions interact with socially stratified identities. Intersectionality therefore, applies to the findings of the study as it considers:

**1) Conflict beyond “Cultural difference”:** While interpersonal and cultural differences contribute to tension, intersectionality suggests that conflict is intensified when clients occupy multiple marginalized positions (e.g., low-income migrant women; racialized parents in child protection systems). Institutional policies may disproportionately affect such groups. Thus, what appears as “cultural conflict” may in fact reflect structural

marginalization interacting with bureaucratic authority.

### **2) Institutional governance and differential impact:**

Policies are not neutral. Intersectionality highlights how: Welfare conditionality may disproportionately burden single mothers, Risk-based child protection may disproportionately target racialized communities, and Migration enforcement may intersect with class precarity. The quantitative findings of the study indicating strong structural predictors of conflict are consistent with this layered inequality model.

**3) Moral distress and power awareness:** Social workers may experience moral distress when they recognize that policies disproportionately disadvantage clients occupying intersecting marginalized identities. This aligns with the mediation findings.

**4) Professional positionality:** Intersectionality also applies to practitioners. Social workers’ own identities (race, gender, class background) shape authority, empathy, and perceptions of conflict. Reflexive engagement in the qualitative findings of the study reflects this awareness. Integrating intersectionality in the study: Prevents oversimplifying conflict as cultural misunderstanding; Explains why structural inequality had such a high mean score; Clarifies how institutional power interacts with identity; and deepens the anti-oppressive dimension of your framework. Without intersectionality, structural inequality remains abstract. With it, the study can analyze who is most affected and how institutional systems reproduce layered disadvantage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → QUAL) to investigate how structural, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics shape conflict management in social work practice. The quantitative phase identifies structural predictors and patterns of professional–client conflict, while the qualitative phase deepens understanding of how these patterns are experienced and negotiated in practice contexts. This design is appropriate because conflict in social work operates across multiple levels: Micro-level: interpersonal and cultural differences; Meso-level: organisational and bureaucratic pressures; and Macro-level: social policies and structural inequalities. A mixed-methods approach allows empirical measurement of structural conditions while also capturing ethical dilemmas, professional identity tensions, and critical reflexivity that cannot be reduced to numerical indicators. The mixed-method is particularly appropriate in this study because this study investigates: Structural tensions, Institutional control, Policy-driven conflict, Professional identity, Ethical dilemmas, and Cultural difference. A mixed-methods approach in this context becomes necessary because: Structural forces require measurement, Ethical and identity tensions require interpretation, Policy impact requires both statistical evidence and narrative depth, and Conflict is multi-layered and socially

**Table 1.** Distributive characteristics of respondents (Social Workers).

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Std. deviation
<b>Sector distribution</b>				
Child protection	160	32.0		
Welfare/Income support	130	26.0		
Migration/Refugee services:	90	18.0		
Community-Based services	120	24.0		
<b>Professional experience</b>				
Mean years of practice			9.4	6.2
Mean caseload size			28.7	11.3
<b>Organizational type</b>				
State/Public sector	340	68.0	1.5	0.54
NGO/Non-profit	145	29.0		
Private agencies	15	3.0		

Source: Field report (2025).

constructed. This design strengthens empirical credibility while preserving critical social work's normative commitment to social justice and reflexivity.

#### Instruments of data collection

The study used the quantitative and qualitative instruments of Data collection. The survey instrument was structured into six sections. Established scales were adapted where possible to enhance validity and reliability. Professional–Client Conflict Scale (Dependent Variable), which measured frequency and intensity of conflict. Sample questionnaire, used (Likert 1–5: Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree), and considered the following: I frequently experience disagreement with clients regarding service decisions; Cultural misunderstandings contribute to tensions in my practice; Institutional policies often trigger conflict between clients and myself; and Clients express frustration related to service eligibility rules.

**i) Institutional pressure scale measured bureaucratic and organizational constraints:** It considered the following sample issues: Documentation requirements limit time with clients; Performance indicators influence my professional judgment; Risk management policies shape my decisions more than relational considerations; and I feel pressured to prioritize compliance over client empowerment.

**ii) Resource constraint index considered:** My caseload is manageable. (reverse coded); Limited resources increase tension in service delivery; Clients compete for scarce services; and Budget limitations restrict intervention options.

**iii) Moral distress and ethical tension scale measured:** "I experience conflict between organizational policies and professional values", I feel morally distressed when enforcing policy requirements; and I am confident balancing ethical commitments with institutional demands. (reverse coded).

**iv) Perceived structural inequality impact measured:** Structural inequalities (poverty, discrimination) contribute to client conflict; Institutional systems disproportionately disadvantage marginalized

groups; Policy frameworks inadequately address structural injustice. Descriptive, and inferential analysis were employed to analyse data, while mediation analysis tested whether moral distress mediates the relationship between institutional pressure and conflict. Bootstrapped confidence intervals were used to test indirect effects. The qualitative data employed the semi-structured interview, and critical thematic analysis, to analyse the collected data.

## RESULTS

### Distributive characteristics of respondents

#### Interpretation

Policy-induced conflict shows the highest mean score, suggesting institutional frameworks are perceived as stronger triggers of conflict than interpersonal or cultural differences. Also, the perceived structural impact indicates strong agreement that structural inequalities contribute significantly to client conflict as seen in table 1 and 2.

### Inferential statistical analysis

#### Interpretation

Strong positive correlations indicate that higher institutional pressure, resource scarcity, and moral distress are significantly associated with greater conflict intensity as seen in table 3 and 4.

### Multiple regression analysis

Dependent variable: Conflict Intensity Model summary:  $R^2 = 0.54$   $F(5, 494) = 115.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the research questions.

Main variable	Sub-Variable	Mean	Std. deviation
Professional–client conflict levels	Overall conflict intensity	3.42	0.71
	Interpersonal conflict	3.58	0.76
	Policy-Induced conflict	3.74	0.69
	Cultural-Based conflict	3.11	0.81
Institutional [pressure	Institutional pressure scale	3.89	0.64
	Documentation burden	4.12	0.73
	Performance metric pressure:	3.77	0.82
	Risk-management dominance	3.84	0.75
Resource constraints	Resource constraint index	4.01	0.68
	Caseload stress item:	4.15	0.72
Moral distress	Moral distress scale	3.67	0.74
Perceived structural inequality impact	Structural inequality scale	4.23	0.59

Source: Field report (2025).

**Table 3.** Pearson correlations analysis revealed.

Variable	r	p
Institutional pressure ↔ Conflict	0.62	<0.001
Resource constraint ↔ Conflict	0.58	<0 .001
Moral distress ↔ Conflict	0.66	<0. 001
Structural inequality ↔ Conflict	0.49	< 0.001

Source: Field report (2025).

**Table 4.** Multiple regression analysis.

Predictor	β	p
Institutional pressure	0.31	< 0.001
Resource constraint	0.24	< 0.001
Moral distress	0.29	< 0.001
Structural inequality	0.18	< 0.01
Caseload size	0.12	< 0.05

Source: Field report (2025).

Predictors:

**Interpretation**

Institutional pressure and moral distress were the strongest predictors of conflict intensity. The model explains 54% of the variance in conflict, indicating substantial structural influence.

**Mediation analysis**

Moral distress partially mediated the relationship between

institutional pressure and conflict (indirect effect = 0.14, 95% CI [0.09, 0.20]). This suggests that bureaucratic pressures increase conflict partly through increasing moral distress.

**Sectoral differences (ANOVA)**

Significant differences emerged across sectors: F (3, 496) = 9.87, p < 0.001.

**i) Highest conflict scores:** Child protection (M = 3.71, SD = 0.68).

ii) **Lowest:** Community services (M = 3.21, SD = 0.72).

### Qualitative analysis (Thematic analysis)

Twenty-eight participants were interviewed with the following thematic analysis:

#### **Theme 1: Policy as conflict catalyst**

Participants described welfare conditionality, risk protocols, and eligibility criteria as primary triggers of client frustration.

*“Most of the conflict starts when I explain the rules, not when I discuss support.”*

This aligns with the quantitative finding that policy-induced conflict had the highest mean score.

#### **Theme 2: Bureaucratic identity shift**

Social workers reported feeling repositioned as compliance officers. *“I feel more like a gatekeeper than a helper”*. This explains the strong statistical association between institutional pressure and conflict.

#### **Theme 3: Structural inequality as background tension**

Participants emphasized poverty, housing insecurity, and discrimination as underlying conflict drivers. *“They are angry at the system, but I represent the system”*. This supports the high mean (M = 4.23) for structural inequality perception.

#### **Theme 4: Moral distress and ethical fracture**

Workers described emotional strain when enforcing policies conflicting with professional values. *“I know the policy is unfair, but I still have to apply it”* This theme explains the mediation effect of moral distress.

#### **Theme 5: Reflexive resistance strategies**

Some practitioners used advocacy, informal flexibility, or relational repair to mitigate conflict. *“I bend what I can without breaking policy”*. This reflects professional negotiation of identity under structural constraint. In summary, the findings indicate that: Institutional pressures and moral distress are primary predictors of conflict, Structural inequality significantly shapes conflict intensity, Cultural differences are important but secondary to policy and bureaucratic structures, and

professional identity is deeply entangled with institutional mandates. Conflict management in social work should therefore, be understood as a structurally embedded phenomenon rather than solely an interpersonal challenge.

### Study limitations

Despite the extant contribution of the study, and the significance of the study methods, there are still limitations associated with study. They include:

- 1) Cross-Sectional Design- Causality cannot be definitively established.
- 2) Self-Report Bias- Participants may overestimate institutional pressures or conflict frequency.
- 3) Sector Representation- Although multi-sectoral, findings may not generalize internationally.
- 4) Institutional Sensitivity- Participants may moderate criticism due to professional risk.
- 5) Measurement Constraints- Survey scales may not capture the full complexity of cultural conflict dynamics.
- 6) Absence of Client Perspective- The study captures professional perception but does not include service-user voices.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined conflict management in social work by situating professional–client tensions within structural, institutional, and policy contexts. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (N = 500; 28 qualitative interviews), the findings demonstrate that conflict in social work practice is not primarily interpersonal or cultural in origin, but deeply embedded within institutional pressures, policy mandates, and structural inequalities.

### Structural and policy-induced conflict

The quantitative findings revealed moderate-to-high levels of professional–client conflict (M = 3.42, SD = 0.71), with policy-induced conflict (M = 3.74, SD = 0.69) scoring higher than cultural conflict (M = 3.11). Structural inequality (M = 4.23, SD = 0.59) and resource constraints (M = 4.01, SD = 0.68) were strongly endorsed. These results suggest that what is often framed as “cultural misunderstanding” may instead reflect systemic inequities embedded in welfare regulation, risk governance, and bureaucratic accountability structures. The regression model further demonstrated that institutional pressure ( $\beta = 0.31$ ), moral distress ( $\beta = 0.29$ ), and resource constraints ( $\beta = 0.24$ ) significantly predicted conflict intensity, explaining 54% of variance. This finding underscores that conflict is not merely relational but

structurally produced. It supports structural and critical social work arguments that professional–client tensions frequently arise when practitioners are required to enforce policies that reproduce inequality (Mullaly and West, 2018; Morley et al., 2019).

### **Institutional governance and bureaucratic control**

Institutional pressure emerged as the strongest predictor of conflict. Qualitative themes revealed that administrative surveillance, performance metrics, and risk-averse organizational cultures constrained relational engagement. Participants described feeling positioned as agents of control rather than empowerment, particularly within child protection and welfare compliance systems. These findings align with critiques of neoliberal managerialism in human services, where bureaucratic intensification restructures professional discretion and shifts the locus of accountability from client well-being to institutional compliance (Carey and Foster, 2021). Conflict, in this context, becomes a manifestation of structural tension between relational ethics and bureaucratic mandates.

### **Moral distress and professional identity**

Moral distress significantly predicted conflict intensity, indicating that ethical strain is central to conflict experiences. Social workers reported tension between professional commitments to social justice and the enforcement of exclusionary or punitive policies. This supports the argument that professional identity in social work is intrinsically dual: simultaneously care-oriented and regulatory. The qualitative data showed that practitioners engaged in critical reflexivity to reconcile these tensions. However, without institutional support, reflexivity alone may not mitigate systemic drivers of conflict. This finding strengthens calls for structurally supported ethical deliberation within agencies.

### **Intersectional dimensions of conflict**

High endorsement of structural inequality suggests that conflict disproportionately affects clients occupying marginalized social positions. Qualitative narratives indicated that race, migration status, poverty, and gender intersected with institutional rules to intensify adversarial encounters. This supports intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019), demonstrating that conflict cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks of cultural difference. Conflict management strategies that focus solely on communication skills risk obscuring the layered power relations shaping these encounters.

### **Reconceptualizing conflict management**

Taken together, the findings call for a reconceptualization of conflict management in social work. Rather than framing conflict as interpersonal dysfunction, this study positions it as structurally mediated and policy-embedded. Effective conflict management must therefore operate across micro (relational), meso (organizational), and macro (policy) levels.

The explanatory mixed-methods design strengthens this conclusion. Quantitative analysis identified structural predictors of conflict, while qualitative findings clarified how practitioners experience and interpret these pressures in practice contexts.

### **Contribution to knowledge**

This study advances the literature by empirically demonstrating that structural and institutional variables significantly predict conflict intensity in social work practice. It contributes to theoretical integration by linking conflict theory, critical social work, and intersectionality within a mixed-methods empirical framework. Importantly, it moves conflict management discourse beyond cultural competence toward structurally informed, critically reflexive practice.

### **Conclusion**

Conflict in social work is not primarily a breakdown of communication; it is often the lived expression of structural inequality, institutional control, and policy constraint. Recognizing this shifts the responsibility for conflict from individual actors to the broader systems within which professional–client relationships are embedded. Such recognition is essential for advancing ethical, equitable, and structurally responsive social work practice. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that conflict in social work is frequently structurally produced rather than merely interpersonally generated. Effective conflict management must therefore operate at three interconnected levels: Micro: Reflexive, intersectional awareness and relational practice; Meso: Organisational reform reducing bureaucratic and resource-driven tensions; and Macro: Social policy restructuring to mitigate inequality-driven conflict. Reconceptualizing conflict management within this multilevel structural framework enhances ethical coherence, professional autonomy, and social justice responsiveness while aligning practice interventions with broader policy realities. Effective conflict management therefore requires: Organisational reform, policy restructuring, ethical reflexivity, intersectional awareness and resource redistribution.

## RECOMMENDATION/IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Grounded in the study's explanatory sequential mixed-methods findings, these implications or recommendations are aligned to the research questions.

1) There should be structural reframing of conflict management: Given that policy-induced conflict ( $M = 3.74$ ) and structural inequality ( $M = 4.23$ ) were more strongly endorsed than purely cultural tensions, agencies must move beyond interpersonal communication models toward structurally informed conflict frameworks. Therefore, structural assessment tools are required to be embedded in case planning. Interpersonal disagreement must be distinct from policy-driven conflict and power and inequality analysis should be integrated into supervision. The policy implications should involve reviewing legislative mandates that inadvertently create adversarial service encounters, particularly in child protection, welfare compliance, and migration regulation contexts.

2) Institutional reform to reduce bureaucratic conflict: Institutional pressure ( $\beta = 0.31$ ) emerged as the strongest predictor of conflict intensity. Therefore, organisational practice should reduce excessive administrative burdens, reassess caseload thresholds, and institutionalise reflective supervision structures. While, policy-makers should reform compliance-heavy accountability, and balance risk management with relational practice models. These reforms address structural tensions between professional discretion and institutional control identified in both quantitative and qualitative findings.

3) Resource redistribution and service flexibility: Resource constraints ( $M = 4.01$ ;  $\beta = 0.24$ ) indicate that many conflicts stem from systemic scarcity rather than relational failure. Practice and policy responses should include: Increased funding for frontline services, flexible resource allocation models, and discretionary funds to address urgent client needs. Without structural investment, conflict management strategies risk individualising what are fundamentally systemic deficiencies.

4) Addressing moral distress and ethical tensions: Moral distress significantly predicted conflict intensity ( $\beta = 0.29$ ), and qualitative findings revealed ethical strain when enforcing policies perceived as unjust. Therefore, the study recommends ethics consultation mechanisms within agencies, structured moral deliberation forums, and professional development on critically reflexive practice. Policy bodies and professional associations should protect advocacy roles and create safe channels for policy critique without punitive consequences.

5) Embedding intersectional and anti-oppressive practice: The findings on structural inequality necessitate intersectionality-informed practice with focus on: Training on how intersecting identities shape conflict experiences, equity impact assessments of institutional procedures,

and community-engaged policy development processes. This ensures that conflict management does not obscure the differential impact of institutional policies on marginalized groups.

6) Repositioning professional identity within policy frameworks: The study revealed tension between professional values and institutional mandates. Therefore: Agencies should reaffirm social justice as a core professional mandate, Policy frameworks should allow contextualized discretion, and professional education should integrate structural literacy and policy analysis into conflict training. Rearticulating professional identity within broader social policy contexts strengthens ethical agency and reduces adversarial dynamics.

7) Reform social policy design to minimize conflict, because policy-induced conflict scored highly. Therefore, policymakers should consult frontline social workers during policy formation; implement trauma-informed and equity-based policy frameworks, and conduct participatory evaluation with affected communities. Policy that fails to account for lived realities inadvertently generates adversarial relationships.

8) Integrate scientific knowledge and practice contexts: Conflict management training should combine empirical evidence on predictors of conflict with structural theory, move beyond generic "communication skills" models, and incorporate policy literacy and structural analysis.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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