

Social conflict in the relationship between donors and beneficiaries: An analysis of Lewis Coser's Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study explores a digital philanthropic conflict between a donor and a recipient that emerged due to differing expectations regarding the use of collected donation funds. This case reflects broader structural tensions in donor-recipient relationships, particularly concerning transparency, control, and autonomy. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach with a secondary case study method, this research draws from online media documentation and analyzes the conflict using Lewis Coser's theory of social conflict. The analysis focuses on the functions of conflict in clarifying social boundaries, strengthening internal group solidarity, and enabling normative transformations. The findings reveal that such conflicts function not only as manifestations of interpersonal disagreement, but also as catalysts for social reflection, role renegotiation, and the redefinition of ethical expectations in charitable practices. In digital spaces, these tensions are amplified through public discourse, resulting in stronger group polarization and the solidification of collective identities. Theoretically, this study contributes to sociological debates on the constructive role of conflict in maintaining social order and cohesion. Practically, this highlights the urgent need for clearer ethical standards and mutual accountability in digital donation systems. These insights deepen the current understanding of how online philanthropy operates within the mediated public sphere and its implications for evolving civil societal norms.

Keywords: Lewis Coser, digital philanthropy, social conflict, donor-recipient relationship.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A common perspective is that the connection between aid recipients and donors is a social one founded on trust, kindness, and humanitarian solidarity. However, this relationship does not always function well in complicated social reality. Tensions between rights, obligations, and control over the resources provided can be shown in a relationship that becomes a battlefield when the giver and recipient have different expectations. Conflicts in philanthropic partnerships are becoming increasingly transparent and open, particularly in the current digital era when social media is frequently used to facilitate fundraising and distribution procedures (Shaw-Hardy & Taylor, 2005; Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012). The conflict between Agus Salim, a victim of an acid attack, and Pratiwi Noviyanthi, known publicly as 'Teh Novi, is a clear example of social dynamics. Teh Novi initiated a donation campaign to help cover Agus' medical expenses. Problems arose when Teh Novi requested that some of the funds that had been collected were returned because she believed that they had not been used for their original purpose. Agus Salim refused the request. He argued that the funds given to him were his full rights as a recipient of assistance. On the other hand, the request for the return of funds deviated from the original purpose of the donation drive, which was to assist Agus' recovery as a victim.

The situation escalated when Agus felt wronged and believed that Teh Novi's actions violated the law. He even reported Teh Novi on the charges for extortion and defamation. This case highlights how differing perspectives and expectations can lead to tensions in social relationships. What was initially built on solidarity and empathy has become a legal conflict that has drawn public attention. This issue sparked a new debate about rights, ownership of aid funds, and moral responsibility in philanthropic activities. Not all relationships between donors and recipients of aid were smooth. Many studies have shown that such relationships are often far from mere acts of mutual aid or pure solidarity. Behind these good intentions lies complex and tense social dynamics, especially when it comes to expectations, power, and who has the right to determine the use of donated funds.

Wiepking and Bekkers (2012) found that donors were generally motivated by altruistic intentions. However, at the same time, they also have certain expectations. For example, they want the aid they provide to be managed transparently, clearly accounted for, and used by the social values they support. However, problems arise when this does not occur. When there are no financial reports or funds used for something considered deviant from the original purpose, the relationship between the giver and recipient can become strained. This is reinforced by the findings of Prakash and Gugerty (2010), who show that tension often arises because of the lack of a clear division of roles and responsibilities in fund management. This frequently occurs in philanthropic organizations and community-based social movements. When there is no clarity about who has control over the use of funds, conflicts can arise between the recipient's desire to freely determine their own needs and the donor's demand that everything be monitored and in line with shared expectations.

Research conducted by Ostrander (2007) showed that when aid recipients are only considered recipients without being involved in the decision-making process, such relationships can be uncomfortable. In the long run, this can lead to them feeling as if they are in a lesser position and can even interfere with their own sense of confidence and identity. In other words, the relationship with aid is not just a matter of giving and receiving. Many things are intertwined, ranging from good intentions and social interests to issues of power and control. All of this makes the relationship not always ideal and sometimes creates tensions that are difficult to avoid.

This study examines conflict from Lewis A. Coser's social conflict theory perspective. Unlike the Marxian view of conflict, which emphasizes class struggle, Coser sees conflict as an inherent part of the social structure that has functional potential. According to him, conflict is not always destructive but can clarify social boundaries, strengthen internal solidarity within groups, and serve as a means of renewing norms in society (Coser, 1956). Through the categorization of realistic and non-realistic conflicts, Coser provided a conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of conflict arising from concrete differences in demands and underlying emotions.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a secondary case study analysis. This approach was chosen because it allows the author to explore and analyze the dynamics of social conflict in depth through narratives and data available in the public domain (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2011). The present study examines the conflict between Agus Salim (aid recipient) and Pratiwi Noviyanthi, also known as Teh Novi (fundraiser), selected for its substantive relevance to contemporary debates in Indonesia concerning the responsibilities inherent in digital philanthropy. This case exemplifies a recurring pattern of tensions within donor–recipient relationships that frequently escalates into public disputes. Beyond its empirical significance, the case offers notable theoretical value through the application of Lewis Coser’s framework on conflict, which is both realistic and non-realistic. This study defines realistic conflict as tension rooted in concrete issues and practical goals such as the use of donation funds, demands for transparency, and control over fund allocation. Non-realist conflict is defined as tension primarily triggered by emotions, personal attacks, or symbolism that does not directly resolve the main issue. The analysis was conducted using a content analysis approach by repeatedly reading all the data (media quotes, statements on social media, and audiovisual content) to identify units of meaning.

Distinct from comparable public controversies, this conflict is characterized by its rapid proliferation across social media platforms and the concurrent emergence of both moral and legal claims. These dynamics provide a rich body of empirical material for analyzing the functional role of conflict in the redefinition of social norms (Yin, 2011).

The data sources in this study were obtained from online media, particularly news articles, investigative reports, and other public documentation containing information about the chronology, narrative, and reactions of the various parties involved in the conflict. Online media was chosen because it is the main means of disseminating information about this case and reflects the social construction formed in the digital public sphere (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Miller et al., 2016). The reliance on media reports poses a potential risk of bias and the construction of a one-dimensional narrative; therefore, this study employs source triangulation and crosschecking to minimize possible information distortion. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges that their academic background and theoretical orientation may influence the interpretation process and thus explicitly articulate reflexivity to ensure transparency and enhance the credibility of the research findings.

The research data were obtained from various online media platforms, including *Tempo.co*, *Suara.com*, audiovisual content on YouTube, and social media posts from parties directly involved. The inclusion criteria were media with high credibility, a clear identity of publication, containing direct statements or factual evidence from related parties, and providing complete and relevant chronological information related to the research focus. The exclusion criteria included anonymous blogs, opinion pieces without supporting data, and unverified social media posts. After data collection, the data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive techniques, describing and revealing the characteristics of the variables that were the focus of the study. The collected data were then analyzed using a theoretical framework based on Lewis Coser's theory of social conflict, which provides analytical tools for interpreting the tensions and dynamics observed in the material. The analysis focused on elements of realistic conflict, the formation of social boundaries, internal solidarity, and the renewal of social norms as the main dimensions for understanding social conflict within the structure of aid relationships. This method aims to generalize and deeply understand the dynamics of social conflict in the context of donor-recipient relationships and how such conflicts function within the social structure of contemporary digital society (Patton, 2002; Flick, 2014).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Structural Tensions in Donor-Recipient Relations

Conflict, as defined by Lewis Coser (1956), is a form of conflict rooted in dissatisfaction with unmet objectives and concrete demands. This conflict arises when two or more parties have different

interests and clear expectations, but these are conflicting or fail to be realized. In the case between Agus Salim as the recipient of aid and Pratiwi Noviyanthi (Teh Novi) as the fundraiser, this realistic conflict is clearly evident in the form of tension surrounding the management of donation funds intended for medical expenses.

The recipient of the aid, Agus Salim, believes that the funds raised are his property, and can be used according to his personal needs. On the other hand, Teh Novi, as the fundraiser, feels morally and socially responsible to ensure that the funds are used appropriately in accordance with the initial purpose of fundraising and aspirations of the donors. The fundraising was conducted through Teh Novi's personal network and social media channels, as she is widely recognized as a humanitarian activist and public figure in the realm of digital philanthropy. According to a report by [Tempo.co \(2024\)](#), the funds were transferred to Agus Salim's family account and Teh Novi no longer had direct control over their use. However, conflict began to arise when the public and a number of media outlets began to question the transparency of the funds after Agus Salim was found to have purchased an iPhone and other consumer goods ([CNN Indonesia, 2024](#)). This tension illustrates a fundamental difference in terms of expectations, control, and interpretation of each party's social responsibility.

This conflict can be categorized as a realistic conflict because it is rooted in a very concrete issue, namely, who has control over the funds after they are distributed and how those funds should be used. As explained by [Cosser \(1956\)](#), this type of conflict has the potential to trigger social change if it is constructively directed. However, if not managed properly, realistic conflicts can develop into unrealistic conflicts, especially when emotional tension and social pressure influence the dynamics of relationships. Table 1 outlines the dimensions of conflict that manifested between the donor, represented in this case by Teh Novi in her capacity as a fundraiser, and the aid recipient, Agus Salim.

Table 1. Dimensions of Conflict

Aspect	Donor	Aid Recipient
Social Role	Fund manager, public figure in digital philanthropy	Aid subject, recipient of donation distribution
Expectation	Transparency in usage, loyalty, no complaints	Autonomy in aid usage, recognition of personal needs
Source of Tension	Disappointment over recipient's perceived "lack of gratitude"	Power imbalance, social pressure, and loss of personal control
Social Impact	Moral discourse on social media, shaping public opinion	Stigmatization, delegitimization of needs, disrupted social relations

In line with [Cosser's \(1956\)](#) thinking, this kind of conflict shows that the main source of conflict is not personal hatred but differences in interests and practical goals. Disputes in the relationship between donors and aid recipients have become a battleground for autonomy and accountability in a broader social context. Fundraisers feel that they have a responsibility to respond to the expectations of the public and donors, while recipients want an autonomous space to determine the use of funds based on the conditions they face.

Previous studies have reinforced this framework. [Wiepking and Bekkers \(2012\)](#) find that donor motives are altruistic and involve expectations of transparency and accountability in the use of funds. [Prakash and Gugerty \(2010\)](#) showed that ambiguity in roles in aid management, particularly in the context of philanthropic organizations, can trigger internal and external conflicts. In the context of social media, these tensions become even more complex because public opinion is formed quickly and massively, creating social pressure that exacerbates relations between parties.

This tension is not limited to only two parties. Involvement of the public as a digital audience through social media adds a new dimension to philanthropic relationships. Social media creates public expectations for transparency and places both donors and recipients under strict scrutiny ([Ostrander, 2007](#)). When Agus Salim was seen using aid funds for consumptive purposes deemed inappropriate, negative perceptions and stigmatization arose against him as an unworthy recipient. Conversely, Teh Novi also faced pressure to allegedly not closely monitor the use of funds. There is an overlap in the

understanding between the two parties regarding who should have control over the funds. This often creates tension because both parties have different understandings of the rights and responsibilities of fund management. This tension highlights the differing expectations regarding the relationship between the giver and recipient. This conflict, referred to as a realistic conflict in Coser's theory, is rooted in very concrete differences in expectations, not only regarding how the funds are used but also who has control over the funds after they have been distributed. When transparency becomes a major issue, there is also tension over the extent to which fundraisers should be involved in the use of funds that have been provided.

3.2 The Function of Conflict in Defining Social Boundaries and Solidarity

As proposed by Lewis Coser (1956), one of the fundamental functions of conflict is its capacity to clarify social boundaries. In situations marked by the tension between givers and recipients, conflict defines the roles and rights of each party in their social relationships. Recipients emphasize their autonomy in the use of the resources they receive, and consider unconditional support for their individual needs. On the other hand, givers emphasize their role as fundraisers, with a moral responsibility to other givers, and expect transparency and alignment with the original goals of the fundraising project. This tension identifies two significant social differences. First, it affirms the rights of aid recipients to make independent decisions regarding the aid they receive. Second, it affirms the obligation of donors to maintain accountability and transparency in reporting the use of funds. This conflict thus establishes clear boundaries between the roles of each party, while strengthening the basic structure of philanthropic relationships.

According to Coser (1956), the establishment of these boundaries is at the core of the social function of conflict as it affirms the norms and expectations that govern interactions between donors, fundraisers, and aid recipients. In addition to clarifying individual rights and obligations, conflict creates opportunities to evaluate and update existing social norms. When prevailing norms become obsolete or ineffective in regulating social relations, conflict serves as a mechanism for society to evaluate and reformulate these norms. The normative framework surrounding philanthropic interactions was tested and redefined in the context of disputes between donors and aid recipients. New norms emphasizing transparency and respect for individual autonomy may emerge, thus better reflecting the expectations of modern society. Additionally, conflict strengthens internal solidarity within each group, those supporting donors and those on the side of aid recipients. Polarization sparks empathy, motivates activism, and gives rise to digital solidarity networks that create and disseminate legitimate narratives of their positions. This dynamic aligns with Coser's (1956) view that conflict can consolidate group identity, particularly when group members perceive a common enemy.

The tension that arose in this case should not be viewed merely as a personal misunderstanding but rather as a broader social conflict with structural roots. Coser (1956) distinguished between realistic and unrealistic conflicts and offered an interpretive framework that is useful for understanding the multidimensional nature of this dispute. The table below illustrates the main differences in the ways in which the parties expressed conflicts. As a part of the analysis, all relevant data were coded and grouped according to the Lewis Coser framework. This process resulted in mapping of the forms of tension experienced by each party, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Process Resulted in Mapping of the Forms of Tension Experienced by Each Party

Type of Conflict	Party	Form of Tension
Realistic Conflict	Donor	Demands for financial transparency; desire for control over aid allocation
	Recipient	Feels overly monitored; demands autonomy in managing received donations
	Both	Tension over roles and expectations in philanthropic relationships
Non-Realistic Conflict	Donor	Public moral judgment and criticism expressed via social media
	Recipient	Emotional backlash; perceives public shaming and personal attack
	Both	The conflict became personal and moved beyond asset management.

3.3 New Norms Emerging from Conflict

An important contribution of this conflict is its ability to encourage the evaluation and renewal of social norms related to the relationship between donors and aid recipients. Within Coser's theoretical framework, conflict functions as a social safety valve that allows tension to be released without damaging the entire system. This case sparked widespread discussions about transparency, fundraising ethics, and the limits of surveillance on the private lives of aid recipients.

In addition, conflicts such as these also provide opportunities for social learning. Through conflict, individuals and groups can understand the perspectives and needs of others, which ultimately helps increase understanding and empathy between them. Examples of Agus Salim and Teh Novi show how this conflict provided an opportunity for both parties to explore and understand each other's perspectives. Agus Salim can understand the importance of transparency emphasized by donors, while Teh Novi can understand the importance of respecting the autonomy of aid recipients. This learning process is not only important for the two parties directly involved in the conflict, but also inspires the wider community to observe the conflict. This conflict can mirror social thinking about how to regulate relationships between donors, fundraisers, and aid recipients in the future. In other words, this conflict is like a mirror that allows society to evaluate and improve the existing social norms. The tension between Agus Salim and Teh Novi is not only important at the individual level, but also has a broad impact on social structures. This conflict has opened up space for the formation of new rules that are more transparent, fair, and aligned with the interests of all the parties.

In Coser's theory, social conflict is often used as a tool to identify weaknesses in existing norms and to encourage more targeted reforms. The conflict between Agus Salim and Teh Novi provides an opportunity to re-evaluate and update norms in the relationship between donors and aid recipients. By establishing new guidelines that are more transparent, fair, and respectful of all parties' rights, this conflict can serve as a foundation for building a stronger and more focused social structure in the future. Thus, conflict is not only a tool for alleviating tension but also a catalyst for sustainable social innovation. As a catalyst for positive change, this conflict creates opportunities to form new, better norms, and ensures that social relationships remain relevant in the face of dynamic social change.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The conflict between aid recipients and collectors reflects how conflicts of interest in social relations can cause tensions, but also play a constructive role, as Lewis A. Coser explains. These tensions stem from different approaches to the use of aid; aid recipients view these funds as personal property that they can use independently, while aid collectors feel a moral obligation to assure donors that the funds will be used under the original purpose of the collection. Coser's theory of conflict defines such conflicts by establishing social boundaries and clarifying the roles, rights, and obligations of each party. Aid recipients demand autonomy and freedom in the use of funds, whereas donors emphasize responsibility and transparency as forms of accountability to the public. This tension not only distinguishes between the two different social positions, but also strengthens the cohesion between groups of supporters, who consolidate their positions through the construction of narratives and values such as individual freedom, social dignity, and public trust. Moreover, this conflict provides an opportunity to update social norms in digital philanthropic practice.

This tension creates a space for collective reflection and triggers the formation of new norms such as the obligation of beneficiaries to report on the use of funds and proportionate ethical standards for the oversight of fundraisers. These new norms aim to balance social responsibility with respect to beneficiaries' privacy and subjective needs. This conflict also served as a social learning tool. For those directly involved, as well as the wider public who witnessed it through social media, the conflict expanded collective awareness of the importance of empathy, communication, and role clarity in aid systems. In an increasingly

open digital society, the conflict between donors and recipients reflects the challenges and need for renewal in social relations based on solidarity.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All procedures involving human participants were designed to respect the dignity, rights, safety, and well-being of the respondents.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose, scope, and confidentiality of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, with full assurance of anonymity and confidentiality.

Author Contributions

Not Applicable.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author due to privacy considerations.

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Notes on Contributors

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