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## Personality and Conflict: A Theoretical Model with Moderating Effects of Diversity Beliefs, Power Distance, and Organizational Culture

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### **Abstract:**

*This study aimed to develop a theory to explain how personality of members of workgroups is related to intra-group conflict and preferred conflict resolution styles through the moderating effects of diversity belief, perceived power distance, and organizational culture. We define and discuss what personality is and why it is relevant to workgroups and organizations. Then, we construct a multi-level theoretical framework to propose the conditions under which the big-5 personality traits may be related to conflict (typified as task, relationship, and process conflicts) and conflict resolution preferences (accepting, dominating, obliging, integrating, and avoiding). We describe the moderating effects of diversity beliefs (pro-diversity versus pro-similarity belief), power distance (reflecting upon the relationship between the supervisors and subordinates), and organizational culture (people-oriented versus achievement oriented). We propose several propositions based on the literature review- that agreeable and neurotic individuals are more likely to perceive conflict than extraverts, conscientious, and open individuals. We also include propositions for personality traits and their relationship with types of conflicts. Furthermore, extraverts, conscientious, and open individuals will have an approach-oriented conflict management style such as integrating and compromising style while agreeable and emotionally stable individuals will be more likely obliging and avoiding or even compromising. Next, we propose that organizational culture will moderate the relationship between personality traits and conflict and conflict resolution styles such that individuals will perceive less conflict and will have integrating and dominating styles in the presence of achievement-oriented culture compared to people-oriented culture with more perceived conflict and likely avoiding, compromising, or obliging styles. Additionally, we propose that perceived conflict will be less in the presence of pro-diversity belief compared to pro-similarity belief. Finally, when people experience power distance, neurotic and emotionally less stable will be more likely to perceive conflict but might have avoiding, obliging, or compromising styles compared to when people do not experience large power distance. Extroverts will be more dominating while agreeable may be more integrating in view of the power distance. The model demonstrates the need and significance of examining personality and the conditions, such as the presence of a specific type of diversity belief, power distance perceptions, and organizational culture- that may help or hinder the potential of a workgroup.*

**Keywords:** *Personality, conflict, conflict resolution, organizational culture, power distance, diversity belief*

### **1. Introduction**

Organizations are depending more on workgroups for accomplishing their objectives as these organizations become more sophisticated and multifaceted. These workgroups comprise of members that bring in their unique individual differences. Organization research seeks to understand these individual differences in order to understand the group dynamics and processes. Personality characteristics, innate dispositions or learnt qualities, are an integral and distinct part of every individual that encompasses and instigates a number of group processes. Personality characteristics influence perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, learning and behaving preferences, motivation, satisfaction, and several aspects of workgroup processes and performance. Personality has been defined in a number of ways and a whole field of Personality Psychology has been dedicated to study personality. Big-Five Personality Trait theory introduced a robust method to study personality quantitatively. Organization research has also realized the importance of individual differences and the impact of personality characteristics. With individual differences, another inevitable group process is conflict. When two persons interact, they are likely to experience disagreements and incompatibilities. Organization studies, however,

is yet to reach a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between personality and conflict. This project proposes to explore personality and conflict in view of number of significant factors such as organization culture, power distance and diversity beliefs. One of the main objective is to add to the understanding of the Organizational Behavior and Conflict Management by investigating the personality traits, perceptions and diversity beliefs, and conflict resolution styles. Although personality and conflict have been included in organizational studies but the connection between the two has not been clearly laid out. There is some research that explored personality traits as antecedents of conflict but the information is far from complete. The role of organizational culture, power, and diversity beliefs is yet to be included in our understanding of personality and conflict. The study will contribute to the existing literature as well as inform the practitioners in terms of personnel selection, human resources management, and conflict resolution and conflict management.

### *1.1. Personality and Conflict: Personality Traits and Perception of Conflict*

Employees enter and affect their workplace with certain personality characteristics. Personality characteristics may be more of a reason one has been employed, compared to credentials. Research in personality has endeavored to explain and predict behavior of persons according to their personalities. Big-5 personality trait theory is one of the theories that have been successful at predicting behavior consistently in the workplace. According to Big-5 personality theory, there are five personality traits (Cattell & Mead, 2007; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1989; Goldberg, 1982). The five factors include Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism that are described through a number of constituent traits (Atkinson & Atkinson, Smith, Bem, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). For example, conscientiousness is described as self-discipline and achievement-orientation, extraversion as stimulation-seeking, openness as intellectual and creative, agreeableness as friendliness, and neuroticism as anxiety and depression.

Personality traits explain perception, that is, we can predict who is more likely to perceive and perceive in what ways (Casciaro, 1998). For example, optimists may generally see things positively (Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006) and a conscientious person may be the first one to notice a breach or disorder. In this study, we wished to explore the relationship between personality traits and conflict perceptions. We believe certain traits will be more significantly related to conflict perception, that is, personality traits predict if people will perceive conflict or not.

Conflict is defined as incompatible perceptions among at least two parties (Wall & Callister, 1995). Jehn (1995) distinguished three types of conflict. Task conflict is arguments about work-based issues, relationship conflict is interpersonal clashes, and process conflict is disagreement over logistics (time and resources distribution). There has been research that studied the relationship between personality and conflict (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Suls, Martin, & David, 1998) but only selectively. Extraverts are found to have a tendency to approach arguments as opposed to avoiding it (Schneer & Chanin, 1987), which means extraverts are likely to perceive more conflict. Also, neurotics are more likely to become angry (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and, thereby, are expected to perceive more conflict.

Traits may also explain why some people tend to perceive, and perceive more or less, of conflict. That is, we will also explore conflict asymmetry in view of personality traits. Conflict asymmetry means perceiving conflict differently, that is, an issue may be perceived as more or less conflicting by the members of a workgroup. Conflict asymmetry has been proposed as more important than conflict itself (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010). Conflict asymmetry itself may be disturbing for the group members. However, we need to understand why people perceive conflict differently and who has the tendency to perceive an issue more conflicting than another.

- *Proposition 1:* Extraverts will perceive conflict followed by conscientious compared to open, agreeable and emotionally stable.
  - *Pl1a:* Agreeableness will be negatively related to each of Task, Relationship, and Process conflicts
  - *Pl1b:* Extraversion will be positively related to each of Task, Relationship, and Process conflicts.
  - *Pl1c:* Emotional Stability will be negatively related to Relationship and Process conflicts more than Task conflict
  - *Pl1d:* Conscientiousness will be positively related to Task and Process conflicts more than Relationship conflict.
  - *Pl1e:* Openness will be positively related to Task conflict more than Relationship and Process conflicts.
- *Proposition 2:* Extraverts, conscientious, and agreeable will perceive more conflict, in that order, compared to emotionally stable and the open (conflict asymmetry).

### *1.2. Personality and Conflict: Personality Traits and Conflict Resolution Styles*

Personality is a significant predictor of preferences. In general, people may be divided into two categories; those who fight and those who flight. Other reactions may also include freeze, fright, faint (Bracha, 2004) and negotiation (Traum, Swartout, Marsella, & Gratch, 2005). People are known to see conflict as a challenge or threat (De Wit, Jehn, & Scheepers, 2009). There will be some who accept the challenge and fight while others will be threatened by conflict and may take the flight approach. In terms of Big-5, we know emotionally stable (as opposed to neurotics) are more capable of handling and coping with stress and extroverts may also be interested in an intermediary reaction between fight and flight to be a winner but also not to lose their social relationships (cf., Rusting, & Larsen, 1997). Correspondingly, we explore the relationship between the Big-5 personality traits to investigate the conflict resolution choices.

Follett (1940) offered five different styles of conflict management as domination, compromise, integration avoidance and suppression. Five styles proposed by Rahim (1983) include integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising. Other descriptions of conflict resolution styles include: forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and problem solving (Blake & Mouton, 1964;

Rahim, 2002). Research has noted that personality traits determine conflict related behavior (Graziano, Jensen, & Hair, 1996). Choice of conflict resolution styles may also be predicted by personality traits (see Moberg, 2001; Rahim, 1983; Robbins, Judge, & sanghi, 2008; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Extraverts are likely to approach (opposed to avoiding) conflict (Schneer & Chanin, 1987) and so do open personalities (Blickle, 1997), whereas agreeable individuals tend to approach conflict with a compromising style (Graziano et al., 1996; Wood & Bell, 2008). Antonioni (1998) observed that personality traits could predict conflict styles. Accordingly, we study the relationship between personality traits and conflict resolution style to find out which conflict resolution style is preferred by what personality characteristics and that may also help us understand which conflict resolution styles will be more effective while dealing with certain persons.

- *Proposition 3:* Extravert, Conscientious and Open individuals will have approach-oriented (integrating and even dominating) conflict resolution style while Agreeable and Emotionally Stable will compromise or avoid conflict.

### 1.3. Personality and Conflict: Role of Organizational Culture

Cultural factors of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1980) influence conflict resolution styles (cf., Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006). Individualists prefer confrontational approach while collectivists prefer harmony-inducing approach (Leung, Au, Fernandez-Dols, & Iwawaki, 1992). Similarly, Rahim (1992) found that individualists use a dominating or obliging style while collectivists prefer an integrating or avoiding style (see also Ohbuchi, Shizuka, & Tedeschi, 1999). Personality may interact with the cultural factors (Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Triandis, 1994) when predicting conflict resolution styles.

Organizational culture includes observable norms and values that are characteristic of an organization such as those norms that guide members' perception and interaction with one another (Trice and Beyer, 1993; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1996). Although organization culture has been popularly studied as individualist versus collectivist cultures, there are other typologies that may be more useful in organizational setting. An organization may practice one of a number of identified organizational cultures (cf., Denison, & Spreitzer, 1991; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Extraverts exerted more influence in a team-oriented organization, whereas conscientious were more influential when in an organization with independent individuals (Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008). Conscientious people are achievement-oriented and also like to be recognized for their efforts individually. Therefore, conscientious are expected to do better in achievement-oriented culture so they are likely to experience more conflict in people-oriented culture. Similarly, agreeable people attempt to impress and entertain or please others and they are also more likely to experience in people-oriented culture. Extravert and open are looking for interpersonal interaction and when deprived are more likely to experience conflict, that is, in achievement-oriented culture. To explore if and how organization culture interacts with personality traits in determining conflict perception and conflict resolution styles, we propose the moderating role of organizational culture.

- *Proposition 4:* Organizational culture will moderate the relationship between personality traits and conflict, such that extraversion, openness and neuroticism will be related to conflict perception in the presence of achievement-oriented culture whereas agreeableness and conscientiousness will be related to conflict perception the presence of people-oriented culture.

### 1.4. Personality and Conflict Resolution Styles: Role of Power Distance

Power distance is one of the cultural factors established by Hofstede (1980). The potential to influence other persons due to possession or control of valued resources in organizational relations is called power (Blau, 1977; Halevy et al., 2011). The degree of power gives more leverage and a higher status to a person. Power distance means the status differences (Khatri, 2009) between two parties (often between supervisor and subordinates in work setting) and the two sides treats each other with reference to these status differences or power distance. Power distance is an established cultural dimension and members of the cultural (or organizational group) accept and expect to be more or less powerful than others within their group (Hofstede, 1991). Organizational hierarchy usually represents power distance. When everybody accepts, and expects the same power hierarchy or power distance, then there may not be much of an issue. Individuals whose expectations of power distance do not match with actual power distances held at their workplace may be highly disturbed. The difference between expected and experienced power distance can become a reason for conflict (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Even when expected, power distance implies lack of communication and trust, which denotes conflict. Those at a disadvantage with respect to power will be more susceptible to conflict, especially relationship conflict and at the same time reducing constructive or task conflict. At the same time, depending on the nature of personality, the individuals will respond to conflict in a specific manner. Although we expect a direct effect of power distance on conflict perception, we mainly propose that power distance will moderate the relationship between personality traits and conflict resolution styles. Power may be frustrating and may result in non-responsiveness or passivity (Tepper, 2007).

- *Proposition 5:* Power distance will moderate the relationship between personality traits and conflict, such that emotionally stable, conscientious, and agreeable individuals will prefer avoiding, compromising, or obliging style in the presence of large power distance; extravert and open will prefer dominating or integrating style when power distance is small.

### 1.5. Personality and Conflict: Role of Diversity Beliefs

Diversity means differences between individuals on any attribute based upon which a person may perceive oneself to be different from another person (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; Triandis, Kurowski, & Gelfand, 1994). Diversity can be good in the form of offering diverse perspectives and knowledge base (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Jehn et al., 1999; Simons, Pelled, & Smith, 1999), but diversity can be bad in the form of increased interpersonal conflict (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), prejudice, and discriminations (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Diversity beliefs determine how much value we place on diversity in workgroup functioning (van Knippenberg & Haslam, 2003). Diversity beliefs may include beliefs regarding demographic diversity or any kind of diversity, or normally diversity in the workgroup in general. The more a group believes in diversity, the more the group members will accept and welcome diversity (van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007) and affect the group performance (Ely & Thomas, 2001). While diversity beliefs are related to diversity perceptions and diversity tolerance, we propose diversity beliefs are also related to personality traits. Some personality traits may be more likely to have positive diversity beliefs compared to other traits. Since the idea of diversity belief is quite recent, this will be an exploratory study divulging the importance of beliefs and attitudes. We propose for the moderating role of diversity beliefs in the relationship between personality and conflict, especially in diverse workgroups. With individual differences, there are always some diversity characteristics no matter how homogeneous we attempt to make a group with the help of highly similar people. Workgroups today are becoming more and more diverse and the need to diversity orientation and diversity training has become more important. Research in diversity beliefs has shown that pro-diversity beliefs or positive beliefs towards diversity help reduce the conflict experience and it may also help adopt the most appropriate conflict resolution style. When people are comfortable with all kind of different others, they are more likely to employ conflict approaching strategies or styles. Accordingly, we propose the following:

- *Proposition 6:* Diversity belief will moderate the relationship between personality traits and conflict. There will be more conflict (task, process, and relationship conflicts) when the group members hold pro-similarity belief compared to when they have pro-diversity belief.
- *Proposition 7:* Diversity belief will moderate the relationship between personality traits and conflict style, such that there will be more conflict approaching (confronting or dominating and integrating styles) in the presence of pro-diversity beliefs compared to pro-similarity belief where the tendency may be to adopt avoiding, compromising, or obliging styles.

## 2. The Proposed Research Model

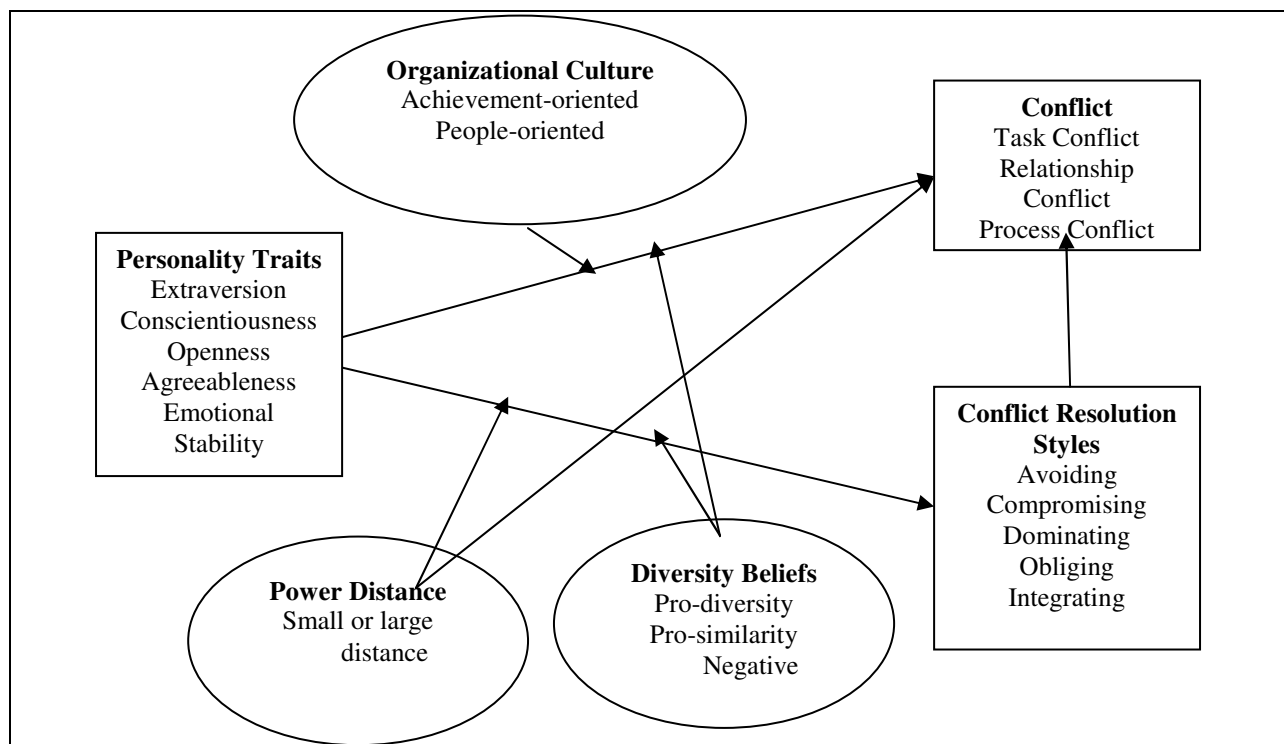


Figure 1

## 3. Discussion and Conclusion

With this theoretical study, we proposed for the relationship between personality and conflict through the moderating roles of diversity belief, power distance and organizational culture. Our first two propositions were about the direct effect of personality on conflict perception and how different personality traits will give more or less of conflict (i.e., explore conflict asymmetry with the help of personality traits). We then proposed how personality traits will be related to each of 5 different types of conflict resolution styles (integrating, avoiding, compromising, obliging, and dominating). Then, we proposed that organizational culture is a moderator of the relationship between personality traits and conflict.

Next, we proposed that there will be a moderating role of power distance in the relationship between personality traits and conflict as well as conflict resolutions styles. We expected that power distance encourages conflict-avoiding or non-confrontational styles more. Finally, we proposed that employees who hold pro-diversity beliefs will experience less conflict. This concurs with previous research that observed value in diversity or found that pro-diversity beliefs can enhance information or cognitive potential of diversity (e.g., van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

In sum, we studied the relationship between personality and conflict noting that research still lacks in this area. Personality traits are an integral part of a person that can help predict and explain several aspects of group processes and behaviors as well as individual and group performance. While personality traits are predispositions that are too difficult to change, there are other variables that can change the nature of the relationship between personality and conflict perception and experience. Some of the variables in work context are considered in this study and those include organizational culture, diversity beliefs, and power distance. This leads to a comprehensive model including perceptions, beliefs, and contextual factors that may influence the relationship between individuals' personality traits and their experiences within a group- conflict perception and conflict asymmetry. The model adds to diversity and conflict research with reference to personality traits and how they are an important source of conflict in a workgroup. It also offers an understanding of several aspects of group processes to the management and suggests that groups may be composed with the right mix of personality traits, favorable organizational culture, a non-discrepant power difference, and positive diversity belief.

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