



Types of intragroup conflict and affective reactions

Types of
intragroup
conflict

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Abstract

Purpose – Seeks to evaluate the link between task and relationship conflict, and their influence on some employees' affective reactions such as satisfaction, wellbeing, and propensity to leave a job; and to analyse the mediated and moderated role of relationship conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – The study involved 169 employees from six service organizations (hotels) in Andalusia (Spain). A questionnaire was used containing different measures: task and relationship conflict, wellbeing, job satisfaction, and propensity to leave the job.

Findings – The two types of conflict have different consequences. Data show that relationship conflict is negatively associated with affective reactions, while task conflict does not relate directly to affective reactions in a predictable way; relationship conflict has a positive influence on the desire to leave the current job, while task conflict does not affect it negatively; the interactive effect of relationships and task conflict shows that this interaction contributes substantially to predict the propensity to leave the current job; and relationship conflict mediates in the link between task conflict and affective reactions.

Research limitations/implications – A high level of task conflict may backfire by boosting relationship conflict as well, thus having a negative effect on affective reactions. Thus some conclusions can be drawn with a view to improving conflict management in teams. First an attempt must be made to understand the type of conflict that is taking place. Second, managers should encourage open discussion of task-related issues. Third, special attention should be paid to the level of each conflict because of its interactive effects on some affective outcomes. Thus, in spite of the generally beneficial effects associated with task conflict, the intensification of task-related conflict may backfire when interacting with dysfunctional affective-dissent.

Originality/value – Serves too analyze the mediated and moderated role of relationship conflict and to test the role of types of conflict on affective reactions such as wellbeing and propensity to leave the job.

Keywords Conflict, Organizational conflict, Job satisfaction, Spain

Paper type Research paper

One of the most outstanding aspects of conflict is that it is practically intrinsic to the life and dynamics of teams. Conflict is present in interpersonal relations (Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993), in intragroup and intergroup relations (Jehn, 1995), in strategic decision-making (Amason, 1996), and other organizational episodes. As many authors



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have pointed out (De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997; Pondy, 1967) conflict is a phenomenon that may give rise to both beneficial and dysfunctional effects on individuals, groups and organizations.

Early group theorists have focuses on the negative consequences of conflict for teams. Conflict difficulties communications between individuals, breaks personal and professional relationships, and reduces effectiveness, because it produces tension and distracts team members from performing the task (Hackman and Morris, 1975; Wall and Callister, 1995). Thus, it is no surprise that today's managers and employees still overwhelmingly view conflict as negative and something to be avoided or resolved as soon as possible (Stone, 1995). Indeed, growing evidence suggests that conflict may be beneficial to team performance. Suppressing conflict could reduce creativity, innovation, performance, quality of decisions, and communication between group's members (see De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997).

Research by Jehn (1994, 1995), Amason (1996) or De Dreu and Weingart (2003) provides evidence that this double-edged effect is attributable to different dimensions of conflict. Research has shown conflict to be multidimensional (e.g. Amason, 1996; Cosier and Schwenck, 1990; Jehn, 1995; Van de Vliert and De Dreu, 1994). Thus, it is possible for one dimension of conflict to enhance effectiveness whereas another hinders consensus and commitment between group members. Jehn (1995) distinguished between two kinds of intragroup conflict: task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict is a perception of disagreement among group members or individuals about the content of their decisions, and involves differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions. Examples of task conflict are conflicts about the distribution of resources, about procedures or guidelines, and about the interpretation of facts. Relationship conflict is a perception of interpersonal incompatibility, and includes annoyance and animosity among individuals. Examples of relationship conflict are disagreements about values, personal or family norms, or about personal taste.

The two types of intragroup conflict have different personal and organizational consequences. Several studies have investigated the relationships between these types of conflict and several outcomes – such as satisfaction, tension or group commitment. Relationship conflict is negatively associated with employees' affective reactions such as satisfaction (for a review, see De Dreu and Van Viannen, 2001) and climate, and it reduces team effectiveness (Jehn, 1997). In contrast, task conflict appears to be positively related to the quality of ideas and innovation (West and Anderson, 1996), the increase of constructive debate (Jehn *et al.*, 1999), the affective acceptance of group decisions (Amason, 1996), and the prevention of groupthink (Turner and Pratkanis, 1994).

These conclusions about the positive function of task conflict and the negative function of relationship conflict are based on research that only examined how one type of conflict affects team performance regardless of the other type (e.g. Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1994, 1995). Consistent with this perspective, scholars tend to recommend management teams to stimulate task conflict and mitigate relationship conflict during team decision-making. These recommendations are, however, problematic because both types of conflict are related. Almost all studies – with the exception of Jehn (1995) – that measured task and relationship conflict in groups, have shown positive correlations between the two types of conflict (Amason, 1996; De Dreu, 1997; Friedman *et al.*, 2000; Janssen *et al.*, 1999; Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Jehn and Chatman,

2000; Pelled *et al.*, 1999). Thus, it may be extremely difficult for teams to effectively embrace one type of conflict, while simultaneously resisting the other. Amason (1996) pointed out that cognitive criticism might easily be interpreted as a personal disapproval or a strategy to enhance one's own position at the expense of someone else's. Baron (1990) showed that a critical evaluation produced negative affective reactions regardless of performance. Finally, many studies finding positive effects of task conflict on performance, also found negative effects of task conflict on team member satisfaction (e.g. Jehn, 1995).

In this sense, outcomes regarding task conflict are open to doubt. Several studies have shown that high task conflict decreases satisfaction (e.g. Jehn, 1995) and cohesion (e.g. Jehn and Mannix, 2001), while increasing stress levels (Friedman *et al.*, 2000). De Dreu and Weingart's meta-analysis demonstrates that task conflict might be as negative as relationship conflict. Conflict stimulation by discrepancy and constructive criticism could have a pernicious effect, because it increases the intensity and quantity of conflict that teams must manage (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003).

The incongruence in the role played by task conflict may possibly be understood by evaluating the link between task and relationship conflict. There are two lines in the study of these relations: types of conflict could play a moderational role, and types of conflict could play a mediational role. The first line of research was tested by Janssen *et al.* (1999) who analyzed the effect of different combinations of types of conflict (low vs high task and relationship conflict) on employees' affective reactions such as satisfaction. Janssen *et al.*'s study did not provide any evidence about the positive or negative effects of these combinations on employees' satisfaction. However, it is possible that these combinations did not affect satisfaction over the performance of a specific task, but did influence other more general and stable affective reactions, such as job satisfaction, psychological well-being or the propensity to leave the job. As De Dreu and Weingart's meta-analysis suggests, an increase in conflict intensity could be dysfunctional for teams. For this reason, combinations that involve a high intensity of conflict – like high task and relationship conflict – would have a negative influence on subjects' affective reactions.

The second line of research was suggested in Friedman *et al.*'s (2000) study which, using a path analysis, revealed that the link between task conflict and affective variables such as stress at work, are mediated by relationship conflict. However, Friedman's study did not analyze the opposite path – task conflict as mediator in the association between relationship conflict and effectiveness. Several authors have suggested that a team member might try to cause difficulties or sabotage the work of a co-worker for personal motives (e.g. Jehn, 1995). In this case, personal discrepancies (relationship conflict) may play a mediational role by generating conflicts at work (task conflict) that will ultimately decrease team productivity.

The existing literature provides strong support for the negative impact that relationship conflict plays in affective reactions in the workplace. Nevertheless, additional evidence is necessary to contrast the role of task conflict and the mediating and moderating role of relationship conflict. As Friedman *et al.* (2000) pointed out, the connections between task conflict and relationship conflict represents one of the key areas for managing conflict in organizations. For this reason, this study aims to evaluate the relationships between task and relationship conflict, and their influence on affective variables such as satisfaction, well-being, and propensity to leave a job; and

evaluate the mediating and moderating role of relationship conflict. We hypothesized that:

- H1. Relationship conflict will reduce satisfaction and well-being in organization members and increase propensity to leave a job.
- H2. The combination consisting of a high task conflict and a high relationship conflict will decrease satisfaction and well-being, and will increase propensity to leave a job.
- H3. Relationship conflict will mediate the link between task conflict and satisfaction, well-being and propensity to leave the job.

Method

Participants

The study involved 169 employees from six hotels in Andalusia (Spain). A total of 46.7 percent were male, 50 percent female, and 3.3 percent of respondents gender was not specified. Participants had different educational levels: elementary school (37.8 percent), high school (24.2 percent), high school graduates (24.2 percent), and university graduates (8 percent). Work experience ranged from 3 months to 44 years, and the average age was 31.45. Employees came from the following departments: 8.61 percent from administration, 21.53 percent from reception, 28.70 percent from cafeteria and restaurant, 29.18 percent from cleaning service and 5.26 percent from maintenance service. In terms of employment status, 43.06 percent had a full-time contract, 38.75 percent had a part-time contract and 16.26 percent had a periodically renewed contract.

Instruments

Task and relationship conflict. Jehn's (1995) four-item scale was used to assess task conflict. The scale asks respondents to consider the amount of task or work-based conflict he or she experiences with others in the work place (e.g. how often do people you work with disagree about opinions regarding the work being done). The scale used a five-point format. The higher the score, the higher the level of task conflict experienced.

To measure relationship conflict we relied on Cox's (Cox, 1998; Friedman *et al.*, 2000) organizational conflict scale. Cox's five-items scale focuses on the active hostility found in relationship conflict and is based on items such as "much plotting takes place behind the scenes" and "one party frequently undermines the other". The scale uses a five-point response format. The higher the score, the higher the levels of relationship conflict experienced.

Job satisfaction. We measured job satisfaction with the 23-item version of Meliá and Peiró's (1989) job satisfaction scale. The respondents were asked to consider how satisfied they were with intrinsic job aspects, supervision, participation, environment and services (e.g. "personal relationships with your superior"). In this study, we used an overall job satisfaction index. The higher the score, the more satisfied the workers.

Affective wellbeing. Affective wellbeing was tapped using the scales developed by Warr (1990). These scales measure: anxiety-calm, depression-enthusiasm and contented-discontented. The six items on six-point scales measure the extent to which people are either anxious or calm, depressed or enthusiastic, contented or

discontented with their job. Respondents were asked to think of the past few weeks and indicate how they felt in different ways (e.g. calm, gloomy, cheerful, contented). Higher scores on these scales represent higher levels of affective well-being (contentment, enthusiasm, calm).

Propensity to leave a job. The González-Romá *et al.*'s (1992) four-item scale was used to assess propensity to leave a job. The respondents were asked to consider different aspects of their workplace and reflect on whether they would change to another workplace in the same organization. The scale uses a six-point response format. The higher the score, the higher the level of propensity to leave a job.

Procedure

A questionnaire containing the aforementioned measures was used. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study accompanied the questionnaire. Participants were told that they would be entitled to a free summary report of the study if they returned the completed questionnaire. They were told that the questionnaire was not designed for their superiors or heads of department, but for their subordinates. A researcher was present as they filled in the questionnaire to clarify any doubts. To ensure confidentiality, participants put the completed questionnaire in a sealed box.

Results

Table I provides the number of items, means, standard deviations and internal consistency reliability of all the behavioral variables, assessed by Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients were good to excellent.

The zero order intercorrelations among the variables used in this study are presented in Table II. As can be seen, relationship conflict is negatively related to satisfaction and well-being; and positively related to propensity to leave a job. Task

Variables	Items	α	Mean	SD
Relationship conflict	5	0.84	2.36	1.04
Task conflict	4	0.81	2.75	0.93
Job satisfaction	23	0.93	4.29	0.99
Wellbeing	18	0.92	3.90	0.82
Propensity to leave a job	3	0.88	2.95	1.64

Notes: α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient; SD = standard deviation; $n=169$

Table I.
Number of items, means,
standard deviations and
Cronbach's alpha of
behavioral variables
presented in this study

	2	3	4	5
1. Task conflict	0.35**	-0.30**	-0.27**	0.19*
2. Relationship conflict	-	-0.47**	-0.45**	0.39**
3. Satisfaction		-	0.65**	-0.30**
4. Wellbeing			-	-0.35**
5. Propensity to leave a job				-

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table II.
Correlations between
types of conflict and
satisfaction, wellbeing
and the propensity to
leave a job

conflict is negatively related to satisfaction and well-being and positively related to propensity to leave the job.

This result agrees with other studies (e.g. Janssen *et al.*, 1999), which conclude that these relations may be due to common variance between task conflict and relationship conflict. To assess this supposition we analyzed partial correlations. When controlling for task conflict, we did find negative correlations between relationship conflict and satisfaction, $r = -0.39$, $p < 0.01$; well-being, $r = -0.37$, $p < 0.01$ and positive correlations with the propensity to leave a job, $r = -0.33$, $p < 0.01$. When controlling for relationship conflict, we found no correlations between task conflict and these variables. Data suggests that relationship conflict have a negative influence on affective reactions and that task conflict does not have influence on affective reactions.

We used hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test *H1* and *H2* (Cohen and Cohen, 1983). First of all, the main effect of task-related conflict and relationship conflict was introduced into the equation, after which the interaction terms were included. To prevent problems of multicollinearity, these analyses were conducted with centered variables (Aiken and West, 1991).

Table III shows the regression coefficients between task and relationship conflict and the different reactions to conflict.

As can be seen in Table III, relationship conflict appears to decrease satisfaction ($\beta = -0.40$; $p < 0.01$) and psychological well-being ($\beta = -0.39$; $p < 0.01$). Relationship conflict also increases the predisposition to leave a job ($\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.01$). Introducing the two-way interaction term into the regression equation contributes substantially to the prediction of the propensity to leave a job ($\beta = -0.18$; $p < 0.05$) As can be seen in Figure 1 the propensity to leave a job increases when high task conflict is combined with high relationship conflict; whereas it decreases when

Table III.
Regression coefficients
between types of conflict
and satisfaction,
wellbeing and propensity
to leave a job

Block	Satisfaction			Wellbeing			Propensity to leave a job		
	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2	β
1. Task conflict	0.24	0.24**	-0.14	0.21	0.21**	-0.12	0.11	0.16**	-0.05
Relationship conflict			-0.40**			-0.39**			0.40**
2. TCXRC	0.24	0.00	-0.02	0.22	0.01	-0.07	0.19	0.03*	-0.18*
General model	0.24			0.22			0.19		

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

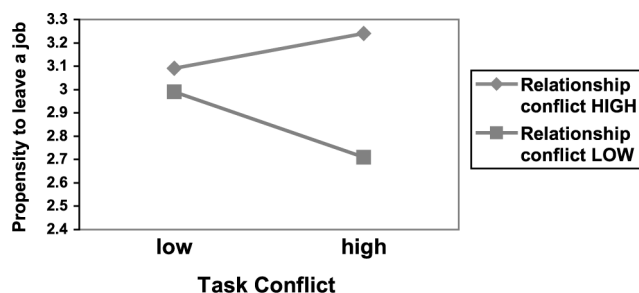


Figure 1.
Types of conflict and
propensity to leave a job

low relationship conflict is combined with high task conflict. Data suggest support for *H1* and partial support for *H2*.

H3 predicts that relationship conflict would mediate the link between task conflict and affective variables. This hypothesis was tested through regression analyses. Baron and Kenny (1986) suggest a three-step process for testing mediation using regression:

- (1) Regressing the mediator on the independent variable.
- (2) Regressing the dependent variable on the independent variable.
- (3) Regressing the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator.

For mediation to exist, the result of the first and second steps must be significant. Furthermore, if the relationship between the mediator and dependent variable in the regression equation (step 3) is also significant, but the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is not significant, then the mediator may be said to account for the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

This process was used to test relationship conflict as a mediator between task conflict and satisfaction and well-being. Two of these analyses satisfy all of the conditions for mediation. Task conflict was significantly related to relationship conflict, $\beta = 0.34$; $p < 0.01$ (step 1) and to some affective variables such as satisfaction, $\beta = -0.34$; $p < 0.01$ and well-being, $\beta = -0.26$; $p < 0.01$ (step 2). The third regression can be seen in Table III. As we can see, when both types of conflict are introduced in the regression, the effect of task conflict disappears. This result suggests that the relationships between task conflict and some affective variables are fully mediated by relationship conflict.

To confirm these results with a different methodology and replicate Friedman et al.'s study, comparing the different paths proposed in literature (task conflict \rightarrow relationship conflict \rightarrow affective outcomes and relationship conflict \rightarrow task conflict \rightarrow affective outcomes), we used LISREL analysis. We test two alternative models: in the first model (M1) we consider relationship conflict as a mediator variable and in the second (M2), we consider task conflict as a mediator variable (see Table IV).

Table IV shows that M1 models have a higher adjustment in all indicators than M2 models. This finding confirms that the relationships between task conflict and some affective variables such as satisfaction and well-being are mediated by relationship conflict.

Discussion and general conclusions

Our objective in this study was to analyze the relationship between different types of intragroup conflict and employees' affective reactions. We investigated the effects of task and relationship conflicts on several criterion variables such as satisfaction, well-being and propensity to leave the current job. The results indicate that the two types of conflict have different consequences. Data show that:

- relationship conflict is negatively associated with affective reactions, while task conflict does not relate directly to affective reactions in a predictable way;
- relationship conflict has a positive influence on the desire to leave the current job, while task conflict does not affect it negatively;

Table IV.
LISREL analysis between
types of conflict and
affective variables

Satisfaction			Wellbeing		
M1	Coef. path	M2	M1	M2	
Path		Path	Path	Path	Coef. path
TC → RC	0.34**	RC → TC	TC → RC	RC → TC	0.34**
RC → SAT	-0.46**	TC → SAT	RC → WB	TC → WB	-0.26**
Résumé		Résumé	Résumé	Résumé	
χ^2	4.20	χ^2	χ^2	χ^2	23.98
<i>p</i>	0.04	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i>	0.00
d.f.	1	d.f.	d.f.	d.f.	1
RMSEA	0.138	RMSEA	RMSEA	RMSEA	0.37
GFI	0.98	GFI	GFI	GFI	0.91
RMR	0.04	RMR	RMR	RMR	0.11
Notes: TC – task conflict; RC – relationship conflict; SAT – satisfaction; WB – wellbeing; χ^2 – chi square; GFI – goodness of fit index; RMR – root mean square residuals; RMSEA – root mean square error of approximation; * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01					

- the interactive effect of relationships and task conflict shows that this interaction contributes substantially to predict the propensity to leave the current job; and
- relationship conflict mediates in the link between task conflict and affective reactions.

As expected, relationship conflict decreases employees' satisfaction and psychological well-being. These results are similar to the ones found in previous research (e.g. Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Surra and Longstreeth, 1990). These data allow for meaningful interpretations for dealing with emotional conflict and avoiding dysfunctional affective reactions from employees in the work place.

An interesting result refers to the interactive effects of relationships and task conflict. It has been found that propensity to leave the current job increases when both types of conflict are present at high levels and decreases when high task conflict is combined with low relationship conflict. Given this situation, task conflict has functional effects when there are low levels of relationship conflict but it tends to become dysfunctional as the relationship conflict increases. The combination of high task and relationship conflict is dysfunctional because relationship dissents produce intolerance and antagonistic attributions concerning each other's intentions and behaviors (Baron, 1990; Janssen *et al.*, 1999). This mixture increases the desire to leave the job. In contrast, employees not affected by relationship conflict are able to stimulate team members and make them discuss, propose new ideas and integrate varying opinions in order to improve the job. This condition does not negatively affect the employees' desire to leave his/her current job. As Amason (1996) and Korsgaard *et al.* (1995) state, when subjects are able to express their opinions, they are more involved with group decisions and their desire to remain in the work group is enhanced.

The absence of interactive effects between task and relationship conflict and some affective variables such as satisfaction and well-being agree with previous findings that suggest no moderating effects between the two types of conflict. Neither did Janssen *et al.*'s (1999) study find any two-way interaction patterns between task and relationship conflict, conflict behavior, decision quality or affective acceptance. Future studies are needed to confirm these interactive effects in other samples and organizations.

The present study provides strong evidence for the link between task and relationship conflict. Thus, relationship conflict mediates the link between task conflict and affective reactions. Therefore the benefits from task conflict may sometimes disappear as the level of relationship conflict increase. Some incongruent results that appear in literature can be clarified by this meditational role. A possible explanation is that task conflict may develop a relationship conflict in the future. This is in consonance with Jehn (1997), De Dreu (1997), Friedman *et al.* (2000) or Simons and Peterson's (2000) studies, which pointed out the transformation of task conflict into relationship conflict. These results suggest that enhancing task conflict may backfire, as the transformation of task into relationship conflict may be counterproductive. Future longitudinal studies are needed to analyze this transformation and to search for the means and instruments to break this link and prevent the negative consequences of relationship conflict in teams.

The practical implications of this study are important. As Dechurch and Marks (2001) found, subjects react negatively to a badly handled conflict even if the results are

favorable. As a consequence, a model of the mechanisms that link task and relationship conflict is essential to provide practical guidance on how to manage intragroup conflicts. Our results suggest that it is important to consider the task conflict's intensity in teams, since a high level of task conflict may backfire by boosting relationship conflict as well, thus having a negative effect on affective reactions. On the basis of these results, some conclusions can be drawn with a view to improving conflict management in teams. First of all, before planning the intervention, an attempt must be made to understand the type of conflict that is taking place. Secondly, managers should encourage open discussion of task related issues, in certain limits, in order to improve the quality of decisions as well as their acceptance by the group members. However, managers should mitigate or resolve relationship conflicts as soon as possible. Thirdly, special attention should be paid to the level of each conflict because of its interactive effects on some affective outcomes. Thus, in spite of the generally beneficial effects associated with task conflict, the intensification of task related conflict may backfire when interacting with dysfunctional affective-dissent.

Some limitations in our study should be noted. Firstly, the correlational evidence between the different variables of the study does not necessarily reflect causal links between them. Future research is needed using independent variables of conflict types to analyze links between conflict issues and affective variables. However, the dynamic and interactive nature of conflict complicates the validity of this kind of study. Secondly, our results have been obtained using self-report measures and as a consequence the threat of common method variance exists. However, this risk is reduced by using standardized instruments (Spector, 1987) as the present study does.

In conclusion, this article clarifies important aspects of the contradictory findings concerning the benefits of task conflict in teams. It is possible that incongruous evidence could be due to the mediational role of relationship conflict and interactions between conflict types. Consideration of conflict as a dynamic and multifaceted process is necessary to guarantee organizational effectiveness.

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