A contingency perspective on the study of the consequences of conflict types: The role of organizational culture

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The potential positive or negative consequence of relationship conflict versus task conflict for group members and organizations continues to be a controversial topic. Whereas a certain amount of agreement exists on the negative consequences of relationship conflict, the evidence for task conflict is not as conclusive. This has led some authors (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a, 2003b) to propose a contingency perspective. This article continues this approach and analyses the influence of types of conflict on group members’ satisfaction and well-being, considering the moderating role that organizational culture plays in this relationship. Two types of service organization have been studied: private organizations with a high goal-oriented culture, and public organizations with a low goal-oriented culture. Results show that (a) relationship conflict decreases both public and private workers’ job satisfaction and affective well-being; (b) task conflicts decrease private organization workers’ satisfaction and affective well-being, while this dysfunctional effect is absent in public organizations; (c) goal orientation culture moderates the effect of task conflict in private organizations; and (d) support orientation culture moderates the effect of task conflict in public organizations.
The study of the consequences of conflict in organizational settings is ongoing (Thomas, 1992). Early organizational conflict theorists suggested that conflict is detrimental to organizational functioning (e.g., Pondy, 1967). In contrast, more recent studies have demonstrated that conflict can be beneficial, so that it might even be recommended to stimulate conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1994; Van de Vliert & De Dreu, 1994). Some studies show that on certain occasions, conflict may increase creativity and job quality in a group (e.g., Amason, 1996; Nemeth, 1986), and improve organizational effectiveness and development (Bourgeois, 1985; Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1990). However, conclusions about the positive consequences of stimulating conflict are not conclusive. Authors such as De Dreu, Harinck, and Van Vianen (1999) have considered four factors that may moderate the results of conflict stimulation: (a) conflict experience, referring to feelings, cognitions, and intentions associated to conflict; (b) conflict management, understood as those behaviours or set of behaviours aimed at the intensification, reduction, or resolution of the conflict; (c) conflict results, understood as the extent to which an agreement is reached, and the quality of this agreement; and (d) types of conflict, understood as the specific issues that give rise to arguments. This article analyses the influence of this final factor, conflict types, on the affective reactions of group members.

**TYPES OF CONFLICT AND PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONSEQUENCES**

The positive or negative consequences of conflict types for group members and for the organization itself have been the object of much research in recent years (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). However, results are still far from conclusive. Following the classic research by Guetzkow and Gyr (1954) most research has considered the existence of two types of conflict: that based on the interpersonal relationships within the group, and that based around tasks developed by the group (e.g., Amason & Schweiger, 1994; Jehn, 1995; Pinkley, 1990). Relationship conflicts are disagreements and incompatibilities among group members over personal issues that are not task related. The most frequently reported relationship conflicts concern social events, gossip, clothing preferences, political views, and hobbies (Jehn, 1997). This type of conflict often includes personality differences, animosity, and annoyance between individuals. In contrast, task conflicts are disagreements among group members or individuals about the content of the task being performed, including 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 (Jehn, 1995, 1997).
Some research has shown that the two conflict types have different consequences for personal, group, and organizational dynamics. The existence of relationship conflict within the group produces negative emotional reactions in workers such as anxiety, fear, mistrust, or resentment (Jehn, 1995). High relationship conflict also means that workers suffer frustration, tension, and fear of being rejected by other group members (Murnigham & Conlon, 1991). At the same time, high relationship conflict appears to cause dysfunction in the group work, diminish group decision commitment, decrease organizational commitment (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), raise communication problems within team members (Baron, 1991), diminish work satisfaction (Jehn, 1995; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997), and increase stress levels (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000).

Findings concerning task conflict are not conclusive. Task conflict has usually been associated with several beneficial effects in the group and organizational settings. Task conflict is related to the quality of ideas and innovation (Amason, 1996; West & Anderson, 1996); it increases constructive debate (Jehn et al., 1999), facilitates a more effective use of resources, and leads to better service provision (Tjosvold, Dann, & Wong, 1992). Team members respond positively to decision processes that are open to them, and that consider their needs and concerns (Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995) and a greater desire to remain in the group (Amason, 1996). However, other studies have shown that task conflict may also have harmful effects. Conflict in any form can be an uncomfortable environment, decreasing individuals’ perceptions of teamwork and their satisfaction (Kabanoff, 1991; Jehn et al., 1997), and increasing their anxiety (Jehn, 1997) and propensity to leave the group (Jehn, 1995).

To analyse the controversial role of task conflict, De Dreu and Weingart (2003b) performed a meta-analysis of research into the associations between relationship conflict, task conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction. Results revealed that task conflict can be as harmful as relationship conflict for team performance, and team members’ satisfaction. These authors also found that task conflict may be moderated by the type of task being performed by subjects, and by work team culture. As a result, and as Jehn (1997) suggested, De Dreu and Weingart point to the possibility of considering a contingent perspective in the study of conflict types outcomes. Following this line of research, the objective of this article is to analyse the effect of conflict types, considering the moderating role played by certain variables in the social context in which these conflicts arise.

When analysing the effects of conflict types, we pay special attention to the effects on employees’ emotional reactions, such as satisfaction and well-being. The reason for highlighting these variables is, as different authors have suggested, mainly due to the fact that conflict may have serious consequences for individual well-being and health, and because well-being
and satisfaction are important predictors of performance, propensity to leave the job and organizational health (e.g., Spector & Jex, 1998). In addition, the importance of considering these variables is based on the fact that previous research on conflict and individual well-being did not consider the distinction between task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a).

**THE MODERATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

Several authors have argued that organizational culture may render members of a group to be more or less tolerant towards discussions and different opinions that may arise within the group (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). Organizational culture is defined in terms of “core values, behavioral norms, artifacts, and behavioral patterns, which govern the ways people in an organization interact with each other and invest energy in their jobs and the organization at large” (Van Muijen, Koopman, Dondeyne, De Cock, & De Witte, 1992, p. 555). This definition has been adopted by its authors following the competing values model of organizational culture (Quinn, 1988). The model consists of two dimensions with contrasting poles. The first dimension represents the organization’s point of view. The focus can either be direct internally—making the organization itself, its processes, or its people, the central issue—or externally—making the relation of the organization with its environment the central issue. The second dimension refers to the contrasting pole of flexibility and control. Combining these two dimensions, four organizational culture orientations are obtained: support, innovation, rules, and goal orientation (Quinn, 1988). Organizations can score high on none, one, or any combination of the orientations, thereby showing the level of strength of their culture.

Van Muijen et al. (1999) describe the four different orientations in terms of their related concepts. The support orientation, which combines the internal and flexibility poles, deals with concepts such as participation, cooperation, people-based orientation, mutual trust, team spirit, and individual growth. The innovation orientation (external and flexibility poles) is characterized by concepts such as searching for new information in the environment, creativity, openness to change, anticipation, and experimentation. The rules orientation (internal and control poles) emphasizes respect for authority, rationality of procedures, and division of work. Finally, the goal orientation (external and control poles) emphasizes concepts such as rationality, performance indicators, accomplishment, accountability, and contingent reward.

Van Muijen and Koopman (1994) point out that the orientations are circumflex and as a result there is tension between the values of the
diametrical orientations. When one moves diagonally in the model, the culture type is the polar opposite. Stability and control (rules orientation) are opposed to creativity and change (innovation orientation). Team spirit and cooperation (support orientation) contrast with contingent reward and accountability (goal orientation). Our review of the task conflict studies further suggests that these cultural orientations would moderate the consequences of the task conflicts developing within them. However, given the consistency of findings on the relationship conflict, one would not expect them to be affected by the differences in their respective organizational cultures. Exploring these possibilities was the major goal of our study. We compare these effects of task versus relationship conflict in two culturally distinct organizations, a private service organization and a public service organization. Perry and Rainey (1988) have proposed a classification of types of organizations, suggesting that the public and the private (for-profit) forms of organization represent the most distinct types of organizations. For the purposes of this article, we focus on these pure types of organizations.

Private service organizations have a simple structure with two hierarchical levels, management and workers (Mintzberg, 1979). In these organizations work is performed on the basis of criteria of rationality, accomplishment, and accountability with the objective of satisfying clients’ needs and obtaining a profit. This type of management assumes the existence of certain clear objectives that guide the organization and working procedures, and a reward system that depends on the performance of its employees. When a high goal orientation culture exists in private organizations, disagreements between employees on how to perform a task—task conflict—may be considered as an essential part of the process and a way of improving work and obtaining profits (Jehn et al., 1999). Therefore, it is possible that task conflict is not negative for group objectives or for the affective well-being of its members. In other words, high job satisfaction and high affective well-being could be achieved when task conflict occurs within a culture that values rationality, accomplishment, and accountability.

Hypothesis 1: Relationship conflict will be negatively related to satisfaction and well-being of private organization employees.

Hypothesis 2: The stronger the goal orientation culture in private organizations, the less negative the relationship between task conflict on the one hand, and satisfaction and well-being on the other.

Public service organizations have a different finality, which consists of providing a service to the general public (Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975). These organizations do not have to compete for clients as is the case with private organizations, they are not driven by the goal of profit making, as their basic remit is to provide a public service to specific groups. These
organizations are, to use Mintzberg’s (1979) terminology, professional bureaucracies in which the yardstick with which work is assessed is not determined so much by results, organizational criteria or management decisions, as by rules and legally established indications. They combine hierarchical administration with a peer philosophy that views employees as self-governing colleagues, a tenure system for job security, and decentralized departments that often operate independently rather than as part of an organization. In terms of cultural orientation they are a long way from performance indicators, accountability, and contingent rewards.

There are differences in human resources practices in private and public organizations. For example, in a public organization, managers have less discretion in exercising leadership than in private organizations, because responsibilities are clearly specified, authority and accountability are documented in policies, procedures, and job descriptions, and remuneration does not depend on leader recommendations (Hooijberg & Choi, 2001). Moreover, public organizations have less flexibility in their reward systems, more specialized and invariant job designs, higher levels of accountability, more rules and regulations, weaker linkages between political leaders and career-level leaders, and an absence of market incentives (Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995). As a consequence, the effects of task conflict in this context might be distinct to private organizations. Public sector workers have to deal with frequently changing agendas and unstable coalitions (Ring & Perry, 1985). Moreover, as Denhardt (1984) suggests, public employees should have different skills from private organizations: to encourage collective effort, to build cohesion and teamwork, to develop people through a caring and empathetic orientation. In this organizations manager and colleagues have to be helpful, considerate, sensitive, open, approachable, and fair (Denhardt, 1984). The culture orientation that describes largely these skills is the support orientation (Hooijberg & Choi, 2001). We suppose that when a high support orientation exists in public organizations, disagreements between employees on how to perform a task—task conflict—may be considered as differences in interpretation of rules and procedures or as a way of improving the work. In this sense, some authors have pointed out that in groups where there is mutual collaboration and trust, arguments about working procedures are less likely to lead to conflicts on personal matters (Simons & Peterson, 2000). As a result, it is possible that when a high support orientation prevails within a group of a public organization, task conflict will not harm the satisfaction and affective well-being of group members. However, task conflict will have negative consequences on the satisfaction and affective well-being of workers when they perceive a low support culture in their work groups.

Hypothesis 3: Relationship conflict will be negatively related with public organization workers’ job satisfaction and affective well-being.
Hypothesis 4: The stronger the support orientation in public service organizations the less negative the relationship between task conflict on the one hand, and satisfaction and affective well-being on the other.

METHOD

Study participants

Data from private organizations were collected from several small/medium-sized hotels. Respondents consisted of 79 men, 86 women, and 4 respondents whose gender was not specified. Subjects had different educational levels: elementary school \((N = 64)\), high school \((N = 41)\), high school graduates \((N = 41)\), and university graduates \((N = 14)\). Nine respondents did not indicate their educational level. Work experience ranged from 3 months to more than 5 years, and the average age was 31.45.

Data from public organizations were collected at several small/medium homes for senior citizens. Respondents from public organizations consisted of 203 women, 107 men, and 17 respondents whose gender was not specified. Subjects had different educational levels: elementary school \((N = 107)\), high school \((N = 166)\), high school graduates \((N = 50)\), and university graduates \((N = 21)\). Work experience ranged from 3 months to more than 5 years, and the average age was 39.

Data collection

Variables were measured using a questionnaire. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study accompanied the questionnaire. Subjects 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 immediate superiors. A researcher was present when they filled out the questionnaire to clarify any doubts. To ensure confidentiality, participants put the completed questionnaire in a sealed box. The response rate was 60%.

Measures

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 workplace (e.g., “How often do people you work with have different opinions about the work being done?”). Each item was cast on a 5-point scale. The higher the score, the higher the level of task conflict experienced.
To measure relationship conflict we relied on Cox’s (1998) Organizational Conflict Scale. Cox’s 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”. We used this scale because it deals more with perceptions of active conflict behaviours rather than perceptions of an overall state of conflict (see Friedman et al., 2001). The scale has a 5-point response format. The higher the score, the higher the levels of relationship conflict experienced.

Organizational culture. To measure organizational culture we used the 40-item adapted version of FOCUS-93 questionnaire (Mañas, González-Romá, & Peiró, 1999; Van Muijen et al., 1999). Respondents were asked to think about all the people with whom they have a working relationship. The questionnaire has two formats. The first format asks subjects how frequently certain situations occur in their workplace (6 items) (e.g., “How often is constructive criticism accepted?”) and the second format asks subjects about the number of people in the organization that are affected by certain situations (34 items) (e.g., “How many people with personal problems are helped?”). Subjects answer using a 6-point scale (1 = nobody to 6 = everybody for the first format and 1 = never to 6 = always for the second format). The higher the score, the higher the level of each orientation: support (e.g., “How many people who wish to advance are supported by their superiors?”), innovation (e.g., “How often is there a lot of investment in new products?”), rules (e.g., “How often are written instructions given?”), and goals (e.g., “How often do rewards depend on performance?”). The higher the scores for the total scale, the higher the organizational culture.

Job satisfaction. We measured job satisfaction with the 23-item version of Meliá and Peiró’s (1989) Job Satisfaction Scale. 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 well-being. Affective well-being was assessed using the scales developed by Warr (1990). The 6-item, 6-point scales measure the extent to which people are either anxious or calm, depressed or enthusiastic, and contented or discontented with their job. Respondents were asked to think of the past few weeks and to indicate how they felt (e.g., “calm”, “gloomy”, “cheerful”, “contented”). Higher scores on these scales are held to represent higher levels of affective well-being.
RESULTS

Table 1 provides for all variables the number of items, means, standard deviations, and internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha). The reliability coefficients for all the variables were generally satisfactory except for the rules scale, which also had an originally low coefficient (.58).

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined whether public organizations were different from private organizations in terms of their level of conflict and their organizational culture. Workers in public organizations perceived higher levels of task conflict, $F(1, 513) = 7.26, p < .01$, and more relationship conflict, $F(1, 513) = 19.6, p < .01$, than workers in private organizations. Workers in private organizations perceived more support for innovation $F(1, 513) = 123.8, p < .01$, goals orientation $F(1, 513) = 73.03, p < .01$, and rules orientation $F(1, 513) = 10.20, p < .01$, than public organizations. No differences were found in support orientation, $F(1, 513) = 1.99, ns$. Data suggest that there are significant differences in cultural orientations between private and public organizations and that these differences are coherent with our theoretical framework. In effect, private organizations have a more goal, innovation, and rules culture orientation than public organizations, given the need of the latter to adapt to the surroundings and meet demands to survive in these surroundings. In general, it is clear that private organizations have a stronger culture than public organizations, with the exception of support orientation, which deals with peer philosophy, mutual trust, team spirit, and individual growth.

In Table 1 it can be seen that in both public and private organizations, relationship conflict is negatively related with all culture orientations, as well as job satisfaction and affective well-being. In task conflict, differences exist between public and private organizations. In private organizations there are no significant relations between task conflict and culture orientations. However, in public organizations, task conflict is negatively related with all culture orientations except innovation orientation in which case the relation is not significant.

Four multiple regression analyses were computed to test the hypotheses, two for the public organizations and two for the private, considering job satisfaction and affective well-being, respectively, as outcome variables. To prevent problems of multicollinearity, these analyses were conducted with centred variables (Aiken & West, 1991), and differential insertion in the hierarchical regression model. In the hierarchical regression analyses, the control variable of gender was introduced in the first step, task conflict, relationship conflict, and culture orientations—support, innovation, goals, and rules—were entered in the second step, and finally, task conflict, relationship conflict interactions, and culture orientation interactions were entered in the third step.
TABLE 1
Number of items, means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha of behavioural variables presented in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Public organizations</th>
<th>Private organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \alpha )</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task conflict</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \alpha \) = Cronbach's alpha coefficient; SD = standard deviation; N public organizations = 360; N private organizations = 169. Correlations above the diagonal belong to public organizations; below the diagonal belong to private organizations.
As can be seen in Table 2, relationship conflict appears to decrease workers’ satisfaction and affective well-being, which confirms Hypothesis 1. In contrast, support orientation increases workers’ affective well-being and satisfaction. As Hypothesis 2 predicted, there is a significant interaction between task conflict and goal orientation, so that goal orientation moderates the effects of task conflict on satisfaction and affective well-being of private organization employees. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how

### Table 2

Regression coefficients between conflict types, culture, satisfaction, and well-being in private organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Well-being</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. TC</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. TC × RC</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>TC × G</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC × R</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC × I</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC × S</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$. TC: task conflict; RC: relationship conflict; S: support orientation; I: innovation orientation; G: goals orientation; and R: rules orientation.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1.** Interaction between task conflict and goal orientation with satisfaction in private organizations.
satisfaction and well-being decrease when task conflict is combined with a low level of goal orientation in organizations.

In the hierarchical regression analyses performed in public organizations, gender was entered first, followed in second place by types of conflict and culture orientations—support, innovation, goals, and rules, and third, task conflict and culture orientation interactions. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 provides information about the negative relation between relationship conflict and public organizational workers' satisfaction and well-being.

![Figure 2. Interaction between task conflict and goal orientation with well-being in private organizations.](image)

### TABLE 3

Regression coefficients between conflict types, culture, satisfaction, and well-being in public organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Well-being</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<td></td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
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<td>1. Gender</td>
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<td>.002</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. TC</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. TC × RC</td>
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<td>.03*</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>TC × G</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>TC × R</td>
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<td>TC × I</td>
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<tr>
<td>TC × S</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$. TC: task conflict; RC: relationship conflict; S: support orientation; I: innovation orientation; G: goals orientation; and R: rules orientation.
well-being, which confirms Hypothesis 3. In the same way, support orientation is positively related with workers satisfaction. As Hypothesis 4 suggested, there is a significant interaction between task conflict and support orientation with job satisfaction, partially confirming this hypothesis. Figure 3 shows that worker satisfaction decreases when task conflict is combined with a low support orientation in public organizations. There is also a significant interaction between types of conflict—task and relationship conflict—and job satisfaction (Figure 4). Results suggest that when low task conflict is related with low relationship conflict, workers’ satisfaction increases.

Figure 3. Interaction between task conflict and support orientation with satisfaction in public organizations.

Figure 4. Interaction between task and relationship conflict with satisfaction in public organizations.
DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to analyse the effects of conflict types on the affective reactions of employees and the moderating role that organizational culture plays in this relationship. We analysed two potentially different cultural contexts, that of private organizations and public organizations. The main findings show, first of all, that relationship conflict is negatively related to satisfaction and well-being of members of both public organizations and private organizations. Secondly, the findings show that organizational culture moderates the relationship between task conflict and members’ satisfaction and well-being. In this section we discuss the implications of these findings, and examine some strengths and weaknesses of the study design.

As envisaged, relationship conflict hampers satisfaction and well-being of employees of both public and private organizations. In other words, when the members of a working group have incompatible values, beliefs, and ideas, personal tension emerges, and workers’ levels of satisfaction and well-being decrease. This result is consistent with previous findings (e.g., De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Surra & Longstreeth, 1990). As Kurtz and Clow (1998) suggest, these affective reactions of employees have important consequences for organizational dynamics, because unsatisfied employees cost companies more than the wages they are paid (Kurtz & Clow, 1998, p. 173). The main reason for the significant impact of human aspects in service organizations is that employees are the basic link between organization and customer, and these employees are often the only ones with whom the client interacts. On the other hand, the study of organizational culture suggests that relationship conflict has a negative impact on daily working practices. This is because employees who perceive a high relationship conflict have a negative perception of the organization and of the activities being performed within it.

Our study also confirmed that under certain circumstances, the consequences of task conflict could be as negative as those of relationship conflict. Our results showed that in private, profit-seeking organizations, task conflict has a negative relationship with workers’ satisfaction and well-being. Despite several studies indicating the positive effects of task conflict for these types of organizations (e.g., Jehn et al., 1999; Rollinson, 2002), this study agrees with De Dreu and Weingart’s (2003b) meta-analysis, in that disagreements between team members over how to perform a task may interfere with the affective development of its members. When conflicts within the group persist, despite achieving or improving working objectives, the satisfaction and well-being of subjects may be harmed (Jehn, 1995; Ross, 1985).

Task conflict does not have a negative influence on the affective reactions of workers in public organizations. One possible explanation for this evidence may be that workers are more used to conflict at work, due mainly
to the decision-making processes of these organizations. As we saw previously, public organizations perceive a higher level of conflict in their working groups. This may be because decisions are taken following extensive discussions between workers, where reaching a consensus is usually the objective. On this point, Falk (1979) demonstrated in an experimental study that democratic decision-making procedures have the potential to facilitate the emergence of task conflict. Another possibility is that workers from public organizations have a high level of job security, so that conflicts are not seen as factors that might jeopardize their jobs. In contrast, in private organizations with much less job security or where employment is of a seasonal nature, workers may see conflicts as job threatening.

Finally, this study confirms that culture moderates the effects of task conflict on workers’ affective reactions. One particularly interesting finding suggests that this modulating relationship depends on the type of organization that is analysed. It appears that in private organizations, task conflict is damaging to workers’ well-being and satisfaction when there is a low goal orientation within the organization. However, in public organizations task conflict negatively affects satisfaction when there is a low support orientation within the organization. Thus different culture dimensions moderate the relationship between task conflict and workers’ affective reactions when private or public organizations are examined.

In private, profit-seeking organizations task conflict does not negatively affect workers’ satisfaction and well-being when it is combined with high goal orientation, when performance indicators and achieving goals are important for the team. In this sense, the suggestions that team members might make about procedures for implementing a specific program, or discussions about ways of performing a given task, can have beneficial effects for the team as it develops their ability to adapt to a complex environment and facilitates the understanding of the subjects on which the discussion is based. In short, it encourages constructive debate (Amason, 1996; Jehn et al., 1999) where subjects have the chance to air different points of view, helping to make members feel that they are being listened to and that the decision-making process at work is fair and open. We can conclude, therefore, that task conflict does not negatively influence workers’ satisfaction and well-being as long as it occurs in an occupational culture that gives priority to group objectives and in which it is accepted that reward distribution should be guided by the extent to which these objectives are obtained.

In the case of public organizations, our study shows that task conflict does not have negative effects on worker satisfaction when this is combined with high support orientation in work teams; in other words, when the relationship between members of the organization are based on collaboration and mutual assistance, and when group members have high levels of trust and participate and collaborate with their peers in work tasks. This result suggests that to
avoid the possible negative effects of task conflict in organizations with a professional bureaucratic structure, where collaboration between workers is vital for obtaining a good level of effectiveness, the conflict needs to occur in a context with high support orientation. Thus, as Jehn and Shah (1997) indicate, the existence of friendship between group members seems to be related both to an improvement in communication channels that influences the creative resolution of conflicts and to an increase in team members’ commitment. As a result, the existence of support orientation could prevent task conflict from turning into relationship conflicts (Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Another interesting finding emerging from public organizations is the interaction of both types of conflict with worker satisfaction. The most satisfied workers are those who perceive least conflict—both task and organizational—in their organizations. An explanation for this may lie in the cultural characteristics of public organizations, which are guided more by harmony than conflict and competitiveness.

Some dimensions that differ from public and private organizations could influence in our results. Firstly, public employees enjoy greater job security, because the strength of unions in the regulation of labour relations and the existence of procedures of collective negotiation. The job security climate in public organizations and the important role of unions handling organizational conflicts can explain why task conflict is less negative in these organizations. Secondly, there is less turnovers in public than in private organizations, since temporary contracts are lower in the former—tourism is a seasonal activity in hotels. In public organizations, people have the same colleagues for many years; this might explain why support culture is so relevant. Finally, differences in task—these are less routine in private organizations due to the high variety of customers’ needs—can explain the role of task conflict in our results.

The moderating effect of culture on the consequences of task conflict found in this article opens an interesting line for future research. Studies carried out in recent years on this subject have been discouraging, leading many authors to conclude that task conflict may be as negative as relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). However, most research into the effects of conflict types, starting with the initial research by Karen Jehn in 1994, has been conducted with management or project teams in which tasks are usually highly creative, with very little standardization and in private organizations with a profit-seeking social role. These previous studies concluded that the stimulation of conflict, both task and relationship, may be negative for group performance. The conclusions from this study allows us to consider that conflict may be positive, or at least not negative, when it is activated in certain situations, and in which the team culture has shown itself to be an important variable. It would be interesting to venture deeper into this line of research in the future, considering objective indicators of group performance. Recent research concerning
conflict types has tended to use private organizations based on the achievement of goals or objectives, which are known by the workers, and where discussion is encouraged as a way of obtaining these objectives (e.g., Jehn, 1995; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). The results from this study illustrate the need to find out more about the implications that differences in organizational culture may have on the effects of intragroup conflict. From this new perspective, it would be interesting to conduct studies contemplating the use of different types of organization.

Some practical implications from the present study concern the improvement of conflict management in the organizational setting. First, before planning an intervention in which task conflict will be activated or encouraged, one needs to understand the type of culture existing in the occupational context that has been chosen. Second, in the private sphere, managers may stimulate already existing discussions about task-related aspects as long as this occurs in a cultural orientation based on the achievement of group objectives. Third, in public organizations, managers may encourage open discussions about task-related aspects as long as they occur in a culture oriented towards the improvement of personal relations and mutual support among its members.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, we obtained self-reported measurements of members’ perceptions, and, as a consequence, there is a possibility of common method variance. However, this risk is reduced by using standardized instruments (Spector, 1987) as the present study did. The second limitation concerns the use of a cross-sectional design, which did not allow us to check the stability of these apparently positive results over time. Finally, we should point out that the use of a correlational methodology does not guarantee the existence of causal links between them. It would therefore be of interest to perform experimental studies to analyse whether these results are upheld.

Taken together, this study is among the few to demonstrate negative relations between relationship conflict and task conflict. More importantly, this study is the first to show that the type of organization involved and the dominant culture orientation within the organization moderates the negative relationship between task conflict and workers’ affective reactions. In private organizations, high goal orientation mitigates the negative effects task conflict can have. In public organizations, it is high levels of support orientation that does the trick.

REFERENCES


