

Interpersonal Conflict: The Importance of Clarifying Manifest Conflict Behavior

Felice Williams

Department of Management & Marketing
Louisiana State University Shreveport
Shreveport, LA, USA.

Abstract

Managing conflict in organizations has long been a topic of interest to researchers because of its impact on performance. In particular, one of the goals of conflict research is to clarify how task and relationship conflict affect performance, but the exact nature of that role remains unclear. This conceptual work attempts to highlight the importance of more closely examining manifest conflict and developing a consistent behavioral taxonomy for use in conflict research. Conflict researchers propose that task conflict should have a mainly positive relationship with performance while relationship conflict should have a mainly negative relationship with performance. Empirically, however, there has been wide variation in the findings linking either type of conflict with performance and the development of consistent conflict behaviors may facilitate much needed clarity. Specifically, the use of Bales' interaction process analysis (IPA) behavioral taxonomy will allow for broadening the focus of interpersonal conflict studies to include behavioral elements. This taxonomy is particularly relevant in this context as it identifies a small subset of behaviors that is broad enough to capture the range of behavioral interaction but narrow enough to be related to both conflict and performance which represents a reasonable compromise. This research adds value by proposing an option for clarifying the inconsistencies within the existing conflict literature through the use of a behavioral taxonomy. Conducting behavioral conflict research may help to clarify the mechanism through which interpersonal conflict affects performance.

Keywords: interpersonal conflict, manifest conflict behavior, interaction process analysis, team performance
Interpersonal Conflict: The Importance of Clarifying Manifest Conflict Behavior

Introduction

Organizations offer an ideal environment for the study of interpersonal conflict as they provide the impetus for conflict as well as incubate conflict situations (Dirks & McClean-Parks, 2003). Conflict "disturbs the equilibrium of the organization" (Pondy, 1967, p. 308) and many organizations invest the necessary resources to efficiently manage the conflict process. Consequently, organizational success to some extent depends on the ability to establish and manage the appropriate mechanisms for addressing a variety of conflict phenomena (Pondy, 1967).

Though definitions vary, conflict is consistently viewed as a sequential, dynamic process. Jehn and Bendersky (2003) described conflict as perceived incompatibilities or discrepant views among the parties involved. Putnam and Poole (1987) define conflict as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (p. 552). The general characteristics of interaction, interdependence, and incompatible goals that are common to most definitions of conflict are integral to providing a comprehensive definition of conflict.

Early process models (e.g., Pondy, 1967) included multiple stages of conflict, which reflected the sequential and dynamic nature of conflict. Pondy's process model included five stages: latent conflict at stage 1, perceived conflict at stage 2, felt conflict at stage 3, manifest conflict at stage 4, and the conflict aftermath at stage 5. Latent conflict was viewed as the cause of conflict. An example could be role interdependence, which has the potential to create interpersonal conflict. Perceived conflict involves the cognitive aspect of conflict where either or both parties may recognize that there is conflict. Felt conflict represents the affective aspect of conflict, and manifest conflict represents the behavioral display of conflict. Perceived, felt, and manifest conflict are often thought of as the core processes of conflict. The conflict aftermath represents the effects of conflict. As conflict process models have evolved, more focus has been placed on perception as the main core process, with felt or manifest conflict becoming less important. This focus on perception informed one of the major typologies of conflict that is used widely in the literature to study conflict--task and relationship conflict.

Task (substantive) conflict is related to the disagreements among group members about the task issues, such as goals, decisions, procedures and the appropriate choice for action (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Relationship (affective) conflict, on the other hand, is not directly related to the task and arises when group members have interpersonal clashes which may lead to animosity among group members (Pelled et al. 1999; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

For many years, conflict management researchers tried to determine how conflict could be reduced, eliminated and resolved in organizations. The implicit assumption was that conflict was detrimental to the organization and that it would be beneficial to reduce or eliminate conflict. More recently, researchers have asked questions that may be more useful: when, and under what circumstances, is conflict detrimental and when and under what circumstances does it benefit the organization? Thus, conflict is not assumed to be good or bad but rather it is recognized as a factor that can be both. The impetus then becomes attempting to manage conflict in a way that will ameliorate or eliminate its destructive effects while capitalizing on and enhancing its constructive effects.

Conceptually, task and relationship conflict are believed to have different relationships with performance outcomes. Some conflict researchers believe the relationship between task conflict and performance to be positive, while others believe it to be negative. Empirically, however, task conflict studies have shown mixed results where both positive, negative and no relationships have been found. A recent meta-analysis by DeWit and Greer (2008) found that across 71 studies, the relationship between task conflict and performance was negative with a relatively large standard deviation.

With regard to relationship conflict, theory suggests that relationship conflict should have a consistently negative relationship with performance. This has been shown in the literature, where a relatively consistent negative relationship has been identified with performance outcomes. However, there has still been wide variation in the effect sizes. The previously mentioned meta-analysis by DeWit and Greer (2008) showed that findings for relationship conflict and performance across 59 studies were negative, but also had a relatively large standard deviation.

This apparent variation in the conflict literature underscores the inconsistency across studies and suggests that there is still unexplained variance which needs to be accounted for. A summary of these findings is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Meta-analytic Findings for Interpersonal Conflict and Performance

Conflict and Performance^a	k	N	ρ	SD_{ρ}
Task	71	5149	-.11	0.31
Relationship	59	3856	-.24	0.23

Note: k = number of correlations; N = number of teams; ρ = corrected population correlation; SD_{ρ} = standard deviation of the corrected population correlation

a. After DeWit and Greer (2008)

These findings beg the question of why conflict researchers have not been able to find consistent conflict results in their studies. One possible explanation of this phenomenon might be the movement away from other more traditional process models of conflict. This shift in focus has resulted in a decreased emphasis on some of the other core processes of conflict, such as behaviors, and an increased focus mainly on conflict perceptions. As such, conflict is largely studied in the literature by accounting for perceptions and the behavioral link between perception and performance is often assumed. Unless perceptions can be reliably tied to more observable and measurable behaviors that represent the mechanism by which conflict affects performance, assessing the link between conflict perceptions and performance will continue to be problematic.

This study therefore seeks to clarify how interpersonal conflict might affect team performance by introducing behavioral indicators which are specific, and definitive as the mediating mechanism in the relationship between conflict perception and performance. The conceptual model introduces a behavioral taxonomy which includes behaviors representing the overt actions and verbal statements displayed during interactions between team members. Behaviors are distinct from other individual attributes such as cognition and feelings because they are observable and measurable actions of individuals.

Linking behaviors to conflict, which has been largely examined through perceptions (which is not easily observed), can help to identify how conflict affects performance. Behaviors can concretely affect the social and physical environment, whereas cognition and feelings are intrinsic to the individual and must be translated into behaviors to have an effect on the team environment. This study therefore can offer insight into how conflict changes behavior and whether task and relationship conflict cause different types of behavioral changes. This study might also offer clarity on whether task and relationship conflict might have unique effects on performance through behaviors. By identifying specific behaviors that result from conflict and influence performance, organizations will be better able to design interventions that overcome the negative effects of conflict.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Several essential elements serve as the conceptual basis of our model. These are discussed in greater detail below and include; the background and overview of conflict research, current conflict typologies and empirical findings related to interpersonal conflict, and the behavioral taxonomy.

Background and Overview of Conflict Research

Pondy (1967) very early on defined conflict as a dynamic process between two or more individuals, incorporating five stages of conflict: latent conflict, perceived conflict, felt conflict, manifest conflict, and the conflict aftermath. In latent conflict, the conditions for conflict are present. In perceived conflict, one or more parties become aware of a disagreement, though at this stage may be associated with inaccurate conflict perceptions. At the stage of felt conflict, the conflict becomes personalized and the parties may feel anxious or hostile. Manifest conflict occurs when conflict is enacted through behaviors such as hostility. Finally, conflict aftermath involves outcomes of the conflict episode.

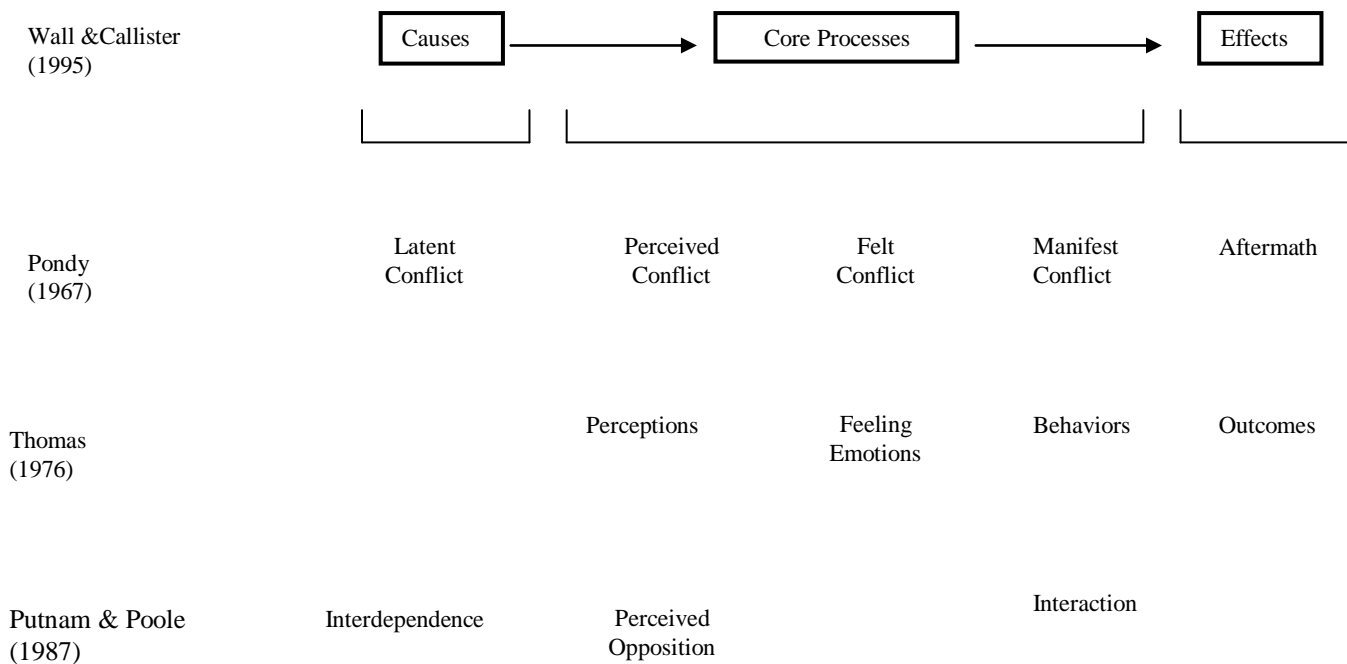
Consistent with each of Pondy's (1967) stages of conflict, Thomas's (1976) definition of conflict as a process also included perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes. Though Thomas's definition included different terminology, the central idea of conflict being a multiple stage dynamic process remained unchanged from Pondy's earlier definition. Later, Putnam and Poole (1987) put forward one of the most widely-used definitions of conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals.

This more contemporary definition of conflict focused on three key characteristics: interaction, interdependence, and incompatible goals. These three characteristics are key to interpersonal conflict; they underscore the essence of conflict dynamics since they are considered to be an integral source of conflict. Conflict researchers believe these characteristics to be relevant for both intragroup and interpersonal conflict. Whether conflict researchers focus on dyads or intragroup conflict involving small groups of 3 or 4, conflict is still treated as interpersonal since the characteristics are applicable in both scenarios.

This convergence in the characterization and definition of conflict informs many of the contemporary views of conflict such as that of Wall and Callister, (1995) and represents a synthesis of prior definitions. Each of the definitions of interpersonal conflict represents a process model view of conflict. The process model view of conflict emphasizes intra-individual and interpersonal processes that are linked to manifestations of conflict (Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008). Process models also imply recursive relationships that suggest conflict episodes have consequences for future interactions and subsequent conflict episodes. Figure 1 outlines four different process models and their evolution over time.

As shown in Figure 1, early process models of conflict initially focused on all the stages of conflict. As process models evolved over time, there was less focus on every stage of the conflict process. Wall and Callister's (1995) model, which is one of the most recent, shows that many of the intermediary stages have been compressed into overarching core processes. As conflict research evolved, conflict perception became the focus of conflict research. Less emphasis was therefore placed on examining behavior related to the conflict process. This focus on conflict perception is evident in the literature, which has shifted more toward perception-based research within the last two decades. The main typology and assessment developed by Jehn (1995) is also perception based and forms the basis for much of the current conflict research. Jehn's (1995) conflict typology of task and relationship conflict derives from the perceived conflict facet of earlier process models and broadly informs interpersonal conflict research.

Figure 1: Summary of the Development of Conflict Process Models



Typology & Conceptual View of Interpersonal Conflict

There is consensus among conflict researchers that conflict perceptions have multiple dimensions. Jehn’s (1995) typology of interpersonal conflict includes task and relationship conflict. This view of interpersonal conflict proposes that both types of interpersonal conflict are distinct, based on the differing conceptual relationships that each is expected to have with outcomes. However, the two types of conflict perceptions may be interrelated, such that a group with many relationship conflicts may also have a high number of task conflicts and vice versa.

Task conflict is focused on the substantive issues associated with the group’s task and can involve differences in viewpoints, ideas, or opinions. Task conflict may also involve the discussion or awareness of different preferences or approaches to a task. More formally, task conflict is defined as “disagreements among group members about the content of tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions” (Jehn, 1995, p.284). Conceptually, it is suggested that task conflict is positively related to performance. This view is consistent with a more contemporary position in the literature that has emerged within the last ten years or so. In the presence of task related conflict, these recent conflict researchers believe that task conflicts have the potential to create value by stimulating creative thinking and divergent thought processes. Task conflict may help employees confront task-related issues, learn to take different perspectives, and address task-related inefficiencies. Other conflict researchers, who conform to the more traditional view of task conflict, contend that task conflict may be detrimental to performance. This is based on the rationale that the tension and antagonism that can result from task conflict, may further distract from the task.

The second type of conflict, relationship conflict, on the other hand, is focused on interpersonal incompatibilities among group members and may include personality differences as well as differences of opinion and preferences regarding non-task issues. Relationship conflict can also be thought of as an awareness of personality clashes, interpersonal tension, or conflict characterized by anger, frustration, and uneasiness. As such, relationship conflict is defined as “interpersonal incompatibilities among group members which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group” (Jehn, 1995, p. 284). Conceptually, relationship conflict is uniformly considered to negatively relate to performance, and has a more adverse effect than task conflict. This is based on the rationale that in the presence of relationship conflict, arousal and cognitive load increases, which in turn affects cognitive flexibility and creative thinking and decreases performance. Further, researchers believe that employees who experience relationship conflict often spend most of their time and effort resolving interpersonal problems.

As such, they mobilize less energy and fewer resources to deal with task-related issues, which lead to process losses. Additionally, employees who are involved in relationship conflict are thought to also suffer from increased levels of anxiety and frustration resulting in cognitive interference and poorer cognitive functioning for problem solving.

Task and relationship conflict can also share some conceptual overlap, as each type of conflict may affect the other. Task conflict may turn into relationship conflict if perceived as a personal disagreement. Misattributions about viewpoints or opinions could lead an individual to assume that his or her competence is being challenged and relationship conflict might result. Similarly, unresolved relationship conflict could also result in unproductive task conflict. Underlying personal issues can become enmeshed in communication and disturb task-related processes.

Empirical Findings Related to Task and Relationship Conflict

Empirical findings related to task conflict have shown a positive relationship between task conflict and outcomes. Some of these outcomes include decision outcomes (Amason, 1996), decision comprehensiveness (Simons et al., 1999), constructive communications (Lovelace et al., 2001), task progress and efficiency (Tjosvold & DeDreu, 1997), and performance (Jehn, 1994), particularly on non-routine tasks (Jehn, 1995). Simons and Peterson (2000) also found empirical evidence to suggest that groups who experience task conflict tend to make better decisions because such conflict encourages greater cognitive understanding of the issue being considered. Other research on team decision-making by Hollenbeck et al. (1995), indicated that when all else is equal, team members whose recommendations are uncorrelated or negatively correlated (i.e. conflicting), provide more value as a unit than do team members whose recommendations are correlated high and positive (i.e. redundant).

Empirical evidence has also shown a negative relationship between task conflict and outcomes such as team productivity and satisfaction (Saveedra, Earley, & Van Dyne, 1993). In her 1995 study, Jehn examined task routineness and found a negative relationship between task conflict and performance when the task was routine. Lovelace et al. (2001) also found that task conflict inhibited the expression of doubts by team members and had a negative impact on innovation. Further, the impact of task conflict on more relational outcomes is generally negative. Specifically, researchers have found that task conflict negatively impacts relational outcomes such as trust, respect, and cohesiveness (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), liking (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), perceptions of leadership (Lovelace et al., 2001), satisfaction (Jehn, 1994), and intent to stay (Jehn et al., 1999).

A meta-analysis by deWitt and Greer (2008) using a sample of over 20,000 teams across 175 studies found an effect size of $-.11$ and a related standard deviation of $.31$ ($\rho = -.11$, $SD_{\rho} = .31$). This finding suggests that, across these studies, a negative relationship was more frequently found between task conflict and performance outcomes. However, some of these results also indicate no relationship between task conflict and outcomes and others indicate a substantial number of positive relationships between task conflict and outcomes. Further, the variance across studies reflects a very wide confidence interval where for 95% of the studies, the resulting effect size is likely to fall between $-.73$ and $.51$. This broad confidence interval suggests that there is substantial unexplained variance that needs to be accounted for in the relationship between task conflict and performance. More specifically, these findings may provide some support for the argument that in some instances, task conflict may be beneficial. Overall, these meta-analytic findings, which include mixed positive and negative findings, represent a strong rationale for deciphering more specifically the mechanism through which task conflict affects performance.

The impact of relationship conflict has been found to be generally detrimental to perceived (Jehn et al., 1999) and actual performance (Jehn, 1994, 1997; Jehn et al., 1999, Earley & Moskowski, 2000) such that a predominantly negative relationship exists between relationship conflict and outcomes. Relationship conflict, which appears to increase in the face of diversity, is debilitating to relational outcomes such as satisfaction (Earley & Moskowski, 2000; Jehn, 1994, 1995, 1997, Jehn et al., 1999), intent to remain (Jehn, 1995; Jehn et al., 1999), commitment (Jehn et al., 1999), cohesiveness, respect, and trust (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), as well as the efficacy of communicative and planning activities (Earley & Moskowski, 2000). Relationship conflict has been found to interfere with team performance and reduce satisfaction because it produces tension, antagonism, and distractions from the task at hand. Carnevale and Probst (1998) showed that when participants anticipated a competitive, hostile, high conflict negotiation, cognitive flexibility and creative thinking decreased substantially.

Simons and Peterson (2000) also found that relationship conflict limited the information processing ability of groups because group members spent their time and energy focusing on each other rather than on the group's task-related problems.

The same meta-analysis by deWitt and Greer (2008) also showed that an effect size of $-.24$ has been found with a standard deviation of $.23$ ($\rho = -.24$, $SD_{\rho} = .23$) across studies with relationship conflict and performance. These empirical findings bear out the theorized negative relationship between relationship conflict and performance. However, as with the task conflict meta-analysis, there have also been great variations in the effect sizes across these studies. Across 95% of the studies, the corresponding confidence intervals ranged from $-.70$ to $.22$, again suggesting that there is some unexplained variation between relationship conflict and performance.

Understanding How Conflict Influences Outcomes

A close look at the empirical evidence gathered since Jehn's (1994, 1995) work suggests that the relationships between both task and relationship conflict and outcomes are inconsistent with the conceptual view. Empirically, both types of conflict have different effects on performance, with relationship conflict being more consistently tied to poorer outcomes. In spite of the range of empirical findings, however, the conflict literature as a whole still does not allow for explicitly understanding how these findings occur for both types of conflict. Consequently, determining how this works might permit us to better understand what causes the variability in outcomes within conflict types.

In summary, empirical findings related to both task and relationship conflict have been mixed and difficult to disentangle. Some studies have reported strong positive correlations between task conflict and team performance (Jehn, 1994), but others have found a negative correlation (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999; Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001) or no significant relationships (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999).

More recent studies have also found that both forms of conflict were found to be negatively related to group performance (e.g. De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn et al., 1999; Earley & Moskowski, 2000), among other outcomes. These contradictory findings related to both types of conflict and their relationship with performance underscore some inherent problems with the study of conflict. Such findings represent what conflict researchers such as Dirks and McLean-Parks (2003) describe as the conflicting state of conflict research. Though there are proposed differences in the expected empirical findings related to both task and relationship conflict, this difference has not been observed across the variety of conflict studies. In other words, the conflict literature fails to bear out what the theoretical positions propose and this may reflect a methodological issue. As such, seeking an explanation for the unexplained variance in these relationships represents a necessary initial step toward understanding the conflict phenomenon. Revisiting the initial process models used by early conflict researchers may provide some valuable methodological insight into the discrepancy in these findings by helping us to understand the underlying mechanisms that lead to differences in outcomes.

A NEW APPROACH TO METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

A majority of conflict studies in the last decade have focused on the relationship between conflict perceptions and performance. In fact, more studies have focused on this relationship than on those for any other core process, including behaviors. These studies typically use surveys and questionnaires that ask participants to recall some aspect of conflict they experienced. These self reports of perceptions are then compared to outcomes. Undoubtedly, there is value in examining the relationship between perceptions and performance since, initially interpersonal conflict is almost always perceptual. However, given that conflict research has largely focused on perceptions, the link between conflict and performance outcomes has remained a black box of sorts, with little insight gained on the mechanism through which conflict affects performance.

Manifest Behavior

Though earlier conflict models identified and studied manifest behavior as an integral element of conflict, later research designs, which tested components of process models, rarely studied manifest behavior. In order to gain insight into the black box of conflict, manifest behavioral processes need to become the focus of conflict studies. The relationship between perceptions and outcomes need to be understood through observed behavior rather than by assuming a relatively vague behavioral linkage, as is the current trend in conflict studies.

There is undeniable value in linking observed behavioral responses to conflict and outcomes: this approach will shed light on the mediating mechanism of how conflict perceptions affect outcomes. As such, broadening the scope of conflict studies beyond the link between perception and performance to include observed behavior may provide some valuable insight that may help to account for some of the unexplained variance in these relationships.

In order for a set of behaviors to explain how conflict relates to performance, these behaviors must be related to both conflict and performance. Given the range of possible behaviors during a conflict interaction, it is important to identify which specific behaviors that relate to performance might also be present during a conflict interaction. Using broad, generalizable behaviors to account for this relationship increases the possibility of finding behaviors that relate to conflict or performance, but not both. Identifying a small subset of behaviors that is broad enough to capture the range of behavioral interaction but narrow enough to be related to both conflict and performance represents a reasonable compromise.

One such taxonomy which incorporates an appropriate subset of behaviors was first proposed by Bales (1950). Bales's (1950; 1970) structural work on group process is seen as foundational for analyzing interaction patterns in group situations. Bales's work with small groups was driven by the absence of studies examining social interaction observationally in real time, and so he aimed to "see what happened when small groups of persons who did not know each other were put together with a common task, but with no designated leader and no specified organization" (Bales, 1999, p.159). Based on his findings, Bales identified what he believed to be two distinct behavioral patterns that were necessary for groups to make task progress when problem-solving. He believed that members must engage in task activities such as directing the discussion and making suggestions in order to accomplish their goal. However, he also promoted the idea that task activity could create negative social behavior such as hostility and tension within the group and group members must therefore also perform positive socio-emotional activities such as relieving tension. Consequently, Bales concluded that two distinct roles--task and social--emerged during group interaction to satisfy these functions.

Based on this premise, Bales developed a set of workably small categories for observation of behavior that constitutes interaction process analysis (IPA). His formulation of the IPA categories is based on a dual purpose: The categories are sufficiently specific to include each kind of behavioral act, but also sufficiently general to be used to study different social interaction systems. The IPA system includes 12 specific behavioral categories nested within four overarching process categories, which are fully outlined in Table 2. Three categories describe positive socio-emotional categories and three others describe negative socio-emotional categories. The other categories each describe three active task activities and three passive task activities. Bales described the IPA categorization as inclusive and continuous. The set of categories is meant to be completely inclusive, so that every observable act can be classified in one defined category. The method is also continuous in that it requires the researcher to make a classification of every act that can be observed as it occurs so that no observed acts are omitted from classification except by error.

Given that the IPA was initially developed for problem-solving groups in a lab setting and was originally created for the act-by-act coding of behavior in interacting groups, its use in the present context is pertinent. Further, the IPA is also applicable for use in this study because it delineates specific, fine-grained teamwork behavior that relates to both task and socio-emotional elements. Consistent with Bales's two distinct roles, the task areas of the IPA reflect task roles associated with problem-solving while the socio-emotional areas of the IPA reflect social roles related to group functioning. Bales believed that the interaction process within small groups could be described as one of alternating emphasis between these group functions. When attention is given to the task, strains may be created in the social and emotional relations of the group members, and attention becomes focused on resolving these problems. Once the group devotes itself to managing socio-emotional concerns, the task may be neglected and attention would then have to be refocused on the task area.

Table 2: Interaction Process Analysis Categories and Functional Codes**Socio-emotional area: positive reactions**

1. Shows solidarity/Seems friendly: Any act that shows positive feelings toward another person
Behavioral examples - *raises other's status, gives help, reward*
2. Shows tension release/ Dramatizes: Any act that reduces the anxiety that a person may be experiencing
Behavioral examples - *jokes, laughs, shows satisfaction*
3. Agrees: Any act that shows acceptance of what another person has said
Behavioral examples - *shows passive acceptance, understands, concurs*

Task area: attempted answers

4. Gives suggestions: Any act that offers direction/action for how to engage in a task
Behavioral examples - *direction, implying autonomy for other*
5. Gives opinions: Any act that advances a belief or value that is relevant to the task
Behavioral examples - *evaluation, analysis, expresses feeling, wish*
6. Gives orientation/information: Any act that reports factual observations or experiences
Behavioral examples - *information, repeats, clarifies, confirms*

Task area: questions

7. Asks for orientation/information: Any act that requests factual observations or experiences
Behavioral examples - *information, repetition, confirmation*
8. Asks for opinions: Any act that requires a belief or value that is relevant to the task
Behavioral examples - *evaluation, analysis, expression of feeling*
9. Asks for suggestions: Any act that request direction/action for how to engage in the task
Behavioral examples - *direction, possible ways of action*

Socio-emotional area: negative reactions

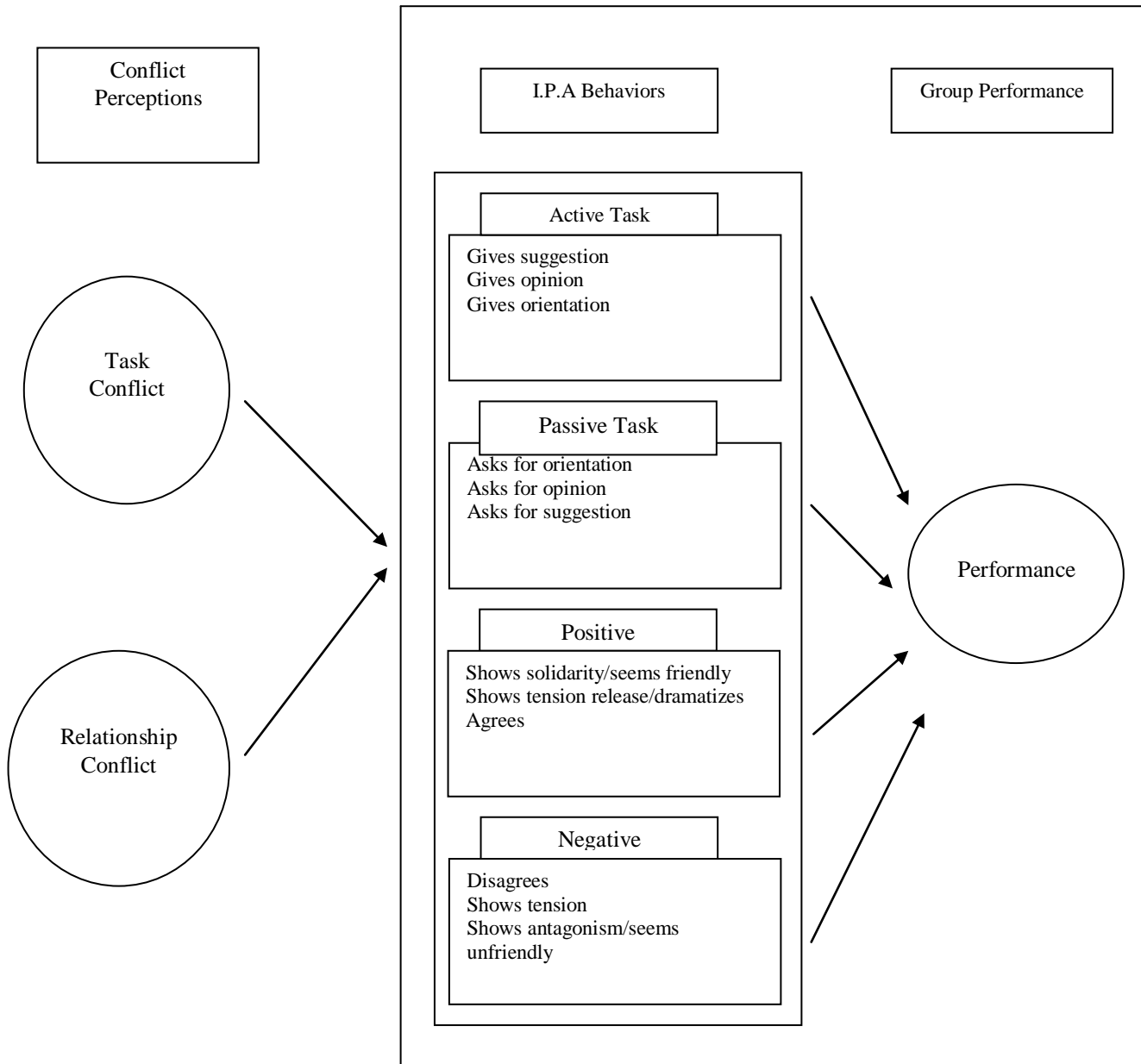
10. Disagrees: Any act that shows rejection of what another person has said
Behavioral examples - *shows passive rejection, formality, withholds help*
11. Shows tension: Any act that indicates that a person is experiencing anxiety
Behavioral examples - *asks for help, withdraws*
12. Shows antagonism/seems unfriendly: Any act that shows negative feelings toward another person
Behavioral examples - *deflates other's status, defends or asserts self*

After Bales, R. F. (1970)

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND PROPOSITIONS

Figure 2 below provides an overview of the conceptual model driving this study. It portrays the relationship between conflict perceptions and performance as explained by various behaviors representative of Bales interaction process. The model represents the inter-relationships among the study variables and provides the basis for the propositions which follow.

Figure 2: Conflict Model



The Effect of Conflict on Bales Teamwork Behaviors and Performance

For active task behaviors, different relationships are proposed with regard to how task and relationship conflict relate to the behaviors in this category. *Gives suggestion, gives opinion, and gives orientation* are consistent options with task conflict, in that when group members engage in these behaviors, task conflict often results and as such a positive relationship is anticipated between task conflict and these behaviors. Conversely, though each of the behaviors that are outlined in this category typically relate to task conflict, the presence of task conflict may encourage interpersonal issues to occur within the team.

It may be relatively easy for a team member to perceive that someone who gives their opinion openly is opinionated, or that someone who always offers opinions is a 'know it all'. As such, the presence of active task behaviors which may stimulate task conflict may also trigger relationship conflict. Similarly, giving suggestion and giving opinion are perhaps more likely to be regarded as behaviors which reflect being proactive and potentially forceful and as such may be more strongly related to both task and relationship conflict. Giving orientation on the other hand may be perceived as more of a reactionary and submissive behavior and may be less strongly related to perceptions of task and relationship conflict. The following statements reflect these proposed relationships.

*P1a: Perceptions of task conflict will be **positively** related to gives suggestion, gives opinion, and gives orientation behaviors*

*P1b: Perceptions of relationship conflict will be **negatively** related to gives suggestion, gives opinion, and gives orientation behaviors*

P1c: Perceptions of both task and relationship conflict will have a stronger relationship with gives suggestion and gives opinion than gives orientation

Similarly, perceptions of task and relationship conflict are proposed to have a different relationship with passive task behaviors. When teams engage in passive task behaviors, there is likely to be less task conflict and more agreement among team members related to the task. As such, in the presence of these behaviors, task conflict is expected to be low and a negative relationship with task conflict is proposed. Further, the absence of task conflict discourages potential interpersonal issues from arising among team members and results in a positive relationship between passive task behaviors and relationship conflict. With regard to the specific behaviors, asks for suggestion and asks for opinion are proposed to have an equally strong relationship with perceptions of both task and relationship conflict. Similar to the arguments made for proposition 1c, these behaviors reflect a more proactive element than asks for orientation and perhaps will be more likely to be perceived ambiguously and interpreted as task or relationship conflict. The following statements reflect this proposed relationship.

*P2a: Perceptions of task conflict will be **negatively** related to asks for orientation, asks for suggestion, and asks for opinion behaviors*

*P2b: Perceptions of relationship conflict will be **positively** related to asks for orientation, asks for suggestion, and asks for opinion behaviors*

P2c: Perceptions of both task and relationship conflict will have a stronger relationship with asks for suggestion and asks for opinion than asks for orientation

For positive socio-emotional behaviors, it is expected that both task and relationship conflict will be positively related to each of the specific behaviors. Since positive socio-emotional behaviors involve raising other's status, showing satisfaction, and concurring, it is expected that when these behaviors are present in group interaction, there will be less relationship conflict based on the interpersonal camaraderie and less task conflict based on the passive acceptance and solidarity of group members which may discourage them from challenging each other's viewpoints and opinions.

Further positive socio-emotional behaviors encourage an atmosphere of support within the team for both task and interpersonal expression, and the manifestation of each of these specific behaviors is proposed to have different strengths of relationship with perceptions of task and relationship. Showing solidarity is reflected in raising team members' status, rewarding, and giving help and this is purported to have the strongest relationship with both task and relationship conflict given that it might perhaps be one of the more obvious of the positive socio-emotional behaviors. Showing tension release and agreement behaviors are proposed to have a less strong relationship with task and relationship conflict respectively because the expression of these behaviors is perhaps slightly more ambiguous than showing solidarity behaviors. The following propositions represent the previous arguments.

*P3a: Perceptions of task conflict will be **negatively** related to showing solidarity, showing tension release, and agreement behaviors*

*P3b: Perceptions of relationship conflict will be **negatively** related to showing solidarity, showing tension release, and agreement behaviors*

P3c: Perceptions of both task and relationship conflict will have the strongest relationship with showing solidarity, followed by tension release, and then agreement behaviors

For negative socio-emotional behaviors, a positive relationship is proposed for both task and relationship conflict. Behavioral indicators in this category include withholding help, withdrawing and deflating other's status. These behaviors are expected to be associated with increased task conflict and relationship conflict given that there is the potential for both task and interpersonal issues to arise when these behaviors are exhibited in a team setting. With regard to the specific behaviors, showing antagonism is expected to have the strongest relationship with perceptions of both task and relationship conflict given that this behavioral indicator reflects an aggressive verbal exchange. Though showing tension can also be verbal it is less likely to be perceived as aggressive and as such is hypothesized to be less strongly related to perceptions of both task and relationship conflict. The most passive of the three behaviors, disagrees, is proposed to be the least strongly related to perceptions of task and relationship conflict. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

*P4a: Perceptions of task conflict will be **positively** related to disagrees, shows tension, and shows antagonism behaviors*

*P4b: Perceptions of relationship conflict will be **positively** related to disagrees, shows tension, and shows antagonism behaviors*

P4c: Perceptions of both task and relationship conflict will have the strongest relationship with showing antagonism, followed by showing tension, and then disagreement behaviors

Since it is proposed that active task behaviors and negative socio-emotional behaviors will be positively related to relationship conflict such that the presence of these behaviors should result in more relationship conflict, it should be expected that these behaviors will be more likely to explain the relationship between relationship conflict and team performance. As such, the following proposition suggests that:

P5: Passive task behaviors and negative socio-emotional behaviors will mediate the relationship between relationship conflict and decision making performance

DISCUSSION & MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Overall, studying interpersonal conflict mainly through conflict perceptions has been inherently problematic for conflict researchers. This focus on conflict perceptions has limited research involving specific behaviors related to conflict. Focusing the study of conflict on perceptions has left unresearched the behavioral link between conflict and performance, which in current research is assumed but not explicitly measured. This approach might represent one of the main reasons for the inconsistency in the empirical findings.

A possible plan of action to rectify this methodological shortcoming in conflict research is to broaden the focus of interpersonal conflict studies to include behavioral elements. Current conflict researchers should return to the foundation of the early conflict research that put a premium on distinct, individual actions. This approach represents an improvement on the past studies of conflict while providing an alternative mechanism to address the apparent disconnect between theory and empirical findings in the conflict literature. Few if any conflict studies to date have attempted to identify a subset of unambiguous defined behaviors that are integral to performance but also occur in conflict episodes. Identifying those behaviors related to conflict and associated with differences in performance is necessary to furthering our understanding of how conflict impacts performance.

Developing approaches for conducting research that offers insights into these behavioral mechanisms is critical to advancing the understanding of the impact of conflict on performance.

In terms of application in a managerial context, this model provides a means by which managers in organizations might better be able to address conflict. Equipping organizations with the ability to recognize conflict behaviors which may be detrimental to performance would certainly be advantageous. Employees within the organization who are proximal to conflict situations may be able to alter the interpersonal dynamics of conflict situations if the behaviors related to dysfunctional conflict are identifiable. The applicability of this process is made more salient given that the use of teams has become more common in organizations. Organizations have already realized a multitude of benefits associated with utilizing teams, and being better able to manage interpersonal conflict related to teams will help garner greater benefits.

Conflict has continued to generate a great deal of research interest over the years, especially given the prevalence of interpersonal conflict in organizational settings. This study would contribute to the literature by examining behaviors that are relevant to conflict perceptions affecting performance.

Though this offering represents an initial step toward the possible implications of examining conflict as it occurs, future research should continue to focus on clarifying the measurement issues surrounding behavioral interaction that are prevalent in the conflict literature. Success in conducting conflict research that examines the importance of behavior in explaining the link between conflict perceptions and performance is likely to shed some light on clarifying the conflict phenomenon.

References

- Amason, A.C. (1996), "Distinguishing the effects of functional and dysfunctional conflict on strategic decision making: Resolving a paradox for top management teams", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 39, pp. 123-148.
- Bales, R. F. (1950), *Interaction process analysis: A method for the study of small groups*, Addison-Wesley, Cambridge, MA.
- Bales, R. F. (1970), *Personality and interpersonal behaviour*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, NY.
- Bales, R. F. (1999), *Social interaction systems: Theory and measurement*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Carnevale, P. J. and Probst, T. M. (1998), "Social values and social conflict in creative problem solving and categorization", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 74 No 5, pp. 1300-1309.
- De Dreu, C.K.W. and Weingart, L.R. (2003), "Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: A meta-analysis", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 88, pp. 741-749.
- De Wit, F. R. C. and Greer, L. L. (2008), "The black-box deciphered: A meta-analysis of team diversity, conflict, and team performance", Paper presented at the Sixty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management (AOM), August 8 – 13, Anaheim, CA.
- Dirks, K. T. and McLean-Parks, J. (2003), "Conflicting Stories: The State of the Science of Conflict", In Greenberg, J. (Ed.), *Organizational behavior: The state of the Science*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 283-324.
- Earley, E. C. and Moskowski, E. (2000), "Creating hybrid team cultures: An empirical test of transnational team functioning", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 43, pp. 26-39.
- Guetzkow, H. and Gyr, J. (1954), "An analysis of conflict in decision making groups", *Human Relations*, Vol. 7, pp. 367-381.
- Hollenbeck, J. R. Ilgen, D. R. Segoe, D. J. Hedlund, J., Major D. A. et al (1995), "Multilevel theory of team decision making: Decision performance in teams incorporating distributed expertise", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 80, pp. 292-316.
- Jehn, K.A. (1994), "Enhancing effectiveness: An investigation of advantages and disadvantages of value-based intragroup conflict", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 5, pp. 223-238.
- Jehn, K.A. (1995), "A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 40, pp. 256-282.
- Jehn, K.A. and Bendersky, C. (2003), "Intragroup conflict in organizations: A contingency perspective", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 25, pp. 189-244.
- Jehn, K.A. Chadwick, C. and Thatcher, S.M.B. (1997), "To agree or not agree: The effects of value congruence, member diversity, and conflict on workgroup outcomes", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 8, pp. 287-305.
- Jehn, K.A. and Mannix, E.A. (2001), "The dynamic nature of conflict: A longitudinal study of intragroup conflict and group performance", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 44, pp. 238-251.
- Jehn, K. A. Northcraft, G. and Neale, M. A. (1999), "Why differences make a difference: A field study of diversity, conflict, and performance in workgroups", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, pp. 741-463.
- Korsgaard, M. A. Jeong, S. S. Mahony, D. M. and Pitariu, A. H. (2008), "A multilevel view of intragroup conflict", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 1222-1252.
- Lovelace, K. Shapiro, D.L. and Weingart, L. R. (2001), "Maximizing cross-functional new product teams' innovativeness and constraint adherence: A conflict communications perspective", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 44, pp. 779-783.

- Pelled, L. H. Eisenhardt, K. M. and Xin, K. R. (1999), "Exploring the black box: An analysis of work team diversity, conflict, and performance", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, pp. 1-28.
- Pondy, L. R. (1967), "Organizational conflict: Concepts and models", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 12, pp. 296-320.
- Putnam, L. and Poole, M. (1987), "Conflict and negotiation", In Jablin F. Putnam, L. Roberts, K. and Porter, L. (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage pp. 459-499.
- Saavedra, A. Earley, P. C. and Van Dyne, L. (1993), "Complex interdependence in task-performing groups", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 78, pp. 61-72.
- Simons, T. Pelled, L.H. and Smith, K.A. (1999), "Making use of difference: Diversity, debate, and decision comprehensiveness in top management teams", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 42, pp. 662-673.
- Simons, T.L. and Peterson, R.S. (2000), "Task conflict and relationship conflict in top management teams: The pivotal role of intragroup trust", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 85, pp. 102-111.
- Thomas, K. W. (1976), "Conflict and conflict management", in Dunnette, M. D. (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*, Rand McNally, Chicago, IL, pp. 889-935.
- Tjosvold, D. and De Dreu, C. K. W. (1997), "Managing conflict in Dutch organizations: A test of the relevance of Deutsch's cooperation theory", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 27 No. 24, pp. 2213-2227.
- Wall, J. A. and Callister, R. R. (1995), "Conflict and its management", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 213, pp. 515-558.