Conceptualizing the Construct of Interpersonal Conflict

Par : Jon Hartwick, McGill Univ.
     Henri Barki, École des HEC

Cahier du GReSI no 02-04
Avril 2002
CONCEPTUALIZING THE CONSTRUCT OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Jon Hartwick (1951-2002)
McGill University, Faculty of Management

Henri Barki (henri.barki@hec.ca)
École des Hautes Études Commerciales
IT Department
3000 Chemin de la Côte Sainte-Catherine
Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3T 2A7
Tel: (514) 340-6482
Fax: (514) 340-6132
Résumé

Parmi les chercheurs œuvrant dans le domaine des conflits ceux qui donnent une définition et une mesure précise des conflits interpersonnels sont peu nombreux. Par ailleurs, les chercheurs qui spécifient clairement comment leurs conceptualisations des conflits interpersonnels sont différentes de celles des autres chercheurs sont encore plus rares. En rendant la comparaison des résultats des différentes études difficile cette situation empêche l'avancement des connaissances dans le domaine. Afin de répondre à cette problématique, cet article développe et présente une définition générale des conflits interpersonnels de même qu'un cadre bi-dimensionnel englobant les conceptualisations antérieures. Par la suite, l'article se sert de cette définition et du cadre proposé pour souligner les faiblesses des conceptualisations et des mesures actuelles du conflit interpersonnel ainsi que pour identifier et suggérer des éléments de solution.

Abstract

Few conflict researchers clearly specify, not only their chosen definitions and means of assessing interpersonal conflict, but also how their conceptualization is similar or different from other researchers’ perspectives. The lack of a clear conceptualization and operationalization of the construct of interpersonal conflict makes it difficult to compare the results of different studies and hinders the accumulation of knowledge in the conflict domain. To address this issue, the present paper develops and presents a general definition for the construct of interpersonal conflict, as well as a two-dimensional conceptual framework that incorporates previous conceptualizations of this construct. Subsequently, the paper uses this definition and framework to highlight several shortcomings of current conceptualizations and operationalizations of interpersonal conflict in the organizational literature, and to provide directions for their remedy.

Keywords

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA01</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA02</td>
<td>Human factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA10</td>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AI02</td>
<td>Research frameworks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conceptualizing the Construct of Interpersonal Conflict
Jon Hartwick and Henri Barki

Conflict is a frequent occurrence in organizations, affecting a host of individual and organizational processes and outcomes. Its importance is evidenced by more than 70 years of research, work that has been summarized in numerous books, handbook chapters, and journal review articles (e.g., Deutsch, 1990; Fink, 1968; Greenhalgh, 1987; Pondy, 1967; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Putnam and Poole, 1987; Thomas, 1976; 1992a; Tjosvold, 1991; Wall and Callister, 1995). In this literature, the term conflict has been used in different ways, referring to different forms or kinds of conflict (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, political, marital, personality, gender, role, value, etc.), to different units or levels of analysis that are involved (e.g., within the individual, between individuals, between groups, between organizations, between nations, etc.) and to different situational contexts where it occurs (e.g., at home, in organizations, in the arena, on the battlefield, etc.).

While past research on conflict is voluminous, a clear, generally accepted definition of interpersonal conflict is still lacking (Wall and Callister, 1995). Many empirical studies fail to provide any definition of conflict. Others skirt the issue and define conflict either in terms of when, where or how it occurs, or in terms of what impact it has. In doing so, they define conflict indirectly by describing its antecedents or consequences, not by specifying exactly what it is. Even studies that provide a direct definition don’t always agree about conflict’s defining elements. Some of them equate conflict with disagreement or differences of opinion; some see it as antagonistic or hostile behavior; others view it as a mixture of negative emotions like anxiety, jealousy, frustration and anger; and still others treat conflict as some combination of the above. Adding to an already complex situation, several studies have differentiated between types of interpersonal conflict found in organizational settings such as task, process, and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1994; 1995; 1997; Jehn and Mannix, 2001), and cognitive vs. affective conflicts (Amason, 1996; Amason and Schweiger, 1994). The present situation is not unlike the one described more than three decades ago by Fink (1968):

“The resulting terminological and conceptual confusion may simply reflect that scientific knowledge about social conflict has not yet moved to a level of analytical precision superior to that of common sense knowledge. But it may also constitute an impediment to scientific communication and to the advance of knowledge which such communication is supposed to facilitate. Terminological diversity can mask conceptual unity, or it can reflect an underlying conceptual difficulty. Conceptual diversity may reflect divergent aims, divergent assumptions, or divergent actual bases for theory construction, which can be obscured by the use of similar terminology… it seems obvious that a consistent language for discussing conflict phenomena is desirable. Such a language can only be developed within a unified conceptual framework for dealing with conflict in general.” (p. 430)

The goal of the present paper is to develop and present a conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict, that is conflicts that occur between individuals or groups in organizations, regardless of form or kind. As part of this framework, a general definition of interpersonal conflict is proposed, and alternative means of measuring the construct are suggested. In addition, a typology is provided for viewing types of interpersonal conflict in the organizational literature. Using this framework, we point to a number of limitations in current assessments of interpersonal conflict, as well as in the interpretation of conflict's causes and effects.

Defining Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process that occurs between individuals and/or groups who are in
interdependent relationships, and is more likely to occur when a variety of background situational (e.g., zero-sum reward structures, scarce resources, etc.) and personal (e.g., previous history of conflicts, interpersonal diversity, etc.) conditions exist (e.g., Fink, 1968; Pondy, 1967; Thomas, 1992a; Wall and Callister, 1995). While conflict has been defined in many different ways, three general themes or properties are thought to underlie descriptions of what conflict is: disagreement, interference, and negative emotion (Barki and Hartwick, 2001; Pondy, 1967; Putnam and Poole, 1987; Thomas, 1992a; 1992b; Wall and Callister, 1995).

These three themes can be viewed as reflecting cognitive, behavioral and affective manifestations of interpersonal conflict. First, although a number of different cognitions can be associated with interpersonal conflict, disagreement is the most commonly discussed and assessed cognition in the literature. Disagreement exists when parties think that a divergence of values, needs, interests, opinions, goals, or objectives exists. Second, a number of different behaviors such as debate, argumentation, competition, political maneuvering, back-stabbing, aggression, hostility, and destruction have been associated with interpersonal conflict. While such behaviors may be typical of conflict, they do not always imply the existence of conflict. It is only when the behaviors of one party interfere with or oppose another party's attainment of its own interests, objectives or goals that conflict is said to exist. Finally, while a number of affective states have been associated with conflict, overwhelmingly, it has been negative emotions such as fear, jealousy, anger, anxiety, and frustration that have been used to characterize interpersonal conflict.

While these themes or properties are generally recognized as being important elements of interpersonal conflict, definitions of conflict have used or combined them in different ways. The Venn diagram of Figure 1, depicting the overlapping variances of disagreement, interference, and negative emotion, is useful for describing and organizing the different perspectives found in the literature. One group of definitions equates conflict with a single property or theme. That is, they define interpersonal conflict solely as disagreement (shown in Figure 1 by the disagreement circle), or solely as interference (shown in Figure 1 by the interference circle), or solely as negative emotion (shown in Figure 1 by the negative emotion circle). For example, Dahrendorf (1958) equated conflict with the presence of disagreement: "All relations between sets of individuals that involve an incompatible difference of objective … are in this sense relations of social conflict." (p. 135). Similarly, Jehn and Mannix (2001) defined conflict as "… an awareness on the part of the parties involved of discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires." (p. 238) Wall and Callister (1995) provide another example of this perspective, one that equates conflict with perceived interference, and define it as "… a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party." (p. 517).
Figure 1 - Venn Diagram for Components of Conflict

D Disagreement
I Interference
NE Negative Emotion
A second group of perspectives conceptualize conflict using more than one conflict theme or property. One variant of this multiple-theme group suggests a broad, inclusive definition of interpersonal conflict, defining it as the presence of either disagreement, or interference, or negative emotion (represented in Figure 1 as the union of the disagreement, interference and negative emotion circles). In other words, the presence of any one of the three properties is deemed sufficient to label a situation as conflictual. For example, Fink (1968) defined conflict as "Any social situation or process in which two or more social entities are linked by at least one form of antagonistic psychological relation or at least one form of antagonistic interaction." (p. 456) Fink's definition included "... a number of different kinds of psychological antagonisms (e.g., incompatible goals, mutually exclusive interests, emotional hostility, factual or value dissensus, traditional enmities, etc.) and a number of different kinds of antagonistic interaction (ranging from the most direct, violent and unregulated struggle to the most subtle, indirect, and highly regulated forms of mutual interference), none of which is necessarily present in all instances of conflict." (p. 456).

A second variant of this group also conceptualizes conflict using multiple themes or properties, but defines it more narrowly than the first, as the joint presence of two or more themes (represented in Figure 1 by any one of the four intersecting sub-areas). For example, Mack and Snyder (1957) argued for a definition of conflict that reflects the joint presence of disagreement (mutually exclusive and/or mutually incompatible values and opposed values) and interference (mutually opposed actions and counteractions, as well as behaviors that injure, thwart, or attempt to control other parties). Similarly, Hocker and Wilmot (1985) defined conflict as "... an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals." (p. 23). In Figure 1, these definitions correspond to the two sub-areas labeled "D, I" (formed by the intersection of D and I circles) and "D, I, NE" (formed by the intersection of D, I, and NE circles). Another example for the second variant of the multiple perspective can be found in Pondy (1967) who stated: "The term conflict refers neither to its antecedent conditions, nor to individual awareness of it, nor certain affective states, nor its overt manifestations, nor its residues of feeling, precedent, or structure, but to all of these taken together ..." (p. 319). Thus, Pondy's view corresponds to the sub-area labeled "D, I, NE" in Figure 1.

Most reviews of the conflict domain suggest that conflict should be defined using multiple themes or properties. For example, both Mack and Snyder (1957) and Fink (1968) suggested that the weight of scientific evidence supports a view of conflict that incorporates multiple properties (though as noted above, they disagree about how to do so). Pondy (1967) also argued for the second perspective, and Thomas (1992a; 1992b) noted a trend, following Pondy, toward definitions of conflict that used multiple themes or properties. Recently, empirical evidence supporting the multiple theme view has been provided by a study of 162 project teams in 141 organizations which found that 95% of the variance in participants' perceptions of interpersonal conflict (as measured through assessments of conflict frequency and intensity) was predicted by perceptions of disagreement, interference and negative emotion, with omission of any one of these properties significantly worsening the prediction (Barki and Hartwick, 2001).

To our knowledge, there have been no conceptual or empirical comparisons of the two variants of the multiple-theme perspective. Recall, the first variant suggests a broad boundary for the concept of interpersonal conflict, including all instances of disagreement, interference, and negative emotion. The second variant suggests a more narrow boundary including only those conflict episodes where disagreement, interference, and negative emotion are all present. Both variants agree that conflict exists in situations where all three properties are present. Critical to their comparison is an assessment of the three sub-areas in Figure 1 where only one property is present; that is, the sub-area representing instances of "pure" disagreement (i.e., the sub-area labeled "D" where disagreement, but neither interference nor negative emotion, exists), the sub-area representing instances of "pure" interference (i.e., the sub-area...
labeled "I" where interference, but neither disagreement nor negative emotion, exists), and the sub-area representing instances of "pure" negative emotion (i.e., the sub-area labeled "NE" where negative emotion, but neither disagreement nor interference, exists).

Organizational life is replete with instances of pure disagreement. Possible examples of pure disagreement occur when there are opinion differences concerning goals, tasks, or activities that are not very relevant or important to an individual, when these differences are easily resolvable, or when they hold the potential for win-win solutions. When such disagreements are not accompanied by any interference or negative emotion (i.e., the case of pure disagreement), they would not generally be seen or labeled as conflict – just because people disagree does not mean that they are in conflict. Numerous instances of pure interference also exist in organizations. An example of pure interference would be a situation where the behaviors or actions of one individual unintentionally prevent another from attaining his or her goals, perhaps by sheer accident. Such involuntary, accidental acts of interference would not generally be seen or labeled as conflict. Finally, organizations are replete with instances of pure negative emotion. Often, individuals dislike or hate others without necessarily disagreeing or interfering with them. Their negative emotions could stem from others’ personal or physical attributes, from their choice of friends and associates, or from their past behaviors. Again, just because an employee dislikes another as a person, it doesn’t mean that he or she would always be in conflict with that person, especially when their work related views and opinions are quite similar.

Intuitively, the above examples provide instances of pure disagreement, pure interference behavior, and pure negative emotion that would not generally be labeled as conflict. However, it is important to note that such situations may not be the norm in organizational life. More often than not, disagreement, interference and negative emotion are likely to occur together. Moreover, past conflicts could spill over, leading to greater disagreement, interference, and negative emotion in the present situation. In addition, current instances of pure disagreement, pure interference and pure emotion, may foster conflict in the future. The significance of the examples provided in the above paragraph lie not in their frequency of occurrence, but rather in their usefulness in clarifying theoretical distinctions between different definitions of conflict. In this regard, they support the second variant of the multiple theme perspective and indicate that disagreement, interference and negative emotion need to be taken into consideration when defining interpersonal conflict.

We therefore suggest the following definition: Interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals. According to this definition, interpersonal conflict exists only when all of its three components (i.e., disagreement, interference, and negative emotion) are present in a situation. Cases of pure disagreement, pure interference, pure emotion, or cases combining only two of these components, are not considered to be instances of interpersonal conflict.

Some conflict theorists (e.g., Fink, 1968) could consider such a definition to be too strong or restrictive, and argue that instances of pure disagreement, pure interference, and pure negative emotion also need to be included among instances of conflict, albeit those that are of very weak intensity. Such an argument could also consider instances where two of the three themes or properties are present to be conflicts that are somewhat stronger, and instances where all three are present to reflect the most intense conflicts. While plausible, we believe that such a view could lead to much confusion within the field. For one thing, considering disagreement, interference or negative emotion, by themselves as conflict, would introduce an equivalence to different constructs. In addition to creating ambiguities, this would also force a coarser grained conceptualization than the three-component view. Moreover, it is likely that different antecedents and consequences will be identified for "weak" and other forms of conflict. As such, this would put the
onus on researchers to clearly identify which form of conflict they are describing or examining, and qualifiers such as weak are apt to be lost or omitted in subsequent communications, leading to conceptual confusion, ambiguity, and inaccuracy in future discussions. We believe that the clarity and simplicity of keeping disagreement, interference, and negative emotion separate from the construct of interpersonal conflict would be more useful and fruitful both for conflict research and its management.

A Typology for Conceptualizing and Assessing Interpersonal Conflict

Given the above definition, the amount of interpersonal conflict that exists between interdependent parties can be assessed in two different ways. First, conflict could be assessed in terms of all three of its themes or properties. To do so, individuals need to be queried about the magnitude or intensity of their opinion differences concerning some issue with a particular individual or group, about the magnitude or intensity of their interference behaviors concerning some issue with a particular individual or group, and about the magnitude or intensity of their negative emotion concerning some issue with a particular individual or group. Anything less and an incomplete, and possibly inaccurate, assessment of interpersonal conflict would be achieved. Second, an overall assessment of conflict could also be obtained by asking individuals general questions regarding the magnitude or intensity of conflict they are experiencing about some issue, with a particular individual or group. The two ways of measurement should yield similar and valid overall assessments of interpersonal conflict.

By extending the above categorization, a two-dimensional framework of interpersonal conflict was developed, and is depicted in Table 1. The first dimension of this framework encompasses the cognitive, behavioral and emotional components of interpersonal conflict as reflected by disagreement, interference and negative emotion. As previously noted, interpersonal conflict can be assessed either using specific questions reflecting all three of its definitional components, or more generally, by assessing the overall level of conflict existing in a situation. These four possibilities are depicted on the left side of Table 1 by the rows labeled: Cognition/Disagreement, Behavior/Interference, Affect/Negative Emotion and Overall Conflict.
### Focus of Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of Conflict</th>
<th>Task Conflict</th>
<th>Non-Task Conflict</th>
<th>Conflict Issue Not Specified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task Outcome</td>
<td>Task Process</td>
<td>Non-Task Organizational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(what)</td>
<td>(how)</td>
<td>Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>disagreement with X over task content</td>
<td>disagreement with X over task process</td>
<td>disagreement with X over non-task organizational issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interference with X over task content</td>
<td>interference with X over task process</td>
<td>interference with X over non-task organizational issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>negative emotion toward X over task content</td>
<td>negative emotion toward X over task process</td>
<td>negative emotion toward X over non-task organizational issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conflict with X over task content</td>
<td>conflict with X over task process</td>
<td>conflict with X over non-task organizational issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1
A Typology for the Conceptualization and Assessment of Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations
The second dimension of the framework reflects the focus of interpersonal conflict. From an individual’s perspective, conflicts are about one or more issues, and occur with some particular person or group. In addition, interpersonal conflicts that occur in organizational contexts are either about an organizational task that needs to be accomplished (Task Conflict), or about some other issue that is not related to an organizational task (Non-Task Conflict). In turn, Task Conflict can either be about an organizational task’s Outcome (i.e., what is to be accomplished by the task) or the Process used to perform the task (i.e., how the task is to be accomplished). Moreover, Non-Task conflicts can either be about other specific non-task organizational issues (i.e., issues that are not directly related to the organizational task at hand—parking spaces, shift and vacation times, credit for performance, promotions, etc.), or about specific non-organizational issues (i.e., issues that are not directly related to the organization—personal loans, recreational teams, spousal affairs, children’s interactions, etc.). Finally, in addition to questions concerning these domains of specific focus, non-specific questions concerning levels of disagreement, interference, negative emotion, and conflict can also be asked to assess interpersonal conflict. By not specifying the focus of the conflict, these non-specific questions assess general overall levels of disagreement, interference, negative emotion, and conflict. These five possibilities are depicted at the top of Table 1 by the columns labeled: Task Conflict—Task Outcome, Task Conflict—Task Process, Non-Task Conflict—Organizational Non-Task Issue, Non-Task Conflict—Non-Organizational Issue, and Conflict Issue Not Specified.

The above categorization of conflict issues owes much to the work of Pinkley (1990; Pinkley and Northcraft, 1994), Amason (1996; Amason and Schweiger, 1994) and Jehn (1994; 1995; 1997; Jehn and Mannix, 2001). This body of work has distinguished three types of conflict: task conflict, process conflict and relationship conflict. Initially, Pinkley (1990) observed a dimension of conflict anchored at one end by items that were labeled task conflict, and at the other end by items labeled relationship conflict, leading him to differentiate two types of conflicts. Later, Jehn (1994; 1995) distinguished task conflict from relationship conflict. She defined task conflict as an awareness of differences in viewpoints and opinions pertaining to a group task. Relationship conflict was defined as an awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities. Similarly, Amason (1996; Amason and Schweiger, 1994) also distinguished between two types of conflict which he labeled cognitive conflict and affective conflict. The former was defined as task-oriented conflict that focuses on judgmental differences about how to achieve common objectives, while the latter was defined as conflict that involves personalized, individually-oriented disputes. Both Jehn and Amason have noted the similarity between task and cognitive conflict, and between relationship and affective conflict (Amason, 1996; Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Jehn, 1997; Jehn and Mannix, 2001). More recently, Jehn identified process conflict as a third type of conflict, and defined it as an awareness of controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed (Jehn, 1997; Jehn and Shah, 1997; Jehn and Chatman, 2000; Jehn and Mannix, 2001).

Our categorization of interpersonal conflict types depicted in Table 1 differs from the conceptualization of task and process conflict developed by Jehn and Amason in a number of ways. The first difference concerns the categories of task and process conflict. We believe that process conflict is one component of task conflict, and not separate from it, as argued by Jehn. In essence, our position is that task conflict generally concerns one of two sets of issues: conflicts concerning what is to be done (which we label Task Outcome conflict in Table 1), and conflicts concerning how the task is to be done (which we label Task

---

Table 1 depicts disagreement, interference, negative emotion and conflict with a generic target labeled X, essentially ignoring the target person or group with whom an individual has some conflict. This choice was made because we felt adding a third dimension would introduce a level of complexity to the typology that is beyond the objectives of the present paper. The third dimension would reflect the qualities of the individual parties in conflict or the nature of their relationship. An obvious candidate would be the power relationship between interdependent parties; for example, a superior-subordinate, peer, or subordinate-superior relationship.
Process conflict in Table 1). The second difference concerns the conceptualization and definition of task and process conflict. As can be seen in their definitions, Jehn and Amason focus primarily on the disagreement component of task conflict. Because such a focus ignores the interference and negative emotion components, it provides a narrow and potentially inaccurate view of task and process conflict. Note that Jehn’s assessment of task and process conflict incorporates questions concerning both disagreement (e.g., “How frequently do you have disagreements within your work group about the task of the project you are working on? How often are there disagreements about who should do what in your work group?” Jehn and Mannix, 2001, p. 243) and overall conflict (e.g., “How much conflict of ideas is there in your work group? How much conflict is there in your group about task responsibilities?”, p. 243). Note also that these operationalizations can be mapped to cells numbered 1, 2, 16, and 17 in Table 1. While Jehn’s conflict measures are generally slanted toward the disagreement component of interpersonal conflict, her inclusion of items assessing overall conflict allows for some interference and negative emotion variance to be captured in assessments of task and process conflict, which is consistent with our definitional position.

The third difference between our position and that of previous work concerns the notion of relationship conflict. At least four conceptually distinct, but operationally overlapping, meanings can be found in different conceptualizations, definitions and operationalizations of relationship conflict. According to one of these meanings, relationship conflict is equated to non-task conflict (i.e., the two Non-Task Conflict columns of Table 1) and derives from factor analytic work which found a dimension of conflict anchored at one end by task conflict, and at the other end by relationship conflict (Pinkley, 1990). Definitions and operationalizations of relationship conflict espousing this view imply that conflicts are either about tasks or about relationships. For example, according to Jehn, Chadwick, and Thatcher (2000) “… relationship conflicts are disagreements and incompatibilities among group members about personal issues that are not task related, such as social events, gossip, and world news.” (p. 288). Operationally, the notion of relationship conflict as non-task conflict is also suggested by Jehn and Chatman (2000), where task, process, and relationship conflict are summed to form a measure of overall or general level of conflict in the group.

A second perspective of relationship conflict that can be found in past work views it as socio-emotional conflict. Conflicts that are based on interpersonal relations existing in a group (Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954), relationship focused people conflicts (Wall and Nolan, 1986), and social-emotional conflicts arising from interpersonal disagreements not directly related to the task (Priem and Price, 1991) provide examples of this perspective of relationship conflict. It is interesting to note that the idea of socio-emotional conflict derives from the group process and leadership literatures where the social role focuses on group harmony, satisfaction, and happiness (Brislin, 1993; Fiedler, 1978). As a result, this role partly overlaps with the notion of process conflict, and includes both task and non-task issues. As such, the socio-emotional view of relationship conflict would seem to partly map to the Task Process column and the two Non-Task Conflict columns of Table 1.

A third perspective views relationship conflict as general conflict about a non-specified issue. For example, according to Jehn (1995) "Relationship conflict exists when there are interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group." (p. 258). The last column of Table 1 captures this meaning of relationship conflict in which no conflict issue is specified. Example operationalizations of relationship conflict that correspond to this third meaning include "How much friction is there among members in your work unit?" and "How much tension is there among members in your work unit?" (Jehn, 1995, p. 268). These particular items neither specify the issues involved in the conflict, nor do they assess any particular type of conflict. Rather, they assess interpersonal conflict in a general way that corresponds to cell 15 of Table 1.
Finally, the fourth meaning relationship conflict perceives it as affective or emotional conflict. For example, Jehn and Mannix (2001) state that relationship conflict "... includes affective components such as feeling tension and friction. Relationship conflict involves personal issues such as dislike among group members and feelings such as annoyance, frustration and irritation." (p. 238). They operationalize it with items such as "How often do people get angry while working in your group?" and "How much emotional conflict is there in your work group?" (p. 243). The Affect/Negative Emotion row of Table 1 captures the meaning of relationship conflict reflected by these two items which are representative of cell 15 of Table 1.

Thus, the two-dimensional typology of the framework of Table 1 helps clarify the distinctions between the multiplicity of meanings and operationalizations of relationship conflict found in the literature. In particular, by specifying the component (disagreement, interference, or negative emotion) and the focus interpersonal conflict the framework identifies 12 interpersonal conflict types that can be assessed (corresponding to cells 1-4, 6-9, and 11-14 in Table 1). To these, eight additional assessments can be added corresponding to general operationalizations of interpersonal conflict which do not specify either the component or the issue of conflict being assessed (corresponding to cells 5, 10, 15-16, and 19-20 in Table 1). As such, the framework of Table 1 provides a comprehensive structure for conceptualizing and operationalizing the construct of interpersonal conflict in future research.

Implications and Conclusion

The definition and framework of interpersonal conflict of the present paper are useful as they help explain some of the puzzling results obtained in previous conflict research. For example, some researchers have observed that task conflicts lead to positive consequences while relationship conflicts have been found to lead to negative consequences, suggesting that task conflicts need to be encouraged while relationship conflicts ought to be discouraged (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois, 1997; Jehn, 1994; Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin, 1999; Simons and Peterson, 2000). According to these results, task and relationship conflict should have opposing effects on performance, which means that these two conflict "types" should correlate negatively. The observation that their average correlation was strongly positive has puzzled researchers (mean $r = .47$ across 12 studies, with 10 of 11 studies reviewed by Simons and Peterson, 2000 reporting positive correlations, as well as a twelfth study by Jehn, Chadwick, and Thatcher, 1997), and prompted explanations based on the moderating role of intragroup trust and group members' misattribution of task conflict. An equally plausible alternative explanation is provided by the framework of Table 1 and by noting that past research has operationalized task conflict mostly as disagreement while relationship conflict has been operationalized mostly as negative emotion. As one of the three properties or themes of interpersonal conflict, disagreement is expected to correlate significantly and positively with the other two properties of interpersonal conflict, disagreement and negative emotion. Thus, it is likely that the positive correlations reported in the literature between task and relationship conflict simply reflect the expected relationship between disagreement and negative emotion, which has also been empirically supported (Barki and Hartwick, 2001).

Another set of results for which the definition and framework of the present paper provide an alternative plausible explanation concern the generally positive relationships observed between task conflict and group performance measures (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Jehn, 1995; Jehn and Shah, 1997; Pelled et al., 1999). As noted above, the conceptualization and measurement of task conflict in past research has consistently been slanted towards the assessment of disagreement and opinion differences in work contexts. Thus, it is likely that past results provide evidence of a positive relationship between pure disagreements and performance, not between a type of conflict (i.e., task conflict) and performance. A positive relationship between disagreements and group performance is not surprising since pure disagreements that are not accompanied by interference and negative emotion would not be perceived as
situations of interpersonal conflict. As such, pure opinion differences could encourage increased discussion and debate, which could lead to the identification of better solutions to problems, thereby improving group outcomes. Indeed, recent evidence indicates that individuals perceive or interpret the notion of interpersonal conflict as the presence of disagreement, interference, and negative emotion, and that the presence of interpersonal conflict negatively impacts team and project performance measures (Barki and Hartwick, 2001).

The definition and framework of the present paper should facilitate the development of reliable and valid measures of interpersonal conflict in different contexts. For example, to assess task-related interpersonal conflicts in project teams, the framework of Table 1 suggests that items would have to be developed to measure disagreement, interference, and negative emotion with respect to the task outcomes and task processes of the project team (cells 12, 6-7, and 11-12). On the other hand, if one is interested in assessing all types of interpersonal conflict, additional items would have to be developed to assess disagreement, interference, and negative emotion regarding specific organizational issues that are not related to the project team’s task, as well as regarding issues that do not concern the organization (cells 3-4, 8-9, and 13-14). Additional items of an overall nature could also be developed as criterion measures and for validation purposes (cells 5, 10, 15, 16-20).

In the past, researchers have often neglected to clearly specify, not only their chosen definitions and means of assessing interpersonal conflict, but also how their conceptualization is similar or different from other researchers’ perspectives. Regardless of which perspective is adopted by a researcher, definitional and measurement clarity is needed for the field to advance as a science. Having a clear conceptualization and operationalization of the construct of interpersonal conflict is important so that results from different studies can be reconciled and for effective knowledge accumulation to occur. We hope that the definition and framework of interpersonal conflict of the present paper will provide a useful step in that direction.
References


