

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY AND THE OTHER PARTY'S CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGY

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## ABSTRACT

The present field study investigates how an individual's conflict strategy is affected by the individual's personality (agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness) and the conflict strategy used by the other party, as well as how the two factors interact. The results of a hierarchical regression analysis based on 261 student-roommate dyads indicate that agreeableness and extraversion are related to the individual's conflict strategy. The results also show that people tend to adopt the same conflict strategy used by the other party, suggesting that interactions between the parties in conflict situations are strongly governed by the norm of reciprocity. Furthermore, the effect of personality is stronger when there exists high uncertainty associated with the other party's conflict strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal conflict is an "interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social parties" (Rahim, 1992: 16). Strategies for conflict resolution involve two main factors: (1) Concern for getting one's own needs met and (2) concern for the other person getting his or her needs met. It is important to understand how people resolve conflicts, as it determines whether the conflict yields negative or positive consequences. We examined four conflict resolution strategies. Collaboration represents an attempt to resolve conflicts in a win-win manner and involves a strategy that seeks to satisfy both parties' concerns. Competition is an attempt to satisfy one's own concerns at the expense of the other. This strategy tends to produce a win-lose outcome because one of the parties in conflict aggressively pursues his or her own concerns without paying attention to the other party's concerns. The strategy of accommodation means that people neglect their own concerns in order to satisfy the other party's concerns and thus produces a lose-win outcome. Finally, the avoiding strategy represents an attempt not to become involved in conflict itself. This strategy allows events to take their own course, thus is likely to yield a lose-lose outcome in which neither of the parties satisfies its concerns.

### Personality and Conflict Resolution Strategy

Many researchers have argued that agreeableness and extraversion are the most relevant personality dimensions in conflict research because they are manifestly related to social interactions (e.g., Barry & Friedman, 1998). Barry and Friedman (1998) have also argued that conscientiousness influences conflict resolution because an effortful analysis and complex problem solving are required. One persistent debate in conflict research is whether an individual is predisposed toward the use of specific conflict resolution strategies, or employs different strategies depending on the situation. In the present study, we examine three Big Five personality dimensions (agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness) as important individual characteristics that will affect an individual's conflict strategy and propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Agreeableness will be positively associated with avoiding, accommodation, and collaboration and will be negatively associated with the use of the competition strategy.

H2: Extraversion will be positively associated with collaboration and competition and will be negatively associated with accommodation and avoiding.

H3: Conscientiousness will be positively associated with collaboration and competition and will be negatively associated with accommodation and avoiding.

### **The Norm of Reciprocity in Conflict**

The present study examines the conflict strategy of the other party as a situational factor that affects a party's decision to use a particular strategy. We believe that the interactions between the parties involved in conflict are strongly governed by the norm of reciprocity. The norm of reciprocity means that if one party receives something from the other party, it is required to return equivalent things to the other party, thus an individual is likely to use collaboration strategy if the other party uses collaboration strategy. The same argument can be applied to competition, accommodation, and avoidance strategies. Thus we propose:

H4: An individual's use of a certain conflict strategy will be positively associated with the extent to which the other party uses the same conflict strategy.

### **Personality-Situation Interaction**

Interactional researchers have argued that the effect of personality on conflict behavior will be stronger in certain instances than others (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). The first approach focuses on the nature of the situation and the second emphasizes the characteristics of individuals. "Strong" situations are those that are highly structured and provide salient cues with little ambiguity while "weak" situations are unstructured and ambiguous (Mischel, 1977). An individual's personality will predict conflict strategy better in "weak" situations than in "strong" situations (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989). Thus, we propose:

H5: The effect of personality will be weaker when the other party scores high on a certain conflict strategy than when scores are low.

In the second approach suggests that personality is a useful predictor of social behavior for some people, but not others (Bem & Allen, 1974). We have argued that agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness are likely to be positively related to collaboration because individuals who score high on agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness are likely to possess the attitudes, skills, and abilities required for collaboration. Individuals with low agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness may not be able to reciprocate the other party's collaboration strategy. Thus, we propose:

H6: The interaction effects of personality and the collaboration strategy used by the other party will be positive.

## **METHOD**

Our sample consisted of 425 student-roommate dyads at a larger Midwestern university. Due to missing data, subsequent analyses were based on 261 student-roommate dyads. The mean ages of the students and roommates were 20.27 and 20.31, respectively; 43% of the students and 45% of the roommates were males. The median number of months for which the student and roommate had known each other was 30 months. Conflict resolution strategy was measured by using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II), Form C for peers (Rahim, 1983b). Agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness were measured by using 9-bipolar adjective scales developed by Goldberg (1992). A hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. First the conflict resolution strategies for each student were regressed on the student's personality and the roommate's conflict strategy. Then, the interactions of the personality and the roommate's conflict strategy were added to the main effect model.

## **RESULTS**

The results of a hierarchical regression analysis based on 261 student-roommate dyads indicate that agreeableness and extraversion are related to the individual's conflict strategy, thus hypotheses one and two were confirmed. The results support hypothesis four, that people tend to adopt the same conflict strategy used by the other party, suggesting that interactions between the parties in conflict situations are strongly governed by the norm of reciprocity. Finally, there was partial support for hypothesis five regarding the interaction between personality the conflict resolution strategy. The effect of using a collaboration strategy tends to be stronger when roommates scored low on their conflict strategies. The results also show that the effect of conscientiousness on collaboration is stronger when the roommates used more avoidance strategy. This suggests that an individual's conflict behavior is more complex than what the dispositional or the situational view may suggest.

## **DISCUSSION**

The finding of reciprocity has important implications. The norm of reciprocity suggests that such exploitation is less likely to occur than the rational theories suggest. Hoffman, et al. found in their experimental study that people exercised reciprocity even in situations where game theory predicted noncooperative strategies. The norm of reciprocity may account for why we observe more collaborative relations in the real world, even in situations where incentive structures suggest noncollaborative behaviors. Hoffman, et al. also found that by exercising reciprocity, people were able to achieve more efficient outcomes than what rational actors would achieve. So, use collaboration strategy when you experience conflict next time. In turn, the other party will likely respond with collaboration. We also found some support for the interactional approach. The effects of personality on collaboration strategy tended to be stronger when the roommates scored low on their conflict resolution strategy. This finding is consistent with the argument that the effect of personality is stronger in a "weak" situation than in a "strong" situation (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989)

## **REFERENCES**

References are available from the second author upon request.