

## *Summary*

# **A Diary Study on Organizational Conflict: Augmenters of the Negative Effects of Conflict**

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Organizational conflict has been found to have detrimental effects on employee well-being and work performance (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). Conflicts make employees tense, increase hostility and animosity in the workplace, and cause disruptions of attention and lack of concentration on the part of the partners that are involved in a conflict episode (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Fujiwara and colleagues (2003) have demonstrated that increase in the level of interpersonal conflict is paralleled by the increase of employee burnout and exhaustion. Almost one quarter of the people working in a variety of occupations have reported interpersonal conflict at work as the number one cause of stress in their lives (Smith & Sulsky, 1995). Thereby, it is essential to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of organizational conflict in order to maintain the well-being and job satisfaction of the employees, as well as organizational efficiency.

Various alternative definitions of organizational conflict have been suggested in the literature. The common theme underlined and shared by these definitions refer to the fact that conflict is subjectively perceived by an individual and it is related with the perception of incompatibility between one's own interests versus another one's interests (Wall & Callister, 1995). Organizational conflict has been categorized into two components - task conflict and relationship (affective) conflict - by some researchers (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954; Priem & Price, 1991; Wall & Nolan, 1986). Task conflict refers to conflicts concerning how a task should be performed or distributed among the group members. Relationship conflict refers to conflicts arising among persons due to individual differences in personality, attitudes, communication styles, etc. (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). There are consistent empirical findings on the detrimental effects of relationship conflicts on individual and work outcomes, whereas findings on the effects of task conflict are rather counterfactual (e.g., De Dreu, 2008; Tjosvold,

2008). Jehn (1995) have reported positive effects of task conflict on group performance, while a meta-analytic study by De Dreu & Weingart (2003) has reported average correlations of -.19 and -.27 with work performance and job satisfaction respectively. In a recent study by Meier, Gross, Spector, and Semmer (2013) task conflict was found not to have any additional predictive power when the effects of relationship conflict on state anger and somatic complaints of the employees. However, task conflict was found to moderate the relationship between relational conflict and outcome variables. When task conflict was low, relationship conflict had a stronger association with employee state anger and somatic complaints. The researchers refer to the attribution processes involved in the interpretation of conflict events for explaining their findings.

Empirical research on the effects of organizational conflict on employee well-being has demonstrated that conflicts are detrimental for employee affect and work attitudes, such as job satisfaction. Spector, Chen, and O'Connell (2000) have reported significant positive correlations between conflict and the negative emotions of anxiety and frustration. Dierendonck, Schaufeli and Sixma (1994) have found organizational conflict to be accompanied by higher levels of employee burnout and exhaustion. In the study of Dijkstra, Van Dierendonck and Evers (2005), feelings of hopelessness and avoidance tendencies were found to mediate the relationship of conflict with perceived level of stress and mental health. The Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and the Emotion-Centered Model of Work Stress lay the theoretical foundation for the study of conflict - well-being relationship within the workplace context. Both theoretical frameworks emphasize the central and mediating role played by emotions in this process. Conflict episodes are among the sources of stress in the workplace, and emotional reactions to perceived conflict are proposed to be predictive of employee work

attitudes. Since, subjective well-being is operationalized as a two dimensional construct consisting of affect and satisfaction, in a way these two theories can be referred as frameworks of employee well-being in the workplace.

Following this line of research, there are also findings on the moderators of conflict-well-being relationship. Spector’s (1998) Emotion-Centered Model of Work Stress proposes locus of control, Type-A personality, trait anger, and negative affect as the potential moderators of the stress-emotion relationship. This proposition has been supported empirically by several studies (e.g., Spector ve O’Connell, 1994; Spector, 2003; Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). Dijkstra, De Dreu, Evers, and Dierendonck (2009) have demonstrated conflict management styles to moderate the relationship between conflict and employee burnout. Employees who rely on passive conflict management strategies such as avoiding or yielding were found to experience higher levels of burnout in response to conflict at work. Moreover, Ilies, Johnson, Judge and Keeney (2011) have found that individuals who score high on the personality dimension of agreeableness and those who have low levels of social support from their colleagues report higher levels of negative emotions in response to conflict episodes at work.

In the current study, relationships between daily conflict, employee negative emotions, and job satisfaction were examined in a diary study. Moreover, daily negative affect was tested as a mediator of the conflict-job satisfaction relationship, and the within-person and between-person moderators of the conflict-negative affect relationship were explored. Rumination about the conflict and taking conflict personally were assessed as within-person variables, while coping styles (problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping) were assessed as between-person variables. The tested model is graphed in Figure 1.

**Method**

**Participants**

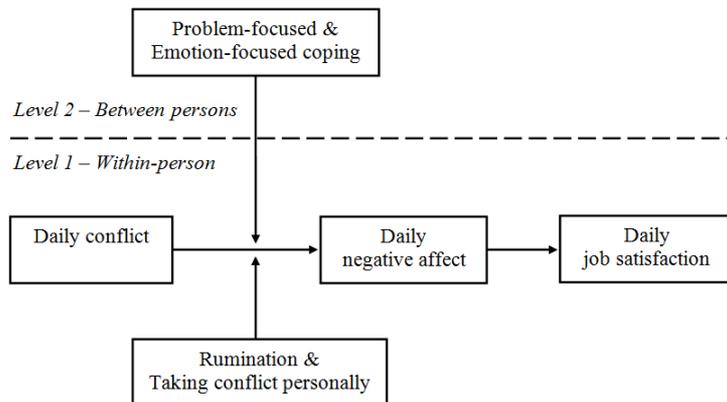
Participants of the study were 140 academic members (lecturers, researchers, research assistants) of a University in Turkey. Among the participants 54% were female and 46% were male. The average age of the participants was 35.35 (*SD* = 7.99) and majority held a university degree. Participants were asked to fill out a daily survey across 15 work days. They were instructed to complete each daily survey at the end of the work day before leaving their office. A general survey was administered before the daily surveys, which included demographic questions and the coping style questionnaire.

**Measures**

**Daily work conflict** was assessed by directly asking participants to indicate whether they experienced a work conflict or not on that particular day. Moreover, the Likert-type scale developed by Jehn (1995) was used for assessing *task conflict* and *relationship conflict*. Each of these subscales consisted of 4 items. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item (1 = Absolutely disagree; 5 = Absolutely agree).

**Daily negative affect** was measured with Watson, Clark and Tellegen’s (1988) Negative Affect subscale of the PANAS scale. The scale consisted of a 10-item list of affect descriptors such as nervous, distressed, upset, and hostile, etc. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced each emotion after the conflict episode (1 = Not at all; 5 = Extremely).

**Daily job satisfaction** was measured by using 3 items from Hacman ve Oldham’s (1975) job satisfaction scale. Items were rephrased asking participants to indicate how they feel about their job “at the moment”.



**Figure 1.** The tested model

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	-	-	-										
2. Age	35.35	7.99	.20**	-									
3. Problem-focused coping	3.75	.40	-.26**	.16**	.70								
4. Emotion-focused coping	2.35	.63	.09**	-.09**	-.31**	.83							
5. Conflict (Yes-No)	0.10	.30	-.05	-.06	.04	.09**	-						
6. Relational conflict <sup>a</sup>	2.99	.91	-.05	.00	-.02	-.12	.60						
7. Task conflict <sup>a</sup>	3.08	1.09	.06	.10	-.13	-.03	.52**	.75					
8. Rumination <sup>a</sup>	2.82	.99	.13	-.17	-.36**	.06	.45**	.40**	.73				
9. Taking conflict personally <sup>a</sup>	2.49	.93	.28**	.00	-.19	.04	.28**	.29**	.39**	.60			
10. Negative affect	1.40	.53	.08**	-.13**	-.22**	.29**	.42**	.16	.09	.55**	.37**	.87	
11. Job satisfaction	3.81	.91	.01	.11**	.21**	-.22**	-.14**	-.07	-.11	-.22*	-.29**	-.35**	.83

Note 1. <sup>a</sup> These variables are valid for those participants that has experienced conflict on a given work day (Conflict variable was coded as 1 for all of them); therefore correlation with "conflict" can not be calculated

Note 2. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Note 3. Scores shown in italic and bold fonts on the diagonal indicate the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scales.

**Table 2.** Negative affect as the mediator of the relationship between conflict and job satisfaction.

Variable	Step I			Step II		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
<i>Random-effect model</i>						
Intercept	3.82	.09	44.78*	3.82	.09	44.72*
Daily conflict	-.31	.08	-3.91*	-.14	.10	-1.45
Negative affect				-.29	.08	-3.86*

Note. \* $p < .001$

**Rumination about the conflict** was assessed with 4 items from Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, and Fredrickson's (1993) Ruminative Response Scale (e.g., "I thought about the conflict event over and over again throughout the day"). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item.

**Taking conflict personally** was measured using 3 items from Hample and Dallinger's (1995) Direct Personalization subscale (e.g., "I took that person's criticisms personally," "It really hurt my feelings to be criticized by that person").

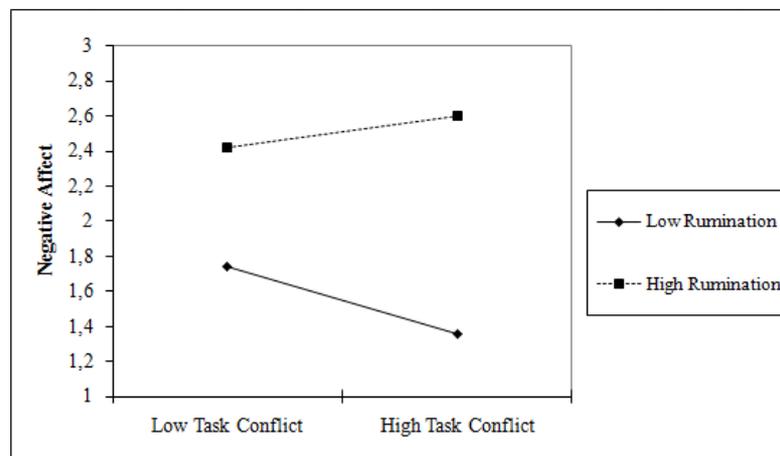
**Coping style** was assessed with the 30-item short version of Folkman and Lazarus's (1980) Ways of Coping Scale. *Problem-focused coping* (e.g., "I make a plan of action and follow it") and *Emotion-focused coping* (e.g., "I try to keep my feelings to myself") scores were computed for each person based on items of this scale.

## Results

Due to missing days and data, out of 2,100 potential data points (140 persons \* 15 days) 1,035 data points were raised. On approximately 10% of these data

points, people reported to have experienced a daily conflict. Among these conflicts 56.3% were conflicts with coworkers, 29.2% with supervisors, and 14.5% with students (customers). Due to its multi-level nature, the data were analyzed using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002). Descriptive statistics of the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Initial within-person analysis revealed that workplace conflict was related with decreased levels of daily job satisfaction, and this relationship was fully mediated by the daily negative emotions individuals experienced (Table 2). Further analyses revealed that rumination about the conflict episode and taking conflict personally moderated the relationship between daily task conflict and daily negative emotion. At the within-persons level, employees high on rumination and taking conflict personally reacted more intensely (higher levels of negative emotion) in response to task conflict. At the between-persons level, employees low on problem-focused coping also reacted more negatively to the experience of conflict on a given work day. Effects of the moderator variables are graphically presented in Figure 2 through Figure 4.



**Figure 2.** Rumination as the moderator

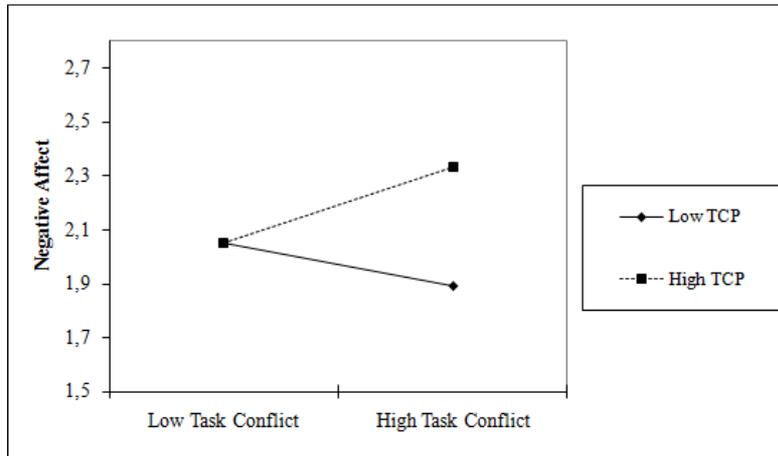


Figure 3. Taking conflict personally (TCP) as the moderator

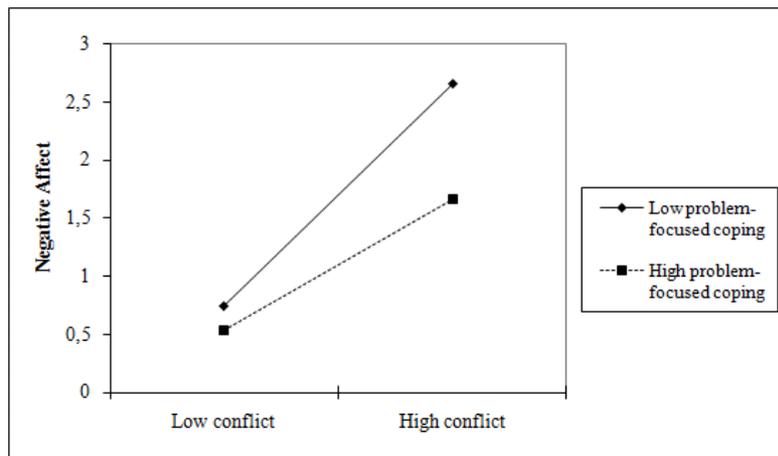


Figure 4. Problem-focused coping as the moderator

### Discussion

This study provided evidence for the within-person detrimental effects of workplace conflict on employee daily mood and job satisfaction. This finding supports the arguments proposed by the Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) which points out the importance of and the potential mediational effects of affective reactions to work events. In this regard, work conflict was conceptualized and studied as a negative work event or daily hassle.

In this study rumination, taking conflict personally, and lack of problem-focused coping emerged as augmenters of the detrimental effects of workplace conflict, especially task conflict. This finding supports the neces-

sity for studying task versus relationship conflict distinctively. If an employee interprets a disagreement about work tasks in a cynical way and perceives the criticisms as personal attacks to her/his ego, such task conflicts are more likely to operate similar to relationship conflicts, and result in poor employee well-being. Employees who ruminate about the conflict episodes are also strongly distressed and in fact their baseline negative affectivity without any apparent conflict is also higher compared to low ruminators. Problem-focused coping style also emerged as a buffer against the detrimental effects of workplace conflict.

These moderator variables need to be integrated into the intervention programs for conflict management and coping with stress in organizations. Organizational

psychologists, in collaboration with Social and Clinical Psychologists, need to design creative programs to assist employees in conflict management. Employees can benefit from mindfulness-based stress reduction (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003) or coping interventions since development of skills in being present in the moment can be useful for decreasing rumination. Assuming that an employee who is present in the moment is less likely to be reactive during conflict situations, such interventions could also prevent escalation of the conflict spiral. Although it is well known that organizations do provide training seminars to their employees on conflict and stress management, there are only a few empirical studies testing the effectiveness of such interventions (e.g., Leon-Perez, Notelaers, & Leon-Rubio, 2016). Therefore, there is an urgent need for conducting effectiveness studies that compare the usefulness of alternative intervention designs.