

INTEGRATING CONFLICT SITUATIONS, PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS, AND
BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Bridging the perspectives of conflict style and a contingency approach to conflict management can lead to a new research agenda in the area of workplace conflict. The distinctions between the two are illustrated and recent research approaches critiqued. In addition, the paper explores research on individual behavior and semantics. From this, a conceptual model of the social processing of conflict, offering an interaction perspective, is proposed. Suggestions are made for a new research direction for the study of workplace conflict that may better inform practice and understanding.

By its very nature, conflict is a phenomenon that everyone has experienced
(Lederach, 1995, p. 40).

Conflict is currently recognized to be a component of interpersonal interactions, not necessarily inevitable or innately bad, but often commonplace and is an emergent function of people interacting within the workplace (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Schellenberg, 1996).

The majority of people who work spend a good proportion of their weekday hours interacting with others at their workplace. The average number of hours worked each week has held fairly constant for a wide range of industries over the last ten year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). This fact alone seems to make workplace organizations a viable context in which to study conflict. Concomitantly, over the last decade there has been increased attention to conflict management in the workplace by organizations, both public and private. Evidence of this is seen in organizations' activities focused at the system and individual level. At the system level, more organizations are implementing alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes and procedures. Cost saving has been an impetus for companies and the Federal Government (General Accounting Office, 1997) to incorporate arbitration and mediation processes as alternatives to formal legal options. Peer and/or management review has been utilized to address interpersonal conflict situations at earlier stages of escalation. Additionally, there has been a growth in the number of companies and agencies creating organizational ombudsmen positions. An organizational or internal ombudsman provides a neutral, independent, and confidential mechanism for employees to deal with conflicts that occur with peers and/or managers.

At the individual-level, more organizations have included conflict management skills as a requirement for recruitment, selection and performance appraisal for employees, especially management and executive positions (Office of Personnel Management, 2007). A quick internet review of the training programs being offered by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM, 2007) reveals that “conflict management skills” is listed as a competency goal in the majority of the leadership courses offered to executives. In the private sector, consultants and internal human resource departments are providing training that includes skills building in conflict management strategies (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Whetten & Cameron, 2002). The trend in organizations implementing both system-wide processes and individual-focused programs to facilitate management of interpersonal conflict in the workplace coincides with a growing body of research showing conflict, if not managed, can lead to poor organizational (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Deutsch, 1949) and individual outcomes (Ayoko, Hartel, & Callan, 2002; Euwema, Van de Vliert, & Bakker, 2003; Friedman, Tidd, C., & Tsai, 2000).

Conflict interactions that occur in the workplace provide a rich opportunity to explore to what extent specific aspects of the situation influence the participants. The literature suggests that individuals interact within contexts and that meaning, perceptions, and behaviors are emerging properties. While the person may use a set of strategies during conflicts, the specific tools used will be contingent on the situation as it is unfolding. How the situation unfolds is influenced by the specific contextual features evident, manifest behaviors used by parties, and individuals’ social cognition processing. The latter may include causal analysis and inferences, attitudes about the specific conflict, perceived behavioral control over the situation, and subjective norms related to the specific conflict.

Statement of the Problem

The preponderance of the research conducted in the workplace setting still frames conflict management as a stable style, and while there is an acknowledgement that conflict management behaviors are emergent within a specific situation, this is not typically reflected in the empirical research. There is an opportunity to bridge perspectives by integrating a contingency perspective to examine the extent to which specific aspects of the context produce different relationships between personal characteristics and behaviors during a workplace conflict situation. This paper reviews existing theories and research related to conflict management taking into account individual background variables, as well as offering an expanded model for consideration. Psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, and education have all embraced this topic as an important one and offer perspectives and research contributing to the current knowledge relating to this complex topic. Opportunities exist for management scholars to assume leadership in enhancing our understanding of conflict in the workplace to create stronger and optimally functioning organizations.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

There is an enormous body of literature, theoretical and empirical, dealing with conflict and conflict management. This paper is grounded in a body of research specifically addressing interpersonal conflict in the workplace. The following section provides descriptions of a specific situation (conflict) in a given context (the workplace) and two views on conflict management behaviors: style versus contingency.

Hypothetical Scenario: John and Mary are peers at ABC organization. Mary believes that John took all of the credit for their joint work on a task force when he presented the results to the management committee. From his words and actions Mary has concluded that John deliberately meant to mislead the committee about his contributions. Mary decides not to directly confront John but to talk to her friends about how angry and frustrated she is about this situation.

Does Mary always respond to conflict by avoiding confrontation or does she use different behaviors based upon the situation? If the conflict involved a female coworker or the disagreement was about a more technical issue, would Mary's behavior be the same? A style perspective to conflict management is based upon the premise that a person uses the same behaviors across different contexts and conflict situations (Wilson & Waltman, 1988), while a contingency approach to conflict management suggests that the individual will use behaviors and actions that incorporates situational and contextual factors (Jameson, 1999). What follows is a more detailed look at style and contingency.

Conflict Style

Research conducted in workplace settings has largely framed the individual to have a conflict style that "may reflect a predisposition, habit or stable internal preference" (Wilson & Waltman, 1988) that is consistent over time and across situations. From this perspective, studies were designed to examine the relationship between individual differences in attributes such as sex (Bullis, Cox, & Herrod, 1982; Gayle, Preiss, & Allen, 1994; LaFrance, Brownell, & Hahn, 1997; Papa & Natalle, 1989), personality (Moberg, 1998; Percival, Smitheram, & Kelly, 1992), moral development (Rahim, Buntzman, & White, 1999), and cultural background (Chua &

Gudykunst, 1987; Tinsley, 2001) to explain or predict their conflict style. Intuitively, many of these individual differences may be related to how a person may approach and behave in a conflict situation. However, if behavior is a function of the individual and the environment, the participants and issues involved in a conflict will often vary and may also contribute to the interaction. Additionally, research linking traits, such as sex to conflict management behavioral styles (Chusmir & Mills, 1989; Hottes & Kahn, 1974; Portello & Long, 1994) has had mixed results raising the possibility that sex is not consistently linked to conflict style or that conflict behavior, as a trait, is not the optimal framework.

Contingency Perspective

In contrast to a style framework, a contingency perspective suggests that an individual incorporates salient external variables into their cognitive processing during an interaction and this may affect the individual's conflict management behaviors. Researchers in conflict management behaviors in the workplace have hypothesized and identified some relevant situational variables. The behaviors used by an individual during a disagreement may vary dependent upon the sex of the other person (Gayle et al., 1994; LaFrance et al., 1997; Tinsley, 2001). There may also be different "types" of conflicts. One categorization identified in qualitative research, task versus relationship-related (Jehn, 1995) has been related to differences in outcome variables, such as team satisfaction (Jehn, 1995), performance, (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and innovation (Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001). Conflicts in the workplace often take the form of verbal or written exchanges. The words used by a participant become part of the context in which the conflict interaction is occurring. When aspects of the context are relevant to the participant, such as sex or specific words used, a different pattern of

conflict management behaviors may be used to manage the interaction (Olson-Buchanan, Drasgow, Moberg, Mead, Keenan, & Donoyan, 1998).

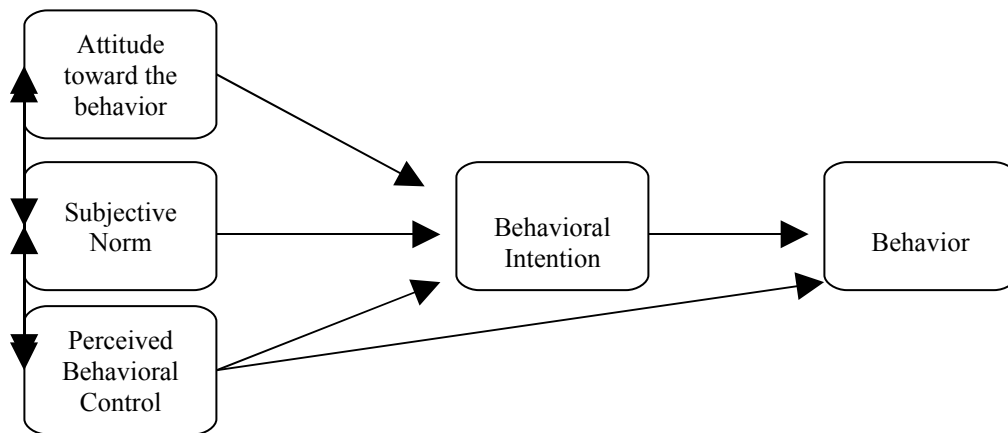
In summary, a contingency perspective advocates that an individual has a tool kit of behaviors that s/he uses during a conflict interaction. These may be related to personal characteristics such as sex, age, or personality. However, there seems to be a growing interest by researchers to question what aspects of the context or situation may relate to or influence the individual's conflict management behaviors. Understanding the person's contribution to behavior has been extensively studied using variables such as sex and attitudes. This paper will apply well-supported theories, primarily from the field of social psychology, to propose a framework for exploring the relationships between the individual, the context, and behavior in workplace conflict situations.

The Individual and Behavior

Research that explores the relationship between the individual and behavior has been the focus of diverse fields, including psychology, education, marketing, and economics. Often the questions asked include: what personal characteristics can be used to predict a person's actions or to understand behavior? The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen & Madden, 1986) has been applied in an impressive body of research, which largely focuses on predicting a specified behavior from a set of individual characteristics, that includes attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986) is a set of theories that relates how individuals make sense of outcomes and situations and the subsequent actions related to this process. The following sections briefly describe these two complex theories as they may be integrated into research on workplace conflict.

The Theory of Planned Behavior. An individual's actions are generally under volitional control and serve a purpose. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) proposed that the immediate and major determinant of behavior is intention, or what they termed behavioral intention. The model has three individual variables that are antecedent to intention: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitude toward a behavior is a positive or negative evaluation of performing a specified behavior. Subjective norm is the perceived social pressure that the individual feels that is either for or against performing a specific behavior. Behaviors occurring in a social interaction may not be under a single person's direct control because there are external variables, including the other person's actions that may influence that control. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) serves as an additional antecedent to intention (Ajzen & Madden, 1986) to reflect the extent that a person feels that s/he has control over and the ease or difficulty in performing a specific behavior. The PBC variable largely considers the extent to which an individual believes or infers that s/he has personal control to perform or not perform a behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior has been used extensively in research to explain and predict a range of behaviors, including dishonest behaviors, such as cheating and lying, exceeding speed limits, and a range of health topics such as exercising, dieting, and using condoms. The model of the Theory of Planned Behavior is in Figure 1 below.

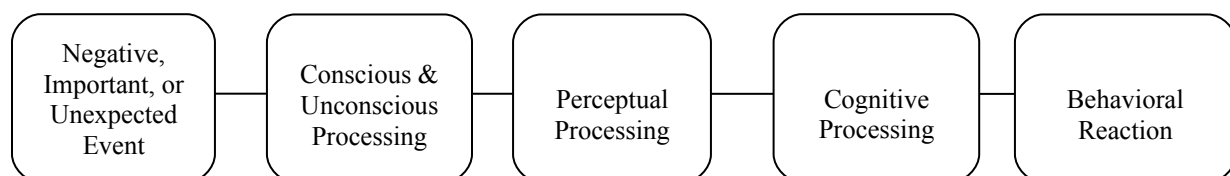
Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)



Attribution Theory and Locus of Causality. People come to know about each others' states (e.g., emotions and intentions) and more enduring dispositions (e.g., traits and beliefs) through processes referred to as social cognition (Fiske & Taylor, 1991b; Gilbert, 1998) and described by Attribution Theory. Fritz Heider (1958), credited as the founder of Attribution Theory, suggested that people use naïve processes to understand the causes of events in order to make decisions and take actions to adapt and respond to events. The processes that people use to know themselves and others may be conscious, unconscious, perceptual, cognitive, and

behavioral. While there may be different attributions and inferences made by an individual during an interaction, researchers have hypothesized that attributions of the locus of causality play a significant role (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004; Weiner, 2000, 2001). Participants in an interpersonal interaction likely make attributions of causality such that they infer the cause of the event or outcome is oneself, the other person or the situation (Allred, 2000; Jones & Davis, 1965; Weiner, 1986). Attributions made during an interpersonal interaction have been shown to be influenced by participant characteristics, such as sex (Fiedler, Semin, & Finkenauer, 1993) and group membership (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 2000; Rubini & Semin, 1994). Research designed to look at language revealed that words used during an interaction, specifically verbs, conveyed information that both implied and lead to different attributions of causality (Fiedler & Semin, 1988; Semin & Fiedler, 1988; Semin & Marsman, 1994). Research focused on intrapersonal attributions of causality (within oneself) has supported a relationship between different attributions (e.g., to oneself or situation) and subsequent behaviors and outcomes, such as achievement and depression (Abramson & Martin, 1981; Weiner, 2000). An Attribution Model of Emotion and Motivation is in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Attribution Model of Emotion and Motivation



In summary, the Theory of Planned Behavior and Attribution Theory have each been applied in research to explore the relationship between individual characteristics and behavior.

Researchers have found that attitudes alone are not always the best predictor of behavior and have included additional individual variables, such as subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Locus of causality, an individual's inference of the cause of the event, is thought to play an important role in interpersonal interactions (Weiner, 2000), and may explain behavior, in addition to the other individual variables.

The Individual, Context & Behavior

A person's behavior can be framed to be an emergent function of the individual and the environment or context (Lewin, 1951). Whereas the field of psychology focuses more on the individual and behavior, social psychology is built upon the notion that the individual develops and interacts within social systems (Turner, 1991). Examples of research within this perspective includes: the development and manifestations of stereotyping (Allport, 1954/1979; Fiske, 1998; Maass et al., 2000), alcohol use in the Greek system at colleges (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007), and violence within families (Gelles & Straus, 1979). A contingency perspective adopted in conflict management research (Jameson, 1999; Olson-Buchanan et al., 1998) considers how the context influences the individual and behavior. Individuals act and interact within a context. While the individual brings a lot to the situation, whether that is exercising alone or interacting with others, the context has the potential to affect what behaviors are intended.

Sex of Parties

The extent to which there is a relationship between various personal characteristics and conflict management has generated considerable research. Examples of these include: sex

(Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002; Bullis et al., 1982; Gayle et al., 1994; Papa & Natalle, 1989), personality (Moberg, 1998; Percival et al., 1992), moral development (Rahim et al., 1999), and cultural background (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987; Tinsley, 2001). While some research has indeed suggested relationships between them, others have found mixed results.

The influence that sex plays on conflict interactions is considered in this paper, because of possible affects that extend beyond a relationship to conflict management behaviors as an individual-level variable. Sex is considered to be a salient contextual variable in the literature and research in attributions (McLean, Stongman, & Neha, 2007; Tay, Ang, & Dyne, 2006), social cognition (Brewer, 1988; Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999; McCrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992) and stereotyping (Schneider, 2004). Research by Mannetti and DeGrada (1991) using the linguistic category model (LCM), a language-attribution model, showed different main effects related to sex. Also using the LCM, Fiedler et al (1993) examined the relationship between sex and language used to describe ten gender-role issues, such as prevention of pregnancy and driving cars, in a small student sample. Their results suggested different patterns of language use when comparing female and male respondents. Research using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explain a range of behaviors, including to predict driver's compliance with speed limits (Elliott, Armitage, & Baughan, 2003), adolescent eating and activity behaviors (Baker, Little, & Brownell, 2003), and exercise (Brickell, Chatzisarantis, & Pretty, 2006) reported statistically significant effects for respondents' sex.

The literature cited represents a slice of the research that has been done on these topics and theories. Many other articles exist that do not include sex as a variable in the design. However, because sex has been implicated to be relevant as both an individual and contextual variable, its potential role is valuable to explore workplace conflict management situations.

Language & Linguistic Category Model (LCM)

During a conflict interaction, the behaviors that manifest between parties are often in the form of verbal utterances. A lot of information, in addition to the actual meaning, is conveyed in the words. It is this additional information that may be a contextual influence on the conflict interaction. Additionally, the LCM presented in this paper shows how language interacts in conflict and its potential to influence behavior.

Research on what is commonly called the “implicit causality” of verbs arises from a social psychological perspective in that, “language will be viewed as a behavior that is both influenced by other people, as well as a means for influencing the behavior of others” (Holtgraves, 2002, p. 2). Experimental designs are typical for this research using a questionnaire with items worded in the sentence structure, “subject predicate¹ object.” Overall, the results have showed a pattern that action verbs (e.g., hit or tells) lead to attributions of causality to the subject while state verbs (e.g., like or trust) lead to attributions of causality to the object of the sentence (Brown & Fish, 1983). Further, adjectives that stemmed from either action verbs or state verbs showed the same pattern of attributions of causality.

Semin and Fiedler (1988) provide a further development to the verb causality pattern with the LCM. The authors propose that terms used as predicates (i.e., verbs and adjectives) can be categorized into a model along a single dimension of concreteness to abstractness. In their initial research with the LCM (Fiedler & Semin, 1988; Semin & Fiedler, 1988) they developed the categories, examined how well a corpus of terms discriminated into the categories, and explored relationships between categories and attribution-related questions. Their results

¹ “The subject of a sentence is the person, object or idea being described. The predicate is the explanation of the action, condition, or effect of the subject (p. 6)” (Shertzer, 1986).

showed a majority of their participants agreed in categorizing the verbs (84.72%) and the categories discriminated, both theoretically and empirically, when related to five attribution-related variables (i.e., subject informativeness, enduringness, verifiability, disputability, and situation informativeness) (Fiedler & Semin, 1988; Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Using the LCM, Douglas and Sutton (2006) explored the relationship between the language used (concrete-abstract dimension) to describe the actions depicted in cartoons and participants' inferences of actor's attitudes and goals. Participants inferred from a positive abstract description that the describer was more likely a friend (than enemy or unbiased observer) and was in favor of the protagonist. Several researchers (cf., Maass & Arcuri, 1992; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989; Maass & Schaller, 1991; Rubini & Semin, 1994) have examined the relationship between group-membership and language use. Participants described positive ingroup (within one's own social group) and negative outgroup behaviors in more abstract language (i.e., using adjectives and state verbs). Additionally, they described negative ingroup and positive outgroup behaviors in more concrete language (i.e., using action verbs).

Going a step further, the purpose of the research was to explore the relationship between different patterns of language used and subsequent behavior. Semin and De Poot studied to what extent does the question, the specific wording of it using the LCM, influence the answer (De Poot & Semin, 1995; Semin & De Poot, 1997b). This work was built upon earlier research done by Semin and Marsman (1994) who found that the inferences were along two independent dimensions: causality or who instigated the action and dispositional quality of the subject or object of the sentence. Inferences of disposition follow the same pattern as causality, but seemed to also be influenced by contextual information, such as the priming instructions given to the participants by the researchers. Semin and De Poot's research showed a relationship that

abstract predicates used in questions resulted in answers with more abstract predicates (e.g., state verbs). They coined the phenomenon, “Question-Answer Paradigm” (QAP) and replicated the previous research results (Semin & De Poot, 1997a). Their subsequent research also revealed that narratives written by participants were influenced by the predicates used in the questions. Therefore, the authors suggested that participants incorporate and respond to concrete and abstract language implicitly.

If a question can influence an answer through a manipulation of the verbs, Semin, Gil de Montes, Higgins, Estourget and Valencia (2005) explored the effects of a manipulation in a health-related message on participants’ intent to act. The authors reported that in participants that were promotion-focused, determined by a scale, showed a stronger intention to engage in sports when the message included abstract verbs than if it included concrete verbs. The opposite pattern was seen for prevention-focused participants who showed a stronger intention to engage in sports when the message included concrete verbs compared to abstract verbs. They concluded that persuasive messages that are tailored to fit the recipients’ linguistic preferences may be more effective in influencing intention and behavior.

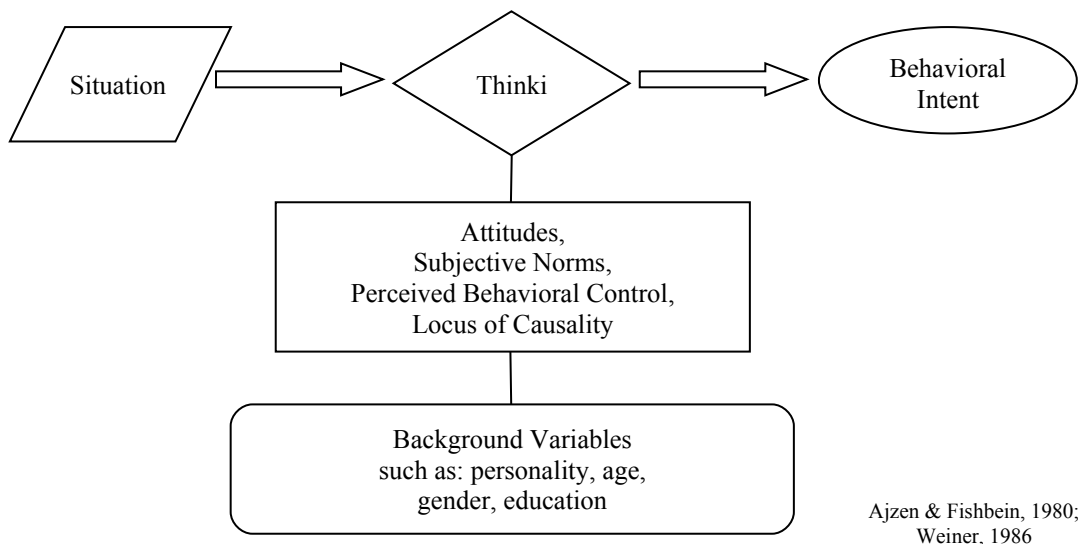
Summary and Consideration for Future Theory, Research and Practice

Conflict interactions that occur in the workplace provide a rich opportunity to integrate different theories and explore to what extent specific aspects of the situation influence the participants. This paper is grounded in literature and research that suggests that individuals interact with contexts and that the meaning, perceptions, and behaviors are emerging properties (Lewin, 1951). Lewin (1951) labeled this the interaction perspective of behavior and involves social processing of the context.

The research that has used the Theory of Planned Behavior has generally performed very well in predicting intention and behavior from three individual variables: attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002; Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988). The behaviors that have been studied with the TPB have generally been intrapersonal (e.g., weight-loss or exercise) as compared to interpersonal. Additionally, in the previous research, the TPB has been used to study a single target behavior, such as smoking cessation. This practice has been questioned by some researchers because the individual generally has more than one behavioral option available in any given situation (Kashima & Lewis, 2000; Sheppard et al., 1988). Attribution researchers suggest that attributions of causality play an important role in interpersonal interactions, but empirical research is limited.

To develop a richer understanding of conflict behavior, it is essential that research include both individual and situational variables. The TPB, representing individual variables, can be extended and expanded in three ways. 1) The model can be applied in an interpersonal interaction, a workplace conflict situation, 2) three conflict management behavioral intentions can be included: nonconfrontation, solution-oriented, and control (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) because during a conflict interaction, an individual has a range of behaviors that can be chosen, and 3) include attributions of the locus of causality to potentially explain additional variance in conflict management intentions beyond that already explained by the three individual variables of the TPB. In the proposed model, three variables: sex of protagonist, type of conflict, and words used, are considered to represent salient aspects of the context suggested in previous research in conflict and attribution. Figure 3 displays the proposed Interactionist Model of Conflict Management.

Figure 3. Interactionist Model of Conflict Management



Organizations are devoting resources to implement systems, processes, and training to improve the management and outcome of workplace conflicts. This trend will likely continue as organizations and employees are required to work effectively within a changing environment. Additionally, results from research showing conflicts can lead to poor organizational and personal outcomes is adding further impetus to understanding conflict situations and conflict management in the workplace. Research is needed to bridge perspectives and apply them in a different way raising questions about the extent to which specific aspects of the context produce

different relationships between personal characteristics and behaviors during a workplace conflict situation. Research agendas around this topic need to be created.

Potential questions for exploration generated by this paper are:

1. Does the context of a given workplace conflict situation influence a person's response?
2. Specifically, in the workplace do people respond differently depending upon each of the following:
 - a. The type of conflict; that is, if the conflict task or relationship-related?
 - b. The language used; that is, if the language varies in abstraction?
 - c. The sex of the person initiating the conflict?
 - d. Do men and women have a different profile of responses related to the questions posed above?

Providing answers to these may lead us to greater understanding of the conflict phenomenon as well as inform learning interventions related to conflict management for managers and employees in the workplace.

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