

## *Antecedents of Interpersonal Conflict: A Study from Turkey*

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### **Abstract**

Interpersonal conflict in the workplace has been shown to be one of the most frequently reported job stressors (Keenan & Newton, 1985) It can affect a host of individual and organizational processes and outcomes in work places (Barki and Hardwick, 2004). Thus investigation of the antecedence of interpersonal conflict is an important topic. There are two main conflict antecedent categories: (1) Individual characteristics such as; personality, perceptions, expectations, attitudes, values, demographics, education, etc. and (2) Contextual factors such as; interpersonal factors, communication, structure, power imbalance etc (Wall and Callister, 1995). However studies suggested that individual characteristics have received limited support as contributors to conflict (Baron, 1989; Derr, 1978; Wall and Callister, 1995) and they appear to be subordinate to contextual factors. This study is aim to examine the impact of sector, quantitative workload and job satisfaction (contextual factors) and some demographics (individual characteristics) on interpersonal conflict.

Keywords: Interpersonal conflict, Individual differences, Organizational factors, Turkey

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## **Interpersonal Conflict in Workplaces**

Conflict is generally viewed as a process that "begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern" (Thomas, 1976, p. 891). Conflicts are often categorized either as factual or interpersonal and can be separated into four sub-categories: intrapersonal (within one and the same individual), interpersonal (in relationships with others), within a (work) group, and between (work) groups (Rahim, 1985).

Interpersonal conflict literature has longstanding history within other disciplines such as sociology, communication, psychology, and more recently organizational management. It 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 and personal conditions exist (Hartwick & Barki, 2002). Interpersonal conflicts at work are generally associated with three components; (1) disagreement, (2) interference and (3) negative emotion (Barki and Hartwick, 2004, Wall & Callister, 1995). These three themes can be viewed as reflecting cognitive, behavioural and affective manifestations of interpersonal conflict. First, disagreement exists when parties think that a divergence of values, needs, interests, opinions, goals, or objectives exists. Second, when a number of different behaviours such as debate, argumentation, competition, aggression, hostility, and destruction interfere with or oppose another party's attainment of its own interests, objectives or goals, behaviours have been associated with interpersonal conflict. Finally, some negative emotions such as; fear, jealousy, anger, anxiety, and frustration have been associated with interpersonal conflict (Hartwick & Barki, 2002).

Workplace conflict is common and widespread thus it has been shown to be one of the most frequently reported job stressors (Keenan & Newton, 1985). Interpersonal conflicts may occur about organizational task (Task Conflict), or about some other issue that is not related to an organizational task (Jehn, 1995). However all types of interpersonal conflict can affect a host of individual and organizational processes and outcomes in work places. Interpersonal conflicts may have negative consequences for the organization in terms of higher employee turnover/attrition, loss of time in negotiations/counseling, lack of organizational commitment and lack of trust. To manage the conflict in workplaces it is important to know the antecedents of interpersonal conflict. The antecedence of workplace conflicts has tended to be individual factors; there are also results that point to organizational structure and other conditions (interpersonal issues) within the organization that may generate conflict. A reasonable assumption is that both individual and contextual factors can explain the emergence of conflicts at the workplace (Oxenstierna et al., 2011). These two main factors are explained below as antecedents of interpersonal conflict in workplaces.

### **Individual & Contextual Factors and Interpersonal Conflict**

Individuals differ in terms of attitudes, opinion, beliefs, culture, emotional stability, maturity, education, gender, language etc. Hence their responses to particular stimuli at workplace also vary. As a result, people across all levels in the offices or shop floor tend to be incompatible or hostile when they view a particular matter to undermine their position or negate their worldview or value system (Jha&Jha, 2010). Individual characteristics that have been identified as antecedents to interpersonal conflict

include personality, emotions (stress, anger, and distrust), social background, values, goals and some demographic characteristics like ethnicity, and even gender. However there is limited support for relationship between individual differences and interpersonal conflicts (Wall & Callister, 1995). Studies were indicating very limited support for personality and emotions however there is support exists for values and goals (Moeller et al., 2012). Some authors have found support for relationship with demographics and interpersonal conflict. Offerman & Beil (1992) have found that female leaders are less likely being in competition and defeating others than male leaders. Similarly Todd-Mancillas&Rossi, (1985) found that female managers are more likely to use communication strategies to resolve disputes with employees. On the other hand male managers are more likely to use power and authority to resolve disputes.

It is indicated that if we are aiming to predict behavior and to uncover the nature of interpersonal conflict in workplaces we should consider contextual factors as well as individual differences (Knapp et al., 1988). There are many contextual factors that may affect interpersonal conflict both between workmates and between workers and their superiors. Conflicts may emergence from some organizational factors such as; bureaucracy and departmentalization, dysfunctional leader-member exchange, perceived organizational injustice harassment, over workload, role ambiguity (De Raeve et al.,2008; Spector & Jex (1998) or some interpersonal factors like relationship characteristics of superior-subordinate (lack of leadership, psychologically distant, poor communication) (Wall&Callister,1995; Tepper et al.,1998; Dawes & Massey, 2005).

In this study it is aim to examine the impact of sector, quantitative workload and job satisfaction (contextual factors) and some demographics (individual characteristics) on interpersonal conflict.

In our research we included gender, income and age variables to find out the individual predictor of interpersonal conflict. We also supposed that sector is one of the important contextual factors of interpersonal conflict because each sector has different characteristics that can shape the organization's structure and also interaction of employees. Workload also appears to have a strong relationship with interpersonal conflict. Because, overloaded individuals often experience feelings of impatience and being rushed, anger and anxiety (Spector and Fox 2005), which affects the quality of their interactions with coworkers. When employees face a demanding workload, they allocate more effort to the task at hand and, thus, have fewer opportunities to engage in altruistic behaviors toward other employees (Jex & Thomas 2003). Previous researches showed that conflict is positively related to the number of hours worked (e.g., Spector, Dwyer, & Jex 1988). Appelberg et al., (1991) indicated that organizational factors included monotonous, fast paced work and white collar jobs contributed to the emergence of workplace conflicts. Thus we supposed that low job satisfaction may also cause interpersonal conflicts.

## Materials/Methods

A total of 519 employees voluntarily participated in our study from different tree sectors: Textile, Automotive and Machine. Data were dependent on self-reporting and privacy, and anonymity measures were taken into account. The three different instruments were used: (1) interpersonal conflict (IC), (2) quantitative workload (QW) and (3) job satisfaction (JS). IC was measured by four-item scale ( $\alpha$  .92) developed by Spector and Jex (1998). QW was measured by a five-item scale ( $\alpha$  .92) designed to assess the amount or quantity of work in a job by Spector and Jex (1998). JS was measured by Weiss, Davis, England and Lofquist 's 20 item Minnesota scale ( $\alpha$  .93) which was translated in Turkish by Baycan in 1985. As well as these variables, sector and demographic variables (age and gender, income) effect on IC were also examined. Data analyses were performed by SPSS, One-way ANOVA, hierarchical regression analysis, correlation analysis and descriptive statistics were used.

## Findings/Results

The mean age of the participants was  $30.22 \pm 6.72$ . % 48 of the participants were from textile sector; % 22 of participants were from automotive sector and % 30 of participants were from machine sector.

One-way ANOVA and Tukey's test indicated that interpersonal conflict in textile, automotive and machine sector all differed significantly  $F(12,63; p<0.001)$ . Results showed that interpersonal conflict in machine sector is higher than textile and automotive.

An examination of the correlations among variables showed that interpersonal conflict is mostly correlated to quantative work load ( $r= .548; p<.001$ ) and there is no significant correlation between job satisfaction and interpersonal conflict. The regression analyses were conducted by entering the demographic variables (gender, age, monthly income) as controls in the first step, followed by the predictor, quantative work load and job satisfaction in the second step. In the first step of the regression model  $F ( 9,879, p<<0.001)$ , gender and income exhibited significant relationships with interpersonal conflict, however age didn't exhibit significant relationships with interpersonal conflict. In the second step of the regression model  $F (53,178 p<0.001)$ , gender, income and quantative work load exhibited significant relationships with interpersonal conflict, however job satisfaction and age didn't exhibit significant relationships.

The result of this study showed that quantative workload and sector are important contextual factor that affect interpersonal conflict. Employees working in heavy sectors with heavy workloads are more likely to conflict with each other. However results showed that job satisfaction does not predict interpersonal conflict in Turkish context. Regarding individual characteristics, interpersonal conflict is higher among male employees rather than females. This result also supported recent studies that indicated that females are less likely to conflict (Todd-Mancillas & Rossi, 1985; Offerman & Beil, 1992). Employees who have higher income are more likely to conflict. Age is not a significant predictor of interpersonal conflict.

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