



# Personality, face concern, and interpersonal conflict resolution styles: A case of Iranian college students



Mohammad Aliakbari\*, Majid Amiri

English Department, Ilam University, P.O. Box 69315-516, Ilam, Iran

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## ABSTRACT

This study tries to examine how personality might interact with face concern to predict individuals' conflict style preference and how the degree of formality may impact the predictive function of each of these variables. Two formal and informal conflict situations were considered to check the style preference of 218 Iranian college students. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to check the predictive power of personality and face concern in each situation. The findings indicated a stronger personality prediction in formal situations but a stronger face concern prediction in informal situations. The results also showed some support for the interplay of certain aspects of personality and face concern.

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## 1. Introduction

Conflict is an unavoidable phenomenon which can happen in communicative situations where there is more than one party engaged (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Conflict is defined as “a felt struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or over differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011, p. 11).

If managed properly, a conflict can strengthen the relationships among individuals, bear positive and constructive outcomes, increase efficiency and lead to efficacious developmental change (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, & Takai, 2000; Park & Antonioni, 2007). These benefits of successful and proper conflict resolution have prompted research on the handling styles which individuals tend to use during a conflict and also the antecedents which can predict these styles.

The differences in conflict handling preferences of the involved parties can be explained via dispositional and situational views (Barbuto, Phipps, & Xu, 2010; Park & Antonioni, 2007). The former deals with conflict styles at a trait level and looks for its antecedents, whereas the situational perspective addresses conflict styles at a state level and targets various situations which may call miscellaneous styles of conflict resolution.

Apart from these two perspectives, the cultural notion of face has casted some new light on the complexities of interpersonal conflict

resolution. According to face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005), face concerns and facework behaviors, mainly affected and shaped by certain cultural- and individual-level variables, can function in accord with the styles that people are prone to employ during a conflict (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

Despite their lack of unanimity (Barbuto et al., 2010), each view has given due weight to certain determinants as predictors of individuals' conflict style preference and has solved conflict style preference puzzle in its own way. By investigating the single and interactive effects of both personality and face concern on individuals' preference for certain styles in two formal and informal situations during an interpersonal conflict, the current study is an attempt to present an integrative image of the effect of these antecedents with more clarity.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Conflict resolution styles

Conflict styles at the interpersonal level denote an overall picture of an individual's general and consistent disposition or orientation toward conflict (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 1997) which can vary from person to person.

Kilmann and Thomas model (1977), founded on the work of Blake and Mouton (1964), is one of the most widely accepted and well-acknowledged frameworks of conflict styles. This framework revolves around two primary notions of *assertiveness*, the extent that individuals try to meet their own concern and *cooperativeness*, the extent that they try to meet others' concern.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [maliakbari@hotmail.com](mailto:maliakbari@hotmail.com), [maliakbari@mail.ilam.ac.ir](mailto:maliakbari@mail.ilam.ac.ir) (M. Aliakbari), [majidamiri7@gmail.com](mailto:majidamiri7@gmail.com) (M. Amiri).

Based on this model, five distinct conflict styles are generated through the combination of these two notions: *avoidance*, which is devoid of either the individuals' assertiveness or cooperativeness, *competition*, which is characterized by the individuals' high assertiveness and low cooperativeness, *accommodation*, which is devoid of the individuals' assertiveness while entailing the individuals' high cooperativeness, *compromise*, which is a mediatory conflict style featuring a relative degree of both assertiveness and cooperativeness on the part of the individuals and *collaboration*, which is a conflict style entailing both a relative high degree of assertiveness and cooperativeness on the part of engaged individuals.

## 2.2. Personality and conflict resolution styles

The Five Factor Model or the Big Five is one of the most widely recognized models which have provided invaluable information about personality differences affecting conflict styles. The model has been recurrently applied in recent interpersonal conflict research (Antonioni, 1998; Moberg, 2001; Park & Antonioni, 2007; Barbuto et al., 2010). It encompasses five independent scales: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness.

Neuroticism is a personality tendency tantamount to anxiety, embarrassment, depression and emotional instability. These characteristics of neurotics is said to be congruent with certain conflict styles such as competition and avoidance (Antonioni, 1998). Extraversion, on the other hand is synonymous with assertiveness, as extraverts have an inclination for obtaining rewards (Park & Antonioni, 2007). Competition and collaboration seem to be associated with extraversion. Apart from these two styles, other studies have reported compromise as another preferred conflict style for these individuals (Moberg, 2001). The extraverts are less likely to prefer accommodation and avoidance which demand a low level of assertiveness.

Openness is a personality dimension associated with adventure, thoughtfulness, imagination, receptiveness, variety and originality (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Conflict styles such as collaboration or accommodation are predicted for this group of individuals. Correspondingly competition and avoidance are the two styles which seem to be incongruent with people possessing this personality type.

Responsibility, discipline, perseverance, determination and integrity are some of the known characteristics of conscientious people (Park & Antonioni, 2007; Costa & McCrae, 1985). These inclinations are consistent with conflict styles such as competition where individuals seek winning in any challenging situation (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Moberg, 2001). This tendency may be inconsistent with conflict styles of avoidance or accommodation (Park & Antonioni, 2007; Moberg, 2001; Antonioni, 1998). However, integrity may function differently for this group of people and make them pursue the goals of others as well as their own during conflicts (Park & Antonioni, 2007). This inclination is closely related to collaboration conflict style.

Agreeable people are known for being warm, trusting, lenient, cooperative and sympathetic (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Based on these general attributes, avoidance, accommodation, collaboration (Antonioni, 1998) and compromising (Moberg, 2001) are some of the styles that agreeable people are more likely to prefer when they are involved in conflict situations.

## 2.3. Face concerns and conflict resolution styles

Face-negotiation theory is one of the theoretical approaches which cover face concern as a constituent. The theory takes face as an elucidative mechanism for treating various conflict resolution styles or behaviors (Oetzel et al., 2000). Face in this theory denotes "an individual's claimed sense of positive image" (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003) which can be saved, maintained, protected or lost in different communicative situations (Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Ting-Toomey (1988) elaborates on the conceptual relationship between cultural variability, individual variability, face concerns, and conflict styles. Conflict styles can be a reflection of the individuals' face concern and facework behaviors (Oetzel et al., 2000).

Based upon the locus of face or the degree of concern for yourself or others during a conflict, face concern is categorized into self-face or other-face. Self-face is defined as the concern for a person's own image than any other image and is under the influence of individualistic values, while other-face is the concern for the others' image and is influenced by collectivistic values (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Both of these dimensions can affect the individuals' interpersonal encounters, conflicts or any other communication threats (Northouse, 2011).

The locus of face seems to be closely in accord with the two notions of assertiveness and cooperativeness upon which Kilmann and Thomas model is founded (Oetzel et al., 2000). They all address the degree of concern for self or other's face or interest. Research shows that self-face concern and conflict styles such as competition are closely associated due to the fact that both of them stress one's own satisfaction rather than others' (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Oetzel et al., 2003; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). On the other hand, other-face concern is anticipated to be closely consistent with styles such as avoidance because the satisfaction of others' interest is the priority for those who possess this face orientation (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Collaboration is consistent with both face concerns (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) because it involves the satisfaction of interest for both involved parties. Accommodation and compromise are associated with other-face concerns (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991).

## 3. The current study

Previous studies on predictors of conflict style have either focused on the effect of dispositional/situational factors on the individuals' style preference or emphasized the cultural concept of face as a mechanism to explain the complexities of interpersonal conflicts.

The present study attempts to investigate the possible linkage between personality traits, face concern dimensions and conflict styles. Also, the present study attempts to examine the effect of formality, as a situational factor, on the individuals' preference for different styles and also its effect on the single and interactive predictive mechanism of face and personality. More specifically, the present study addressed the following research questions:

Is there a difference between individual's preference for certain conflict styles in formal and informal situations? If yes, does this difference affect the way that personality and face concerns predict different conflict styles?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

218 undergraduate college students from two universities in Ilam, Iran constituted the participants of the study studying a variety of disciplines (Engineering, Literature/Humanities and Agriculture). They comprised 132 female and 86 male students with their age ranging from 18 to 22. Since students with diverse sociocultural backgrounds attend universities and live in dormitories, we hypothesize that the context of college and dormitory could be a perfect locus of various formal and informal interactions which in turn may cause interpersonal conflicts to happen between these students.

### 4.2. Instrument and procedure

For each of the inventories used in this study, a translated version was used. The items of each inventory were first translated into Persian and then were back translated to ensure the conceptual equivalence of

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