

Emotional intelligence and personality predict conflict management style: examining relationships and factor structures

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management style, controlling for the “big five” personalities of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism, as well as cognitive intelligence. It also examined the factor structure underlying the five subscales of the Bar-On (1997) *Emotional Quotient Inventory*, the *NEO-Five Factor Inventory* (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and the *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal* (Pearson, Inc., 2008). Results indicated that the emotional intelligence subscales loaded on different factors than the “big five” personalities and the *Watson-Glaser* score, and that emotional intelligence did predict conflict management style when controlling for the “big five” personalities. Results are discussed with implications towards management and leadership in the domain of effective conflict management.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Emotional Intelligence, Personality, Cognitive Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

The management of conflict is an issue in many organizations, and Baron (1990) has argued that “organizational conflict is an important topic for both managers and scientists interested in understanding the nature of organizational behavior and organizational processes” (p. 198). While many consider conflict a negative, it can, in fact, prove beneficial. The key is the management of conflict, and the application of the appropriate conflict management style to the appropriate situation (Rahim, 2011).

Rahim (2011) outlines five conflict management styles, based on a five-factor model first introduced by Rahim and Bonoma (1979). The first style included under this model is the Integrating Style, and it is characterized by an open exchange of information in which innovative solutions to a problem might be attained. The Obliging Style is characterized by a greater attempt to accommodate the concerns of the other party, over one’s own. The Dominating Style is characterized by a “win at all costs” mentality. The Avoiding Style is characterized as a passive approach in which the conflict is evaded and no resolution typically takes place. The fifth style, Compromising, has been characterized as involving a “give and take, whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision” (Rahim & Psenicka, 2001, p. 307).

A study by Jehn (1995) suggested that “conflict is beneficial, as it stimulates discussion and debate, which helps groups to attain higher levels of performance” (Rahim, 2001, p. 77). Similarly, a study by Jordan and Troth (2004) found that emotional intelligence of team members predicted performance on a team problem solving task. Rahim (2001) argues, however, it must be substantive conflict (i.e., task or issue related); otherwise, it potentially “limits info-processing ability and cognitive functioning of the group” and “diminishes group loyalty, work group commitment, intent to stay...and satisfaction” (Rahim, 2001, p. 76).

Rahim (2001) and Rahim and Psenicka (2002) have argued that appropriate conflict management styles can lead to enhanced learning throughout the organization. Likewise, Kohlrieser (2006) has suggested that “conflict must be seen as a challenge, a problem to be solved, an opportunity, and, in that sense, something positive” (p. 100). Kohlrieser goes further, arguing that “in business terms, management must encourage a climate of trust and openness in which people feel it is safe to raise questions and concerns without fear of the consequences. If this climate does not exist, the concerns will...result in tension and other disruptive behaviors” (p. 119).

In order to establish an organizational culture in which communication and decision making is effective, Kohlrieser (2006) further argued that “dealing with conflict means attention must be paid to the relationships as well as to the goals” (p. 112). Similarly, Roberto (2005), in his book, *Why Great Leaders Don’t Take Yes for an Answer*, highlights the role of good conflict management in creating a culture where ideas are openly discussed, debated and effectively communicated in order to enhance decision making. Because of this strong emphasis on communication and relationships, it’s logical to propose that emotional intelligence might be related to one’s conflict management style. Indeed, a study conducted by Jordan and Troth (2004) used the *Workgroup Emotional Intelligence Profile – Version 6* (Jordan, 2000) and found significant, positive relationships between emotional intelligence and the integrating conflict management style, as well as team performance on a problem solving task.

Godse and Thingujam (2010) also examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management, but they controlled for the “big five” personalities (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism). The authors found a

significant relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management, when controlling for personality. Their sample included 81 information technology professionals in India. The age range of the participants was 21-33 years. The authors used Palmer and Stough's (2001) workplace version of the *Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Test* (SUEIT) to measure the following five subscales: emotional recognition and expression, understanding emotions external, emotions direct cognition, emotional management, and emotional control. The study also used the *NEO-Five Factor Inventory* (NEO-FFI) (Costa & McCrae, 1992) to measure personality along the five dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Finally, Rahim's (1983) *Organizational Conflict Inventory-II* (ROCI-II) Form C was used to measure the five interpersonal conflict management styles of integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising among peers.

When controlling for all five dimensions of personality, they found a significant positive partial correlation between understanding emotions external and the integrating conflict management style ($r_p = .29, p < .02$).

While the roots of emotional intelligence can be traced back to Thorndyke's (1920) concept of social intelligence, modern emotional intelligence (EI) theory first entered academic discussions with Salovey and Mayer (1990) and was popularized by Goleman in 1995. The concept of EI holds a great deal of appeal to scholars of leadership theory, particularly with respect to transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) because of this theory's concentration on the personal and ethical relationship between the leader and follower. In fact, Harms and Crede (2010) highlight that "noted experts in the field... argue that elements of EI... are the core underpinnings of visionary or transformational leadership" (p. 5). The authors further describe transformational leaders as "mentors... {who}... provide meaning, act as role models, provide challenges, evoke emotions, and foster a climate of trust" (p. 6).

The concept has since spread rapidly among academic and business circles, to the point that, as highlighted by Antonakis (2004) "consulting companies galore offer panoplies of EI tests that can ostensibly differentiate 60% to 90% of exemplary leaders from average performers" (p. 172). One can see the appeal of such a theoretical construct. Most people can relate to anecdotal evidence that supports an emotional intelligence that is unique from both cognitive intelligence and personality. The anecdotal evidence is seen in the contrast between the failing great intellect without social skills and the succeeding ordinary mind with great social skills.

Despite the mass appeal of the concept of emotional intelligence, as well as the potential for emotional intelligence to relate to various aspects of organizational behavior, several authors have questioned the validity of emotional intelligence measures in predicting human behavior. Antonakis (2004) has stated that "{EI} has been embraced by many practitioners and academicians without clear empirical support for the construct" (p. 171). Similarly, Schulte, Ree and Carretta (2011) and Schermer and Vernon (2009) provide evidence that emotional intelligence may not be unique from either the Big 5 personality factors or general cognitive intelligence ("g"). Indeed, while numerous quantitative studies support the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership (e.g., Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005), a study conducted by Carmody-Bubb, Ree, Duncan, and Green (2011) found that emotional intelligence was not able to predict transformational, transactional or passive leadership styles when controlling for personality and cognitive intelligence. However, the same study indicated that emotional intelligence was able to predict conflict management style when controlling for personality and cognitive intelligence, a finding consistent with those of Jordan and Troth (2004), as well as Godse and Thingujam (2010). The Carmody-Bubb, et al. (2011) study utilized Bar-On's (1997)

Emotional Quotient Inventory, or EQi, the *NEO-Five Factor Inventory* (NEO-FFI) (Costa & McCrae, 1992), Bass and Avolio's (1997) *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire* (MLQ) Short Form 5x, and the *Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory* (ROCI) Forms A, B and C (Rahim, 1983), as well as scores on the *Watson-Glaser Test of Critical Thinking* (Watson & Glaser, 1964, 1980) Form B.

The specific results related to conflict management indicated that, for the subscales of the Bar-On EQ-i, General Mood ($\beta = .42, r_p = -.31, p = .03$) predicted compromising with supervisors, Stress Management ($\beta = -.49, r_p = -.32, p = .03$) and General Mood ($\beta = .38, r_p = .30, p = .04$) predicted avoiding with supervisors, and Overall EQ predicted compromising with peers ($\beta = .39, r_p = .34, p = .01$). These results were preliminary however, since there was limited data available on conflict management style ($N = 57$).

While the results were preliminary, one must question why emotional intelligence might be a unique predictor for conflict management style, but not for leadership style. One could speculate that conflict management style is perhaps a particular application of leadership in which the immediate communication and relationship needs of the group dynamic must be addressed, and interpersonal skills that go beyond individual personality or intellect may be particularly important. Such skills may not be adequately measured at the level of the full range model.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

The present study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management style, while controlling for the "big five" personality factors and cognitive intelligence, utilizing a larger database of conflict management scores. In addition to Bar-On's (1997) *Emotional Quotient Inventory*, the *NEO-Five Factor Inventory* (NEO-FFI) (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and the *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal* (Pearson, Inc., 2008), the study used Rahim's (1983) *Organizational Conflict Inventory II*, ROCI Forms A, B and C.

An existing database of 285 graduate students from a small private university with locations throughout central and south Texas was used. Of the 285 records, 202 records were usable because they contained scores from the *Emotional Quotient Inventory*, or EQ-i (Bar-On, 1997) to measure emotional intelligence, Rahim's (1983) *Organizational Conflict Inventory II*, Forms A-C, to measure conflict management style, and the *NEO-Five Factor Inventory* (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1991) to measure personality.

Data were analyzed using regression analysis and factor analysis, and the following research questions were addressed: 1) What is the factor structure underlying the data from the EQi, the NEO-FFI and the Watson-Glaser? 2) Does emotional intelligence predict conflict management style, when controlling for personality and cognitive intelligence? The alternative hypothesis for the second research question was that emotional intelligence would be a significant predictor of conflict management style, even controlling for personality and cognitive intelligence.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were self-reported and indicated that age was found in 202 of the 285 records (71%). The age range for these 202 records was 26-72 years, with a mean of 43. Likewise, for gender, of the 202 records that included gender, 125 were females (62%) and 77 were males (38%). One hundred eighty six records contained data on ethnicity. The sample ethnicity was 107 Hispanic (57%), 53 White (28%), 22 Black (12%), 2 Other (1%), 1 Asian (.5%), and 1 Asian-Pacific (.5%).

Exploratory Factor Analysis: Cognitive Intelligence, Personality and Emotional Intelligence

An exploratory factor analysis using maximum likelihood method with direct oblimin rotation was conducted on the *Watson-Glaser* score, the five Personality scores (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism), and the five major subscales for Emotional Intelligence (Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Adaptability, Stress Management, General Mood) in order to examine whether or not there is a common general factor underlying emotional intelligence (as measured by the EQi), personality (as measured by NEO-FFI) and general intelligence (as measured by the *Watson-Glaser*).

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for the *Watson-Glaser*, EQi, and NEO-FFI for the sample are presented in Table 1. All tables are located in the appendix.

Factor Analysis Results

As indicated in Table 2, results of the exploratory factor analysis indicated that there were four factors extracted using the criteria of Eigenvalues greater than one and scree plot examination. The first, second and third factors accounted for 31.28%, 17.55%, and 11.04% of the variance, respectively, or 59.88% cumulatively.

As indicated in Table 3, after oblique rotation and, based on the pattern matrix, the following variables loaded on the first factor at .3 or higher (criterion recommended as a best practice by Costello & Osborne, 2005): Openness (.795), Conscientiousness (.334), Neuroticism (-1.02). On the second factor the following variables loaded at .3 or higher: Intrapersonal EQ (.742), Interpersonal EQ (.378), Stress Management (.438), Adaptability (.675), General Mood (.775). The following variables loaded on the third factor at .3 or higher: Extraversion (.839), Agreeableness (.503). Finally, the following factors loaded on the fourth factor at .3 or higher: Extraversion (.36), Stress Management (-.75), Adaptability (-.36).

Based on the factor loadings, it would appear that the personality and emotional intelligence scores, for the most part, loaded on separate factors, whereas the cognitive intelligence/critical thinking score did not load on any factor. The intercorrelations among the factors are presented in Table 4 and were generally small to moderate.

Multiple Regressions Results

Multiple regressions were conducted using as dependent variables each of the self-ratings of the five conflict management styles (Integrating, Obliging, Dominating, Avoiding, Compromising) reportedly used with superiors, subordinates, and peers. The predictor variables included the cognitive intelligence (*Watson-Glaser* critical thinking) score and the five personality scores (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism), all entered first using the stepwise regression method. The emotional intelligence scores for the five major subscales (Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Adaptability, Stress Management, General mood) were entered last into the model, using stepwise regression in a separate block.

Initial results indicated that the *Watson-Glaser* critical thinking score was not a significant predictor of any conflict management styles. Because of this, and the fact that the number of participants with data on the *Watson-Glaser*, the NEO and the ROCI was only 65-69, the multiple regressions were run again, removing the *Watson-Glaser* as a predictor.

The results of the multiple regressions using the self-reported “conflict management style used with supervisors” scores as dependent variables and the NEO-FFI and EQi scores as predictor variables are reported in Table 5.

The results of the multiple regressions using the self-reported “conflict management style used with subordinates” scores as dependent variables and the NEO-FFI and EQi scores as predictor variables are reported in Table 6.

The results of the multiple regressions using the self-reported “conflict management style used with peers” scores as dependent variables and the NEO-FFI and EQi scores as predictor variables are reported in Table 7.

In summary, Agreeableness was a significant predictor of Integrating with Supervisors and Peers, and the relationship was positive. Extraversion was a significant predictor of Dominating with Subordinates and Peers, and the relationship was positive. Neuroticism was a significant predictor of Avoiding with Peers, and the relationship was positive. Interpersonal EQ was a significant predictor of Integrating with Subordinates and Peers, as well as with Compromising with Supervisors, and these relationships were positive. Interpersonal EQ was also a significant negative predictor of Dominating with Subordinates. Adaptability was a significant predictor of Integrating with Supervisors, and the relationship was positive. Stress management was a significant predictor of Obliging with Subordinates, and Avoiding with Supervisors and Subordinates, and all relationships were negative.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Management

The implications from both the literature review and the results of the present study support the idea that emotional intelligence is a consistent predictor of conflict management. Because organizational conflict has been shown to be both a concern for middle and top

managers (Rahim, 2011) and, when managed effectively, critical to organizational growth and team performance (Rahim, 2011; Jordan & Troth, 2004), an understanding of variable that are related to effective conflict management styles should be a primary concern in the fields of management and leadership. Because emotional intelligence is one such variable, and because emotional intelligence is something that can be developed through training (Goleman, 1995), a further understanding of the theories and applications of emotional intelligence would potentially benefit any leadership and/or management training program.

Directions for Future Research

Future research will seek to gain a larger and more representative sample. If the latter cannot be readily obtained, correction for range restriction will be considered. Additionally, future studies may examine the possibility of emotional intelligence as a mediator to personality, particularly within the domain of conflict management. Because the question of shared variance between emotional intelligence and cognitive intelligence continues to be a source of debate within the literature (Schulte, et al., 2004), additional measures of cognitive intelligence will be considered. Further, because exploratory factor analyses do not offer measures of goodness-of-fit, confirmatory factor analyses will be conducted.

Limitations

The present study was limited in that the sample of data for all variables was relatively small ($N =$ approximately 100), and the sample was possibly range restricted.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
IntegratSpv	4.16	.77	102
Openness	122.84	32.08	102
Conscientiousness	139.84	17.03	102
Extraversion	135.43	18.86	102
Agreeableness	135.46	14.03	102
Neuroticism	72.25	34.45	102
IntraPerEQ	106.30	14.73	102
InterPerEQ	103.58	17.39	102
StressMgt	104.46	13.07	102
Adaptable	103.38	11.30	102
MoodEQ	107.26	10.78	102

Table 2
Factor Analysis using Maximum Likelihood with direct oblimin rotation
Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	3.44	31.28	31.28	2.04	18.58	18.58	2.07
2	1.93	17.55	48.83	2.35	21.38	39.96	2.66
3	1.22	11.04	59.88	1.25	11.34	51.29	1.57
4	1.03	9.39	69.26	.55	5.02	56.32	1.21
5	.84	7.62	76.88				
6	.72	6.55	83.43				
7	.66	6.04	89.47				
8	.42	3.82	93.29				
9	.32	2.88	96.17				
10	.28	2.55	98.72				
11	.14	1.28	100.00				

Table 3
Factor Loadings

Pattern Matrix	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Openness	.80	-.04	.02	.14
Conscientiousness	.33	.24	.19	.05
Extraversion	-.03	.14	.84	.36
Agreeableness	.07	-.04	.50	-.20
Neuroticism	-1.02	.03	.01	.09
IntraPerEQ	-.01	.74	-.05	.08
InterPerEQ	-.12	.38	.15	-.02
StressMgt	.12	.44	.08	-.75
Adaptable	.08	.68	-.11	-.36
MoodEQ	.12	.78	.06	.04
WG Total	-.08	-.02	.00	-.17

Note. $N = 102$. Boldface indicates factor loadings $> .3$

Table 4
Factor Correlation Matrix

Factor	1	2	3	4
1	1.00	.22	.21	.17
2	.22	1.00	.37	-.21
3	.21	.37	1.00	-.01
4	.17	-.21	-.01	1.00

Table 5
Conflict Management Style with Supervisor as D.V.

N = 100-102; **p* < .05. ***p* < .01

	Integrating	Obliging	Dominating	Avoiding	Compromising
Personality	Agreeable: $\Delta R^2 = .04$ $\beta = .21^*$				
Intrapersonal EQ					
Interpersonal EQ	$\Delta R^2 = .06$; $\beta = .25^*$				
Adaptability	$\Delta R^2 = .04$ $\beta = .20^*$				
Stress Mgmt	$\Delta R^2 = .11$ $\beta = -.33^{**}$				
Gen Mood					

Table 6
Conflict Management Styles with Subordinate as D.V.

	Integrating	Obliging	Dominating	Avoiding	Compromising
Personality	Extraversion $R^2\Delta = .056$; $\beta = .236^*$				
Intrapersonal EQ					
Interpersonal EQ	$R^2\Delta = .165$; $\beta = .406^{**}$		$R^2\Delta = .04$; $\beta = -.201^*$		
Adaptability	$R^2\Delta = .039$ $\beta = .200^*$				
Stress Mgmt		$R^2\Delta = .045$; $\beta = -.212^*$		$R^2\Delta = .063$; $\beta = -.25^*$	
Gen Mood					

N = 100-102; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01

Table 7
Conflict Management Styles with Peers

	Integrating	Obliging	Dominating	Avoiding	Compromising
Personality	Agreeable: $R^2\Delta = .039$; $\beta = .197^*$		Extraversion: $R^2\Delta = .066$; $\beta = .257^{**}$		Neuroticism: $R^2\Delta = .051$; $\beta = .226^*$
Intrapersonal EQ					
Interpersonal EQ	$R^2\Delta = .083$; $\beta = .288^{**}$				
Adaptability					
Stress Mgmt	$R^2\Delta = .057$; $\beta = -.239^{**}$				
Gen Mood					

N = 100-102; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01