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Examining the Mechanisms Linking Work-Related Conflicts and Employee Well-Being: A Mediation Model

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of negative affect state and relationship conflict in explaining the association between two types of work-related conflicts namely, task and process conflicts; and employee well-being. Drawing from affective events theory and social attribution theory, the study hypothesizes a mediation model in which task and process conflicts are negatively associated with employee well-being through negative affect state and relationship conflict. While examining this model, the study establishes the inter-linkage between task, process conflicts and employee well-being and identifies two pathways to explain these relationships. Based on a sample of 554 IT employees from India, the study found support for the mediation model in which negative affect state and relationship conflict mediates the relationship between two types of conflict and employee well-being. Findings of the present study contribute to the theory by extending our understanding of the effect of task and process conflicts on employee well-being and also explains how it impairs well-being. The current insights will help managers and practitioners to design interventions to mitigate the detrimental effect of task and process conflicts on employee well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on workplace conflict stated that organisations are conflict-ridden (Pondy, 1992) and the magnitude of the same is likely to increase in future due to the diverse nature of modern workforce (Shaukat, Yousaf, & Sanders, 2017). Conflicts are on the rise, more than ever before, due to high workloads, work demands, role conflict, job insecurity and misunderstandings among employees (De Dreu & Gelfland, 2008). Conflict is pervasive (Hann& Nash, 2019) and in a survey, it was found that managers spend 25 to 60 per cent of their productive time, and employees spend 2.8 hours per week approximately dealing with conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Kohlrieser, 2007). In connection with this, various empirical evidence established the repercussions of conflicts among employees and confirmed that it does have a wide range of adverse impact on both employees and organizations alike (Flink, 2015; Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018; Sonnentag, Unger, & Nägel, 2013; Suifan, Ahyari & Sweis, 2019), specifically on employee well-being. More importantly, in a workplace, employees consider conflict at work as a major stressor (Sonnentag et al., 2013) which results in stress, frustration, anxiety and poor task performance (De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Shaukat, Yousaf, & Sanders, 2017) and reduces job satisfaction (Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018).

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Despite promising progress in workplace conflict literature, several vital questions remain unanswered. First, though conflict is considered as a threat to well-being, such conclusions about the adverse effect of workplace conflict were based on a general measure of conflict (Sonnentag et al., 2013), which limits our theoretical and managerial understanding of how different types of conflicts are associated with well-being (Kuriakose, S.S. & Wilson, 2019 a; Shaukat et al., 2017; Sonnentag et al., 2013). Conflicts among employees occur over differences in the goals of a particular task, differences over how to accomplish a particular task and personality differences. Such conflicts over goals, processes and personality differences are termed as task conflict, process conflict and relationship conflict respectively (Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008; Vaux& Kirk, 2018). Previous studies have reiterated that conflicts over personality and value differences which are termed as - relationship conflicts are detrimental for individuals and organisations alike (Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018; Ismail, Richard, & Taylor, 2012; Volmer, 2015; Li et al., 2020). However, in the conflict research, studies differ about the effect of task conflict on employee well-being and process conflict have been omitted from conflict literature considering it as similar to task conflict (Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, &Trochim, 2011; Kuriakose, S.S, Jose, M.R.A,& Jose,2019 b; Greer & Jehn, 2007). This masks and limits our understanding of the effect of task and process conflict on employee well-being. Second, studies in the area of conflict literature have given more focus on examining the direct relationship between conflict and employee well-being and have given scarce attention to the underlying mechanisms through which different types of conflicts influence employee well-being (de Wit et al., 2012; Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018; Jehn, 1995, Shaukat et al., 2017). This lack of understanding of the various mechanisms through which workplace conflicts influence well-being creates difficulties for practitioners and academicians alike (Shaukat et al., 2017). Thirdly, conflict is defined as a process which arises when there is an incompatibility between two individuals (de Wit et al., 2012). However, workplace conflict has both intrapersonal (Ilies, Johnson, Judge, & Keeney, 2011; Volmer, 2015) and interpersonal repercussions (Jimmieson, Tucker, & Campbell, 2017) which could likely explain the two different pathways linking two different types of work-related conflicts and employee well-being. Thus, the quest for both the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms remains largely unexamined in this realm of research. This understanding is vital for practitioners and theorists because this may serve as potential targets for developing various workplace interventions and also enrich the theoretical understanding of the academicians.

The objectives of the study can be summarized as: Firstly, the study examines the effect of task conflict and process conflict on employee well-being. Secondly, the study examines the within-individual effect and between the individual effect of task and process conflict. Thirdly the study examines the mediating role of negative affect state as an intra-personal mechanism and relationship conflict as an inter-personal mechanism linking task, process conflict and employee well-being.

The study contributes to the existing literature and managerial practice in the following ways. Firstly, the study extends our theoretical understanding of how task and process conflicts are related to employee well-being. Secondly, the study extends our understanding of the intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of task and process conflicts. Thirdly, the study not only examines the direct association between task, process conflicts and employee well-being but also examines the various mechanisms through which two work-related conflicts influence employee well-being. Considering the inevitability of conflict and the importance of well-being for various individual level and organisational level outcomes, the findings of the study shall help managers to manage conflict and to enhance employee well-being. The findings related to the various mechanisms linking conflict types and employee well-being will help managers to design various interventions and strategies to mitigate the detrimental effect- within individual and between individual effects- of conflicts and to improve employee well-being.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Affective events theory and Attribution theory provides a useful theoretical framework to postulate the various relationships in the study. According to AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) workplace events are proximal causes of an individual's affective states and such affective experiences following various workplace events influence their perception, judgement, behaviour and well-being. The theory further states that positive work events are likely to result in positive affect state and negative work events are likely to result in negative affect state. Generally, positive affect state is positively related to positive individual-level outcomes and negative affect state is negatively related to individual-level outcomes and the theory attributes a mediating role to individual affective states. Building on these tenets of the AET, the study postulates that workplace conflicts such as task and process conflicts are adverse work events and results in negative affect state and this negative affect state mediates the relationship between the two types of conflict and employee well-being.

According to Attribution Theory (Harvey & Weary, 1985; Heider, 1958), when employees work together, they continuously monitor and interpret one another's motivations and intentions. Generally, in the context of conflicts, employees tend to rationalize the views of other employees by making attributions about them (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Such attributions may be innocuous. However, in the context of conflicts where disagreements are subjective and difficult to justify, such attributions can be offensive and damaging and employees may attribute that other employees are promoting their personal agenda and playing politics (Mooney, Holahan & Amason, 2007). Such offensive and damaging attributions regarding conflicts can escalate disagreements, distrust and reprisal which eventually leads to full-blown relationship conflict among employees (Creed & Miles, 1996; Zand, 1972). Building on the basic tenets of attribution theory, the study postulates that task and process conflicts among employees can result in relationship conflict and relationship conflict mediates the association between the two types of conflict and employee well-being.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

TASK, PROCESS CONFLICTS AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Task conflicts among employees about the goals of the task are generally upsetting and stressful to the employees (Jimmieson et al., 2017), as it is always associated with annoyance, tension and animosity (Jehn, 1995). Task conflicts obstruct the individual's goal accomplishment (Barki & Hartwick, 2004) and threaten the goal of having harmonious relationships with co-workers (Fiske, 1992) and employees appraise task conflicts as social stressors (Bruk-Lee, Nixon, & Spector, 2013). When employee's goal-oriented actions are obstructed by task conflicts, it results in adverse thoughts and feelings which are pre-requisites for stress (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2013; Spector &Bruk-Lee, 2008). Task conflicts disrupt employee's routine activities (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) and increase their cognitive load (Carnevale & Probst, 1998) which results in negative reaction and negative attitude (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012). Few authors have stated that high levels of task conflict are negatively related to job satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Amason, 1996; Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Ragin, 1986). Dissatisfaction with one's job is used as an indicator of the lowered state of well-being (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013). Task conflicts result in tension and fatigue among employees (De Dreu, Dierendonck & Best-Waldhober, 2005) and hence it is likely to adversely influence employee well-being. Task conflicts are additional job-related demand on an employee's routine work activity and require additional time and cognitive effort to reach an amicable solution to the conflict situation (Sonnentag et al., 2013). This is likely to demotivate employees in the process (Marineau & Labianca, 2010) and reduces goal clarity (Jehn and Chatman,

2000; Yang and Mossholder, 2004). Besides, extra time spent to manage task conflict reduces the available time to perform the task and impairs task accomplishment. Generally, lack of time to perform a task and impaired task accomplishment is negatively related to well-being (Crawford, Lepine & Rich, 2010; De Lange, Taris, Kompier & Houtman, 2003). Further task conflicts require considerable cognitive activities such as planning, designing tactics, assessing and implementing strategies which divert the attentional resource for the additional tasks (Sonnentag et al., 2013). As a result, employees will have lesser cognitive resources for coping (Carnevale&Probst,1998) and coping is vital to deal with stressors and for maintaining well-being (De Rijk, Blanc, Schaufeli& De Jonge, 1998). Hence, it is logical to postulate that task conflicts pose a threat to employee well-being. Building on the above arguments the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: *Task conflict at work negatively influences employee well-being*

Process conflicts which are related to the logistical accomplishment of a task are considered as the most long-lasting conflict among employees (Chan, Sit & Lau, 2014; Greer, Jehn and Mannix, 2008). Greer and Dannals (2017) established that process conflict leads to create stronger and long-lasting negative outcomes. Process conflict diminishes the perception of creativity (Dirks & Parks, 2003; Matsuo, 2006), and increases negative emotions such as anger and animosity (Greer & Jehn, 2007; Jehn, 1997; Jordan, Lawrence, & Troth, 2006; Passos & Caetano, 2005). Experience of process conflict, that is, the disagreement regarding who does what and disagreements about the allocation of resources, decreases satisfaction and increases uncertainty regarding task progress (Greer & Jehn, 2007) and misdirects the discussion to irrelevant matters such as members' skills and ability (Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). In a recent study, it was found that process conflicts are negatively related to employee's self-reported perceptions of their well-being (Kuriakose et al., 2019b). Process conflict has been found to diminish various individual-level outcomes such as morale, intention to remain, commitment and perceived individual performance (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999; Thatcher, Jehn & Chadwick, 1998). This may negatively influence the well-being of the individuals (Greer & Jehn, 2007). Hence, it is logical to assume that personal connotations, perceived inequity, injustice and diminished morale associated with process conflicts are likely to adversely influence the employees' perception of their well-being. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: *Process conflict at work negatively influences employee well-being.*

TASK, PROCESS CONFLICTS AND NEGATIVE AFFECT STATE

For employees, experience of task conflicts are stressful and makes them feel uncomfortable (Amason & Schweiger, 1994) which can result in the experience of various negative affect states. Amason & Schweiger (1994) stated that task conflicts are negatively related to affective outcomes. Task conflicts increase psychological strain (Dijkstra, Beersma, & Cornelissen, 2012; Dijkstra, Beersma, & Evers, 2011; Guerra, Martínez, Munduate, & Medina, 2005, Sonnentag et al., 2013) and increase negative emotions and adversely affect one's sense of self, self-esteem and self-worth (De Dreu et al., 2005, Frone, 2000, Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). Jehn (1997), stated that task conflicts are often associated with negative affect states such as annoyance, hatred and animosity. Experience of task conflicts are often perceived as a threat to their goal accomplishment or rather hinders them on their way to achieve their goals (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2006) which results in frustration, anger, anxiety and depression within the individual (Todorova, Bear & Weingart,2014). Cognitive criticism and critical evaluation related to task conflicts are likely to be considered as a threat to self-conceptions and result in negative affective reactions (Baron, 1990). Hence, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

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Hypothesis 3: Task conflict at work is positively related to negative affect state

Employees consider process conflicts as a negative work event (Kuriakose et al., 2019b), adversely assessing their skills and abilities. Process conflicts are likely to result in negative emotions within the individual, as it is related to the perception of justice and equity about the allocation of resources and responsibilities among employees at work (Greer & Jehn, 2007). Hence, process conflicts result in following negative feelings and emotional states such as frustration ("Why am I not given the assignment I wanted?) (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954), resentment ("the process of task delegation is not fair") (Stearns, 1972), anger ("they always fix the meeting time without considering my convenience") (Russell, 1978), and reproach ("my co-workers are biased and they give me the worst task every time") (Allport, 1937). De Wit et al. (2012) stated that process conflicts are often associated with negative moods and emotions (de Wit et al., 2012).

Issues related to process conflicts often carry personal connotations and results in negative affect (Greer & Jehn, 2007). People often consider process conflict as a threat, which undermines their abilities to perform a particular role and negative affect may result as a threat - response to the situation (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996). Employees experience process conflict when they perceive injustice and inequity regarding the allocation of duties and resources at work, and as a result of this incompatibility among employees, they experience negative affect (Kuriakose et al., 2019). Research states that when employees perceive that the available resources to perform various tasks are insufficient, they perceive the situation as a threat and negative affect is likely to result as a threat response (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996).

Process conflicts are related to the undesired allocation of resources and unwanted assignments (Jehn, 1997) and when events take place inconsistent with what one is needed and desired, negative affect is likely to result (Roseman, Antoniou, & Jose, 1996). Employees consider process conflict as a negative work event (Kuriakose et al., 2019b). Building on Affective events theory it can be assumed that process conflict evokes negative affect state. Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), states that workplace events are antecedents of an individual's affective state. Considering process conflict as a negative work event, negative affect is likely to result. In brief, misattributions, personal connotations, inherent incompatibilities, concerns over resource allocation and role assignments associated with process conflicts may result in negative affect. Against this background the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Process conflict is positively related to negative affect state

TASK, PROCESS CONFLICT AND RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

Though task and process conflicts are purely related to the work, there are many reasons to assume that such work-related conflicts can lead to relationship conflict among employees. For instance, Baron reports that, '*often, what starts as a rational exchange of opposing views deteriorates into an emotion-laden exchange . . . in which strong negative feelings are aroused*' (1984, p. 272). Jehn and Mannix (2001), Amason and Sapienza (1997), and Simons and Peterson (2000) similarly suggest that employees have trouble distinguishing cognitive disagreements from personal attacks. Thus differences of opinion over the goals of a task or logistical accomplishment of a task are likely to be considered as personal disapproval or manifestation of a hidden agenda by employees (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Jehn, 1997). As a result, differences of opinion over goals and process related to the task are likely to become fodder for misinterpretation and misattribution, increasing the potential for others to speculate about and find reasons to distrust the motivations and agendas of their team-mates (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). As a consequence, suspicion

and distrust develop, and what started as a purely cognitive disagreement turns into a full-scale emotional… conflict' (Brehmer, 1976, p. 986).

Task conflicts interfere with the individual's goal attainment (Barki & Hartwick, 2004) and threaten the goal of having harmonious relationships with others (Fiske, 1992). While experiencing task conflict employees are likely to misattribute the intentions of others (Guenter et al., 2016; Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000) and such misattributions may lead to adverse reactions and can lead to relationship conflict (De wit et al., 2012; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Task conflicts are associated with intensive disagreements among employees, and they consider such conflict-related behaviours as actions of disrespect (Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2016). Employees may perceive task conflicts as a personal insult and an effort to embarrass them (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). When they feel their behaviours are considered by other colleagues as negative, they may reciprocate by initiating a destructive reinforcement cycle which further amplifies the conflict (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) and may lead to relationship conflict. Though task conflict is cognitive at its core, cognitive criticism associated with task conflicts are likely to be considered as personal disapproval (Amason, 1996) and may lead to relationship conflict. This is because employees tend to consider any stand they take in task conflict as a part of their self-concept (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005) and any opposition to such stand is considered as a threat to an individual's self-concept and ego. To protect their self-concept and ego, they react in a defensive and hostile manner (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005; De Wit et al., 2012). Such defensive and hostile behaviour increases animosity among employees and can lead to relationship conflict (Guenter et al., 2016). Hence, it is logical to assume that task conflicts result in relationship conflict among employees. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5: *Task conflict at work is positively related to relationship conflict.*

Process conflict at the workplace which is related to logistical and delegation issues are often associated with arguments and interpersonal tensions among employees (Kuriakose et al., 2019b). Process conflicts are adverse work events threatening individual needs, social harmony and smooth functioning of human resource. There are various reasons to assume that process conflicts are likely to result in relationship conflict among employees. Generally, process conflicts are detrimental for group functioning (Greer et al., 2008), viability (Thatcher, Jehn & Zanutto, 2003; Vodosek, 2007) and reduce cohesion among employees. Issues related to process conflicts are linked to personal skills and abilities. This is likely to result in animosity and escalate to relationship conflict among employees (Greer and Jehn, 2007). Process conflict issues are related to an individual's skills and abilities and negative assessment of an individual's skills and abilities by others (Behfar et al., 2011). When employees attribute issues related to process conflict to such interpersonal roots, relationship conflicts are likely to result. This is because, according to attribution theory, such attributions are likely to convert work-related conflicts to relationship conflict (Weiner, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Further, process conflict occurs when employees feel that there exists injustice and inequity in the resource and task allocation (Greer & Jehn, 2007). When employees feel that they are not given the right resource and the right job, this is likely to create suspicion about co-workers and supervisors. This further deteriorates the relationship quality and can lead to relationship conflict among employees. Against this background the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 6: *Process conflict at work is positively related to relationship conflict.*

RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT, NEGATIVE AFFECT AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Relationship conflict arises from non-work matters such as personality and value differences (Lu et al., 2011; Martínez-Moreno, González-Navarro, Zornoza, & Ripoll, 2009; Shaukat et al., 2017). Relationship conflicts are associated with identity-oriented issues, where personal beliefs and values come into play (Kuriakose et al., 2019). There is a consensus among researchers that relationship conflict at the workplace is harmful to individuals and groups alike (Meier, Gross, Spector & Semmer, 2013). Relationship conflicts are considered as social stressors and employees experiencing social stressors exhibit adverse behaviour and attitudes which are detrimental for well-being (Bruk-Lee, Nixon & Spector, 2013). Employees' affective responses to relationship conflict result in physical strain (Greenglass, Fiksenbaum & Burke, 1996), somatic symptoms such as headaches and digestive disorders (Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger & Spector, 2011). There is empirical evidence establishing relationship conflicts are positively related to indicators of impaired well-being like emotional exhaustion and emotional instability (Dijkstra, De Dreu, Evers& Van Dierendonck, 2009; Vasquez, Kälin, Otto, Sadlowski & Kottwitz, 2019; Wright & Loving, 2011). Relationship conflicts are considered more interpersonal and emotional (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003,) and indicate a greater threat to one's identity and self-esteem (De Dreu et al., 2005). Since negative job-related experiences that are related to one 's self will have more adverse detrimental outcomes (Semmer, Tschan, Meier, Facchin & Jacobschagen, 2010). Relationship conflicts are related to destructive interpersonal relationships at the workplace and are related to physical ill-health and psychological strain (Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018). Relationship conflicts are positively related to burn out and various psychological problems (Dijkstra et al., 2009). Individuals like to maintain a positive identity (Fiske, 1992), as positive and lasting interpersonal relationships are essential to maintain a positive social identity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and they try to be liked by other individuals (Dijkstraet al., 2011). Relationship conflicts are a threat to this need of the individuals and likely to impair well-being (Sonnentag et al., 2013). Hence, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 7: Relationship conflict at work negatively influences employee well-being.*

Individuals' affective state influences their health and well-being (being (Gross, Uusberg & Uusberg, 2019). Generally, negative affect state is inversely related to health and wellness. Watson, Clark & Tellegen (1988) stated that it is the negative affect, not positive affect which is related to health problems and other adverse individual-level outcomes. Empirical evidence suggests that both trait and negative state affect is related to high levels of somatic complaints (Friedman & Booth-Kewley, 1987; Watson & Pennebaker, 1989). But there is experimental evidence relating state negative affect and health complaints independent of trait negative affect (Cohen, Doyle & Soner,1995). Negative affect reduces the individual's rational and instrumental reasoning and results in irrational decisions and behaviours (Brief & Weiss,2002) which may result in psychological and physical strain.

In two different experimental studies after manipulating negative mood participants reported more number of self-reported symptoms of illness (Croyle & Uretsky, 1987; Salovey & Birnbaum, 1989). It was found that negative affect state adversely influences immune systems (Herbert & Cohen, 1993) and increases respiratory illness (Cohen, Tyrrell & Smith, 1993). Negative affect state reduces the coping ability, and control over the situation (Archer, Adrianson, Plancak & Karlsson, 2007; George & Brief, 1992) and lack of coping ability and lack of control may adversely influence employee well-being. Individuals tend to adopt improper coping strategies when they experience negative affect (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). Since coping is important for well-being, improper coping as a result of negative affect state may diminish well-being. The prevalence of negative affect results in greater levels of stress, depression, poor psychological health, well-being and low self-esteem (Cohen, Doyle, Turner,

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Alper & Skoner, 2003). Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropnzano, 1996) also states that when individuals experience negative affective states, it adversely influences their perception, attitude and behaviours. In line with AET and other relevant empirical evidence, the study postulates an inverse relationship between negative affect state and employee well-being. Hence, in this background the following hypothesis is proposed:

> **Hypothesis 8:** *Negative affect state is negatively related to employee well-being*

AET AND THE MEDIATING ROLE OF NEGATIVE AFFECT STATE

Drawing from affective events theory (Weiss & Cropnzano, 1996) and other related empirical evidence the study proposes the mediating role of negative affect state in the relationship between task, process conflicts and employee well-being. Studies with a general measure of conflict have established that conflict increases negative affect state within the individual (e g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Ilies et al., 2011; Glasø, Vie, Holmdal, & Einarsen, 2011). Moreover, previous research in the work and non-work domains have established that negative affect state is negatively related to various indicators of employee well-being such as mental health and physical health. AET states that workplace events elicit affective states within the individual and affective state influences their judgements of well-being. AET attributes a mediating role to such affective states. Considering task and process conflict as negative events that obstruct an individual's goal accomplishment (Kuriakose et al, 2019; Sonnentag et al., 2013), it is likely to result in negative affect state, which in turn impairs well-being. Various studies have established the mediating role of negative affect state in the workplace context (Glasø, Vie, Holmdal, & Einarsen, 2011; Kelloway, Barling, & Shah, 1993; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Volmer, Niessen, Binnewies, & Sonnentag, 2012). Hence, building on AET and various related evidence the study proposes the following hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 9:** *Association between task conflict and employee well-being is mediated by negative affect state.*

> **Hypothesis 10:** *Association between process conflict and employee well-being is mediated by negative affect state.*

ATTRIBUTION THEORY AND THE MEDIATING ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

The study proposes the mediating role of relationship conflict in the association between work-related conflicts and employee well-being with the aid of attribution theory (Harvey & Weary, 1985; Heider, 1958) and other related empirical evidence. According to attribution theory (Harvey & Weary, 1985; Heider, 1958), employees make innocuous attribution about when they work together, but in the context of conflicts such attributions become subjective and employees make wrong attributions and become suspicious of other's actions and can escalate into relationship conflict. Though task and process conflicts are work-related such wrong attributions about others can lead to relationship conflict among employees. Previous research findings have established that relationship conflicts are a threat to employee well-being (Kuriakose et al., 2019c, Shaukat et al., 2017, Volmer et al., 2012). Assuming this positive relationship between task, process conflicts and relationship conflict and inverse association between relationship conflict and employee well-being, it is logical to assume that relationship conflict is likely to be the mediating mechanism linking two types of work-related conflicts and employee well-being. Further various empirical evidence have established the mediating role of relationship conflict in the association between various work-related factors and various levels of

outcomes such as team member satisfaction (Hansen, 2015), performance, OCB, creativity (Bai, Han & Harms, 2016) and workplace ostracism. Thus, building on the attribution theory and various empirical evidence the study assumes the mediating role of relationship conflict in the association between two work-related conflicts and employee well-being. In this context the following hypotheses are proposed:

> *Hypothesis 11: Association between task conflict and employee well-being is mediated by relationship conflict.*

> *Hypothesis 12: Association between process conflict and employee well-being is mediated by relationship conflict.*
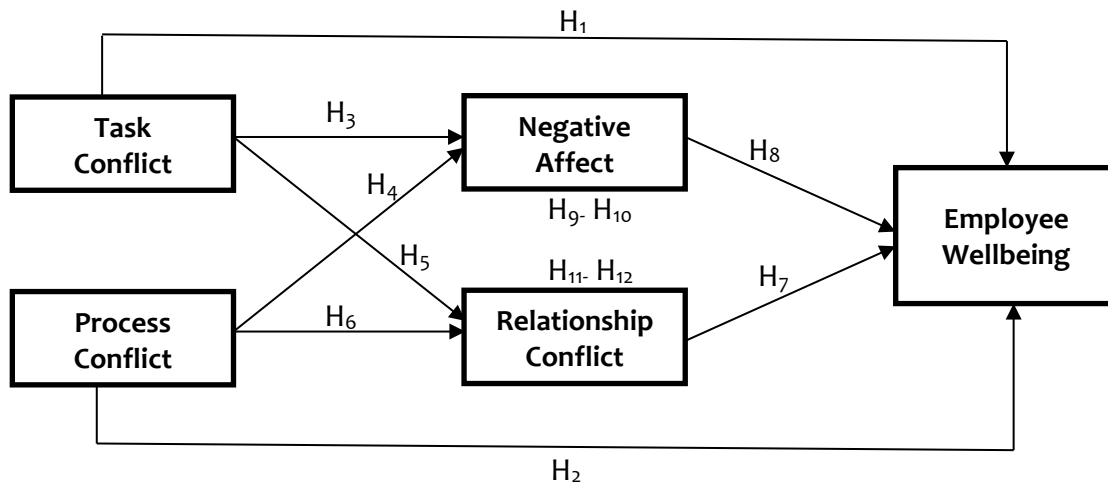
Note: H_9: task conflict → negative affect → employee wellbeing, H_{10}: process conflict → negative affect → employee wellbeing, H_{11}: task conflict → relationship conflict → employee wellbeing, H_{12}: process conflict → relationship conflict → employee wellbeing

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Responses were collected using a structured questionnaire survey from employees working in IT firms in India. Since the study relied on self-report and responses were collected from a single source and on a particular time, the study looked at the potential occurrence of Common Method Bias. To minimize the presence of CMB, the study followed the procedural techniques suggested by (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Further, in the questionnaire survey, a covering letter explaining the purpose of the study and the participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity. Besides this, they were informed that there are no right and wrong answers and were requested to provide their true experiences. To avoid participants to assume illusory relationships, the measures were randomly ordered in the questionnaire.

As part of the data collection procedure, 1000 questionnaires were distributed and received 620 responses on time. Out of the 620, 66 responses were removed during the analysis phase due to a large number of missing values, and finally, 554 responses were used for final analysis (55.4 % response rate). Among the 554 respondents, 227 were male respondents, and 227 were female respondents. The majority of the participants were below the age of 30, 59.7 % of the respondents were from middle-

level management, 31 % were from junior level management, and 9.2 % were from top-level management.

MEASURES

CONFLICT TYPES

Workplace conflict types such as task, relationship and process conflicts were measured using Extended Intra-group Conflict Scale (Jehn et al., 2008). The scale consists of 14 items, in this, 6 items for task conflict and 4 items each for relationship and process conflicts. Participants were asked to report how often they experienced different types of conflict at work on a scale ranging from 1 *(never)* to 5 *(very much)*. Sample items are: task conflict- "we had task-related disagreements", process conflict- "we disagreed about the process to get the work done", relationship conflict- "we fought about non-work things". The reliability check using Cronbach's alpha for task, process and relationship conflicts were reported as 0.93, 0.91 and 0.95, respectively.

NEGATIVE AFFECT STATE

Negative affect state was measured with ten items from Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988). Sample items to measure negative affect state was "troubled" and "upset". Respondents were asked to indicate how often they felt each of the indicator in the last six months and responses ranged from 1*(very slightly)* to 5 *(extremely at all)*. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.93.

EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

The study operationalized employee well-being as employees' self-reported perception of their mental health and physical health. It was measured using two subscales from the occupational stress indicator (Evers, Frese, & Cooper, 2000). Each scale consists of seven items to measure mental health and physical health. Sample items were: mental health- "are there times at work when you feel so frustrated that you think to yourself that 'life is all really too much effort?"; physical health- "feeling unaccountably tired". Respondents were asked to indicate how often they felt each of the indicators in the last six months and responses ranged from 1 *(never)* to 5 *(always)*. Cronbach's alpha of mental health scale was 0.93 and of physical health was 0.92.

CONTROL VARIABLES

For all analyses, age and gender were controlled, because in previous studies the researchers have established that age and gender influences employee well-being (e.g., Siu, Spector, Cooper, & Donald, 2001).

DATA ANALYSIS

The study followed a two-stage data analysis strategy. In the first stage, the study tested the psychometric properties of the scale and ensured that the scales used in the study are valid and reliable, and also the measurement is free from common method bias. In the second stage, the study tested the various postulated relationships in the study, such as the main effect and the mediation analysis.

TEST OF COMMON METHOD BIAS (CMB) AND CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

Before proceeding with the CMB test, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to check the unidimensionality of the scales. From the analysis, it was found that all the items loaded as per the conceptualisation and no cross-loadings were reported. To ensure that the study is free from Common Method Bias (CMB), Harman's Single factor test was performed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The basic assumption of Harman's single factor test is that if CMB is present when factor analysis is performed, a single factor will explain more than 50 per cent of the total variance. From the analysis, it was found that while forcing all the study items to a single factor, the extracted factor explained only 32.96 per cent, which is less than 50 per cent which infers that the study scale measures are free from common method bias.

Before the formal test of hypotheses, confirmatory factor analysis was performed using IBM AMOS to examine the psychometric properties of all the hypothesized latent construct measures. From the analysis, the study found that the overall measurement model fits the data well (χ^2/DF = 2.28, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.029). Further, the convergent validity and reliability were examined using construct reliability coefficients (ranging from 0.92 to 0.98), item-to-construct loadings (ranging from 0.73 to 0.96), and average variance extracted (AVE) values (ranging from 0.624 to 0.90), and all these reported as satisfactory. All these coefficients were above the recommended threshold levels, thus confirmed convergent validity and reliability of the scale measures (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). Additionally, the study examined discriminant validity for all constructs following Fornell & Larcker (1981), and the results supported that in all cases AVE values exceeded corresponding squared correlations for its construct pairs. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the study variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
TC	2.69	.98	(.95)					
RC	2.54	1.31	.182**	(.95)				
PC	2.41	.89	.306**	.161**	(.91)			
NA	2.18	.85	.327**	.393**	.369**	(.93)		
MH	3.57	.74	-.241**	-.327**	-.275**	-.440**	(.90)	
PH	3.77	.85	-.140**	-.305**	-.294**	-.394**	.546**	(.93)

Notes - Task Conflict; RC- Relationship Conflict; PC- Process Conflict; NA- Negative Affect state; PH- Physical Health; Mental Health; M- Mean; SD- Standard Deviation; ** Correlation significant at the .01 level; * Correlation significant at the .05 level; Values in the parenthesis represent Cronbach's Alpha coefficient

HYPOTHESES TESTING

MAIN EFFECT RESULTS

All the proposed hypotheses were tested through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using IBM AMOS 24. Before the mediation analysis, the study tested the direct effects (*Hypothesis 1 to hypothesis 8*) shown in the conceptual model. From the analysis, it was found that both task conflicts (β = -0.15, SE=.05 p <.001) and process conflicts (β = -0.34, SE=.05, p <.001) were inversely related to employee well-being. It was also found that both task conflict (β = 0.23, SE=.04, p <.001) and process conflict (β = 0.31, SE=.05, p <.001) were significantly related to negative affect state. Further, it was found that both task conflict (β =.15, SE=.02 p <.001).) and process conflict (β =0.13, SE=.02 p <.001) were positively related to relationship conflict also. As predicted, it was found that negative affect state (β =-0.47, SE=.05 p <.001) and relationship conflicts (β =-0.24, SE=.05, p <.001) were also inversely related to

employee well-being. Thus, the study finds support for all these eight hypotheses and the hypotheses from 1 to 8 were accepted.

MEDIATION RESULTS

After the main effects were tested, the study proceeded with the mediation analysis and the proposed mediating variables were entered into the model. Hypothesis 9stated that negative affect state mediates the association between task conflict and employee well-being. The study found support for this assumption and established that task conflict was indirectly associated with employee well-being through negative affect state *(indirect effect = -.18, SE= .02, LLCI = -.24, ULCI = -.12, p <.001)*. Further from the analysis, it was found that after the mediating variable was entered the direct effect of task conflict on employee well-being had decreased and had become insignificant *(direct effect = -.09, SE= .05, LLCI= -.19, ULCI= -.02, p =.09)* which indicates full mediation. In hypothesis 10, the study hypothesised the mediating role of negative affect state in the relationship between process conflict and employee well-being. The study established that process conflict was indirectly associated with employee well-being through negative affect state *(indirect effect = -.194, SE= .02, LLCI= -.25, ULCI= -.01, p <.001)*. Further from the analysis, it was found that after the mediating variable was entered the direct effect of process conflict on employee well-being had decreased, but it is still significant *(direct effect = -.20, SE= .05, LLCI = -.35, ULCI= -.14, p <.001)* which indicates partial mediation. Thus, the hypotheses 9 and 10 were accepted.

In hypothesis 11, it was stated that relationship conflict mediates the relationship between task conflict and employee well-being. The study found support for this assumption and established that task conflict was indirectly associated with employee well-being through relationship conflict *(indirect effect = -.075, SE= .02, LLCI= -.15, ULCI= -.01, p <.001)*, and it was found that after the mediating variable was entered the direct effect of task conflict had decreased, but it is still significant *(direct effect = -.20, SE= .05, LLCI= -.35, ULCI= -.01, p <.001)* which indicates a partial mediation. Further in hypothesis 12, it was stated that relationship conflict mediates the association between process conflict and employee well-being. The study also finds support for this assumption. The study established that process conflict was indirectly associated with employee well-being through relationship conflict *(indirect effect = -.06, SE= .01, LLCI= -.10, ULCI= -.03, p =.001)*. Further from the analysis, it was found that after the mediating variable was entered the direct effect of process conflict had decreased, but is still significant *(direct effect = -.30, SE= .05, LLCI= -.44, ULCI= -.23, p <.001)* which indicates partial mediation. These results provide support for hypotheses 11 and 12. The results of the hypotheses testing are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Path		Estimates	SE	P values
Task Conflict → Employee Wellbeing	(H1)	-0.15	.05	<.001
Process Conflict → Employee Wellbeing	(H2)	-0.34	.05	<.001
Task Conflict → Negative Affect	(H3)	-0.23	.04	<.001
Process Conflict → Negative Affect	(H4)	-0.31	.05	<.001
Task Conflict → Relationship Conflict	(H5)	.150	.02	<.001
Process Conflict → Relationship Conflict	(H6)	.130	.02	<.001
Relationship Conflict → Employee Wellbeing	(H7)	-0.24	.05	<.001
Negative Affect → Employee Wellbeing	(H8)	-0.47	.05	<.001
Task conflict → Negative affect → Employee Wellbeing	(H9)	-0.18	.05	<.001
Process conflict → Negative affect → Employee Wellbeing	(H10)	-0.19	.02	<.001
Task conflict → Relationship conflict → Employee Wellbeing	(H11)	-0.07	.02	<.001
Process conflict → Relationship conflict → Employee Wellbeing	(H12)	-0.06	.02	<.001

DISCUSSION

The current study examines the direct effect of two types of work-related conflicts, namely, task and process conflicts on employee well-being. The study also examined the indirect effect of task and process conflicts on employee well-being through negative affect state and relationship conflict. Overall, the study finds support for the proposed model. Specifically, the study established that task and process conflicts are associated with increased negative affect state and relationship conflict. In turn, the experience of both, negative affect state and relationship conflict are negatively related to employee well-being. The study also finds support for the mediated relationships in which negative affect state and relationship conflicts are mechanisms through which task and process conflicts are associated with employee well-being. These two mechanisms can specifically be termed as intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms linking two work-related conflicts and employee well-being. In occupational psychology, it is rarely seen that studies have examined the intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms linking task, process conflicts and employee well-being (Shaukat et al., 2017). In organisations, the focus was given on interpersonal harmony and effectiveness, and intra-personal effect of conflicts got scarce attention (Ilies et al., 2011). The findings of the study extend our understanding of the effect of two types of conflict and explain the explanatory mechanisms through which both types of conflicts are associated with impaired employee well-being. These findings provide valuable insights for organisations to design interventions to reduce the detrimental effect of task and process conflicts on employee well-being which is discussed in the following paragraphs.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study extend our understanding of the complex relationship between different types of conflict at work and employee well-being. The study adds to the theory that task and process conflicts are detrimental for individuals and threatens positive relationships among employees. Though task and process conflicts are work-related, the findings of the study prove that such conflicts are detrimental to employee well-being. This proves that the differences of opinion

among employees at work in any form reduce employee well-being. This reiterates the previous study findings which have established the detrimental effect of workplace conflicts (Esbati & Korunka, 2020; Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2013). Besides the study differentiated process conflict and task conflict and established the distinct nature of process conflict. The finding that process conflicts are distinct from task conflict adds to the theory and necessitates more empirical attention considering process conflict as a distinct type of conflict. Interestingly, the relationship between process conflict and negative affect and well-being have been found stronger than task conflict which indicates that process conflicts are more detrimental to individuals. This adds to the growing number of studies which advocate for process conflict to be considered as a distinct type of conflict (Behfar et al., 2011; Greer and Dannals, 2017; Kuriakose et al., 2019b).

The study examined the within-individual effect (negative affect state) and between the individual effect (relationship conflict) of task and process conflicts. The study adds to the area of conflict literature which suggests that task and process conflicts result in strain within the employee and among the employees. This adds to our understanding of the detrimental effect of both task conflict and process conflict. The finding that both task and process conflict increases negative affect adds to the AET that employees consider task and process conflicts as negative work events. This reduces the major limitation of the AET that the theory has not explicitly listed the various work events resulting in affective experiences (Glasø et al., 2011). These findings not only increases the utility and precision of AET (Dimotakis, Scott, & Koopman, 2011) but also can be applied to other workplace functioning theories that have individual affect states at their core. The finding that task conflicts and process conflicts result in relationship conflict also adds to the conflict literature. Though there are few studies which have established that task conflicts result in relationship conflict among employees (e.g. Mooney et al., 2007; Jimmieson et al., 2017), to the best of the authors' knowledge this could be the first study which examined the association between process conflict and relationship conflict.

The findings related to the detrimental effects of negative affect state and relationship conflict among employees on their well-being reiterates the previous study findings (Sonnentag et al., 2013, Kuriakose et al., 2019b; Kuriakose et al., 2019c). The study also established the underlying mechanisms through which two work-related conflicts are associated with employee well-being namely, intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms. These findings demonstrate that the basic propositions of AET and attribution theory can be extended to predict employee well-being, by revealing how two work-related conflicts are associated with employee well-being through intrapersonal – negative affect state and interpersonal mechanisms-relationship conflict. These findings enrich the conflict literature by reducing the major limitation pointed out by many authors (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012; Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018; Shaukat et al., 2017; Kuriakose et al., 2019a) that research in the conflict literature overly focussed on the direct relationship and overlooked the various mechanisms linking conflict and various levels of outcomes.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study findings provide valuable directions for managerial practice. Considering the detrimental effect of task and process conflict on employee well-being and the importance of well-being for individuals and organisations, managers should take steps to reduce conflict and help employees to deal with these negative work events. Since modern organisations largely depend on teams and groups for achieving goals and considering the diversity of current workforce conflicts are likely to increase among employees (Morgeson, Reider, & Campion, 2005; Shaukat et al., 2017). Since workplace conflicts are positively related to burn out, fatigue (De Dreu et al., 2003, 2004), turn over intention and organisational commitment (Frone, 2000) and diminishes satisfaction, effectiveness and cohesion (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) organisations cannot neglect the occurrences of conflicts among

employees. Since conflicts diminish well-being and impaired well-being diminishes employees' work-related attitudes and positive work behaviours, conflicts are likely to affect the entire organizational functioning, if several employees are affected by conflicts. The primary action organisations can take is to make employees aware of the detrimental effects of task and process conflict on employee well-being (Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018). Since task and process conflicts are closely related to work, a proper job analysis may help to reduce the occurrences of such work-related conflicts (Hagemeister & Volmer, 2018). Johnson et al., (2006) stated that the creation of norms of openness or aligning employee's goals and rewards as cooperative instead of competitive helps to avoid conflicts among employees at the workplace.

The findings wherein both task and process conflicts increase negative affect state, provides helpful direction for managers. Researchers suggest that negative affect state has a contagion effect and hence the experience of negative affect state can impact not only conflict experiencing employees but also other employees and the entire organisation as well (Barsade & Knight, 2015; Barsade, Ramarajan & Westen, 2009). Previous research findings suggest that perception of social support at work from supervisors and co-workers reduce negative affect state associated with workplace conflicts (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Ilies et al., 2011; Kuriakose et al., 2019a). Such supportive acts from supervisors and co-workers can mitigate the detrimental effect of conflict on employee well-being and beyond (Volmer et al., 2012). Also creating trust among employees also help to reduce the detrimental effects of conflict (Khosravi, Rezvani & Ashkanasy, 2020). Hence, organisations should develop a supportive work culture at workplace by developing cooperation and trust among employees (Simons and Peterson, 2000). Further employees should be provided with training on various situational reappraisal techniques and should have trained them to focus on the positive aspects of a situation (Grandey & Diamond, 2010) which helps to reduce the negative affect state.

The study also established that task and process conflicts result in relationship conflicts and impairs well-being has vital managerial implications. Relationship conflict is detrimental not only to employee well-being but also adversely influences other individual and organisational level outcomes (De Dreu et al., 2004; Frone, 2000; Shaukat et al., 2017). In this context, the study alerts the managers the need for developing necessary interventions to reduce the detrimental effect of conflict and to enhance individual and organisational effectiveness. The mediating mechanisms established in the present study establish that intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of task and process conflicts impair well-being. This highlights that organisations should develop interventions which in turn should focus upon reducing both the intra-personal and inter-personal effect of task and process conflicts. Since conflicts and impaired well-being are associated with absenteeism, turn over and impaired performance-managers and practitioners should include the study variables in their checklist when dealing organisations with high absenteeism, turn over and impaired performance (Dijkstra et al., 2011).

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The following limitations of the study cannot be overlooked. The first limitation of the study is related to the cross-sectional nature of the study which limits the causal conclusion of the findings of the study. We cannot be sure as to whether task and process conflicts reduce well-being, or impaired well-being creates more conflicts, or the study variables mutually influence each other. Though this limitation is there in this study, the predictions and findings of the study are in line with previous research findings in conflict literature which examined the effect of conflict with a general measure on employee well-being. However, to empirically prove work-related conflicts increase relationship conflict as well as negative affect state and impair employee well-being, future studies can ideally examine the present model of the study with longitudinal and experimental research design. Such research findings provide confidence to the findings of the present study and to establish causality

patterns between the variables in the present study. The second limitation of the present study is related to the sample. Responses were collected only from one job setting which poses a question, to what extent the findings of the present study can be generalised to other job settings. Technically to generalise the findings of a study to other job settings responses have to be collected randomly from a definable population. The study has not done this and the proportion of employees with less than 30 years is relatively high. Hence to increase the external validity of the findings of the study more heterogeneous small studies employing a random selection of respondents, tasks, and times are needed (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Hence, future research studies should replicate the findings of the present study with different samples to increase the external validity of the findings.

The third limitation of the study is related to data collection. Responses were collected from a single source at a single time. This can create the problem of social desirability bias and common method concerns. Though the study has empirically established the absence of common method bias, future research with data from multiple sources can examine the proposed relationships in the study. Fourthly, the study overlooked the effect of other types of conflict and overlooked the role of moderators which can mitigate and amplify the relationships in the study. Hence, future research should examine the effect of other types of conflict and the role of dispositional and situational moderators which can influence the relationships. Finally, several studies have established a curvilinear (inverted U shape) relationship between conflict (especially task conflict) and various level of outcomes (De Dreu, 2003; Jehn, 1995). Those authors have argued that conflict can be a positive force up to a certain level (beyond that conflict become destructive) which can bring in innovation and creative ideas. However, the current study considered different types of conflict as a negative event adversely influencing employee well-being. Hence, we recommend the future studies to examine this curvilinear relationship/inverted U relationship that conflict types exert by integrating both positive and negative effects of various conflicts types on the employee outcomes, such as performance and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

In the present study, we hypothesized and found support for negative affect state and relationship conflict as mediators in the relationship between task, process conflicts and employee well-being. Our findings establish that both task and process conflicts create strain within the individual and between individuals and impairs well-being. The findings suggest that negative affect state and relationship conflicts are theoretically and practically vital within individual and between individual mechanisms to explain how task and process conflicts negatively impact employee well-being. Apart from contributing to workplace conflict literature, the study provides several significant practical implications, including directions for developing individual and organisational interventions. The study also provides direction for management practices to reduce task and process conflicts thereby to develop a happy workplace and a healthy workforce.

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