Buffering relationship conflict consequences in teams working in real organizations

Miriam Benitez
University of Málaga, Málaga, Spain, and
Francisco J. Medina and Lourdes Munduate
University of Seville, Sevilla, Spain

Abstract

Purpose – Relationship conflict has important negative organizational and personal consequences. However, papers analyzing how to buffer the negative effects of relationship conflict at work-unit level are lacking. This study aims to extend the literature by examining which specific conflict management styles used by work teams (avoiding, integrating and compromising) reduce or increase the link between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion.

Design/methodology/approach – Regression analysis was conducted using 91 teams (398 employees) from 42 hotels and 42 restaurants.

Findings – Results revealed that, as it was expected, relationship conflict was positively related to emotional exhaustion at a team level; this relationship depended on how team members handle relationship conflicts. That is, avoiding and integrating conflict management styles buffered the link between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion, whereas compromising increased this positive link.

Research limitations/implications – Organizations would include conflict management skills as a requirement for preventing negative consequences of conflict in teams, such as anxiety/depression and bullying.

Originality/value – By considering the unique perspective of team member’s shared perceptions of conflict management styles, important implications for the span of influence of collective perception of conflict on well-being have been indicated.

Keywords Relationship conflict, Collective emotional exhaustion, Conflict management styles, Work-team

Paper type Research paper

The hospitality industry (hotels and restaurants) is a high-competitive sector where employees have to work in a turbulent business environment of scarce resources, intense pressure and rapid rates of technological change. Employees are usually forced to display a positive emotional labor characterized by special attention to the customer to offer high-quality service (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009). This extreme situation has consequences for workers’ health. The more radical situation appears in three-star Michelin restaurants, the pressure of trying to earn and keep a third star is particularly severe for chefs and their teams working outside of major cities. According to Michelin, a three-star rating means that a restaurant is “worth a special journey”. So, losing a third star can be devastating for a

This study was partially funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Project Ref. PSI2015-64894-P (MINECO/FEDER)).
One of the sources of stress in the hospitality sector is relationship conflict that is caused by disagreement over personal matters among team members (Ilies et al., 2011; Jehn, 1997; Meier et al., 2014). The main explanation for this is that there is unequivocal empirical research showing that relationship conflict increases experiences of emotional exhaustion at work (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Wright and Loving, 2011) and, as a consequence, has a negative impact for employee health and team performance (Seong and Choi, 2014). In fact, it has been shown that interpersonal conflict predicts a high percentage of negative emotions, employee turnover and absenteeism (De Wit et al., 2012) and is the basis of psychological harassment and counterproductive work behavior (Leon-Pérez et al., 2014).

There is evidence that you can never completely prevent relationship conflict in teams because team members often have discrepancies about personal aspects (De Dreu, 2008). Most of the research in this topic has focused on interpersonal conflict using individual levels of analyses and analyzing projects teams, composed by students in experimental design and not in real organizations. However, in the organizational context, employees have to do the same kind of tasks daily. Moreover, they interacting with the same co-workers for longer periods promoting collective or group experiences (Benitez et al., 2012a, 2012b; Bliese and Jex, 2002). In service organizations, a single front-line employee rarely provides full service to one customer, and they mostly have to work in units involving high levels of task interdependence requiring high levels of relational coordination for the effective delivery of services to customers. As teams, they share organizational environment, rules, goals, tasks and their customers (Gittell et al., 2010). Thus, a unit level seems to be more important than an individual level to understand the effect and dynamics of service employees (receptionists and waiters). In this context, teams face the same (interpersonal) problems, which could develop a shared set of orientations and tactics for managing conflicts within their team buffering or exacerbating conflict consequences (Behfar et al., 2011).

On the other hand, team members tend to share the same context stimuli having the same supervisor, being subject to the same policies and practices and sharing similar job circumstances (Hausknecht et al., 2008). The homogenizing of work experiences among team members effect is reinforced by social exchange and interaction among them (Morgeson and Hofmann, 1999), which facilitates both social information processing within the unit (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978) and processes of emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994). As a result, the conflict management style of team members and the negative feeling, such as emotional exhaustion, are transferred from one person to another, and the tendency, consequently, is to converge in terms of collective conflict management styles and collective emotional exhaustion (Bakker et al., 2001).

Despite this reality, limited research work shows how teams, as a collective entity, respond to relationship conflict and which team responses are effective in reducing the negative effects of this conflict type on team affective reactions. Thus, the main objective of this study is to analyze how to buffer negative consequences of relationship conflict using a team-based approach in real service organizational contexts.

**Team relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion**

Emotional exhaustion refers to a feeling of being overextended and depleted of one’s physical and emotional resources at work (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Recently, researchers have begun to investigate affective linkages between team members. In this sense, Barsade (2002) demonstrated that people are continuously influencing the moods of
others. That is, over time, the emotional state of individuals and teams converges to create a “team emotion”. In line with this, Bakker et al. (2006) found evidence for a relationship between team burnout and individual burnout. That could be explained by an emotional contagion process. That is, the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, feelings and attitudes with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally (Hatfield et al., 1994). Thus, this study focuses on collective emotional exhaustion, defined as shared feelings of being overextended at work among work-unit members.

Research has shown that emotional exhaustion tends to reduce both employees’ motivation and capacity to be productive (Halbesleben and Bowler, 2007; Wright and Cropanzano, 2004). Hence, exhaustion is likely to be associated with lower levels of helping behavior and cooperation within the group. In turn, this can be expected to have a negative effect on group processes, thereby reducing the capacity of the group to provide, for example, high-quality service to customers (Taris, 2006; Taris and Schreurs, 2009). Thus, work teams’ feelings of collective emotional exhaustion have a generally negative effect on perceived service quality and performance (Bakker et al., 2002; Meier et al., 2014; Taris, 2006). Relationship conflict is currently recognized as a negative emotional component which affects work team dynamics (De Dreu, 2010; Jehn et al., 2008), increasing stress levels of team members (Friedman et al., 2000). In this sense, research has shown that relationship conflict is negatively related to well-being at work (De Dreu et al., 2004; Meier et al., 2014). The main reason for this is that the tension and frustration that appear after the conflict about personal standards or values are very hard to reduce, as they touch sensitive areas of personal identity that have been developed over one’s lifetime (Druckman, 1994). Therefore, the existence of relationship conflict within the group produces negative emotional reactions in workers, such as anxiety, fear, mistrust or resentment (Jehn et al., 2008). When perceptions of interpersonal problems are shared among team members, it could be that teams are negatively affected by them (Greer and Jehn, 2007), increasing collective perceptions of stress and anxiety (Jehn and Mannix, 2001), which may make them share feeling of emotional exhaustion. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Team relationship conflict is positively related to collective emotional exhaustion.

Team conflict management styles
Conflict consequences could be influenced by the kinds of behaviors or styles teams use to manage conflict (Behfar et al., 2008; Dijkstra et al., 2011; Kirsten et al., 2016). That is, the way conflict is managed by the team may determine the success or failure of team outcomes and its well-being (Somech et al., 2009). In this sense, management constantly rely on teams to increase competitiveness and solve conflicts; therefore, team members must be able to manage intragroup conflict effectively and constructively. Different theoretical models have been proposed to analyze the way in which individuals approach and handle conflict. The most extended model is based on Blake and Mouton’s (1964) theory, who proposed a bidimensional grid for classifying the ways in which individuals handle interpersonal conflict. These two dimensions relate to the extent to which individuals show high or low “concern for self” and “concern for others”. The “concern for self” dimension reflects the degree to which an individual tries to satisfy his/her personal concerns or needs. The “concern for others” dimension has the same meaning, but is centered on others’ needs or concerns. Combining these two dimensions, five different styles of managing interpersonal conflict are obtained:
Systematically studying the use of these styles has revealed that some conflict negotiation styles are more effective than others are. However, these results are contradictory. For example, the avoiding strategy has been considered by some researchers as the most successful in the management of team conflicts (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001), but other studies contradict that idea, showing that it is integrating conflict management styles that is the most appropriate strategy to solve team conflict (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Gross and Guerrero, 2000). In the same way, some authors consider that compromising is effective for resolving conflict and maximizing the quality of relationships between team members (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Van de Vliert et al., 1995).

Thus, despite the growing body of research on the moderating role of conflict management styles in the relationship between conflict and emotional exhaustion, however, our understanding of this relationship remains limited in an important way. Most of these studies have considered conflict management strategies from an individual perspective. However, it has been shown that employees working in teams could develop a shared conflict management style (De Dreu et al., 2004). For example, Jehn (1997) showed that groups with tolerability (open) rules about conflict, are more ready for discussing problems using cooperative conflict management styles. Employees within the same team tend to influence one another, thereby creating their own social environment with shared preferences over how to manage the conflict (Mohammed et al., 2000). Thus, in some teams, employees may develop a shared tendency to approach and manage conflict, searching for solutions that are satisfactory to all team members (integrating), using authority or interpersonal influence (dominating), giving into wishes of the partners (yielding), trying to avoid disagreement or unpleasantness (avoiding) and proposing a “middle ground” solution (compromising) (De Dreu et al., 2004). Thus, this study focuses on team conflict management styles, defined as strategies implemented within the work team aimed at reducing or solving internal conflicts (Kuhn and Poole, 2000).

The moderating role of team conflict management styles

Avoiding conflict management style

Avoiding occurs when people physically or psychologically remove themselves from the conflict scene or episode by denying the conflict, being indirect and evasive, changing and/or avoiding topics, using noncommittal remarks and making irrelevant remarks or joking to avoid having to deal with the conflict at hand (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). Although research has shown that the victims of relationship conflicts use a wide range of strategies to cope with the conflict – starting with the most constructive and ending with the most passive – the avoiding strategy has been considered by some researchers as the most successful in the management of high levels of relationship conflicts (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001). Specially, avoiding responses have demonstrated their effectiveness in intractable conflicts, such as bullying at work (Zapf and Gross, 2001). The explanation for this is based on team members ignoring the problem, forgetting what caused it in the hope of the conflict sorting itself out and avoiding any escalation. Irritation and annoyance related to interpersonal issues may even go away over time, as team members go through new experiences and get to know one another in new and different ways (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001). Thus,
avoiding responses may help team members forget the problem and distract them from negative emotions and stressful feelings caused by relationship conflict, thereby decreasing experiences of collective emotional exhaustion. It is therefore hypothesized that:

\[ H2. \text{ Avoiding conflict management styles moderate the relationships between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion, such that increasing levels of relationship conflict will have a weaker link to collective emotional exhaustion at higher levels of avoiding conflict management styles.} \]

**Integrating conflict management style**

The integrating conflict management style focuses on problem-solving in a collaborative approach. People with this style face conflict directly and try to find new and creative solutions to problems focusing on their own needs as well as on the needs of others (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). Managing conflicts effectively implies that people openly discuss and, at least actively, attempt to solve their differences by looking for shared needs (Tekleab et al., 2009). In this sense, the integrating style is believed to be the most appropriate strategy because it allows people to be part of the decision-making process, includes a focus on the partner and allows a mutually efficient and collaborative solution to emerge (Dijkstra et al., 2011; Hsi-An and Susanto, 2010). In the event of personal discrepancies, integration can go two ways: straight negotiation or the attempt to reconcile or integrate the interests of both parties (Rahim, 2002). In the former, there is no doubt that a person’s values that shape his or her identity are nonnegotiable, so there is hardly any possibility of reaching an agreement on these terms (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001). However, it has been shown that the search for shared interests or the proposal of new options catering for the interests of the conflicting parties may be a strategy capable of reducing the intensity of a high-intensity conflict (Medina and Benitez, 2011). For example, studies of partners and roommates have found that the integrative style is usually considered as effective, appropriate and generally competent (Canary and Spitzberg, 1990). Additionally, a recent employee study demonstrated that the most effective behaviors for de-escalating an escalating conflict involves problem-solving, especially when the conflict has escalated considerably (Medina and Benitez, 2011). This style could be especially appropriate in teams where members have to work cooperatively to achieve team outcomes (Griffin et al., 2001). In this sense, Tjosvold (2008) argued that teams that use a cooperative approach to conflict for their successfully internal functioning could get significant benefits for both team members, including increased performance. So, when team members perceive team relationship conflicts, using an integrative style of conflict management could help to find new and creative solutions to problems by focusing on their needs as well as on the needs of the entire work-unit (Gross and Guerrero, 2000; Tjosvold, 2014). They will face conflicts directly, showing conciliatory behaviors such as supportive statements and concessions, and their communication processes will focus on reaching a successful resolution that keeps the relationship intact for future interactions (Hocker and Wilmot, 1998) improving stronger feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy and reducing tension and frustration caused by relationship conflict (Tekleab et al., 2009). In other words, the use of more integrating conflict management styles by team members might mitigate the negative effects of relationship conflicts. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H3. \text{ Integrating conflict management styles moderate the relationships between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion, such that relationship conflicts will have a weaker link to collective emotional exhaustion at higher levels of integrating conflict management styles.} \]
Compromising conflict management style

The compromising style focuses on both individual goals and the needs of others. A specific behavior from this conflict management style is proposing a “middle ground” solution (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). This means facing the problem head-on, being open-minded, listening to others and discussing issues openly. This may help clarify issues and alter team members’ understanding of the situation, thereby reducing the negative effects of conflict. In this sense, Van de Vliert et al. (1995) found that the more agreeable the conflict management used, the more effective it was at both resolving conflict and maximizing the quality of relationships between the parties. It is important to note, however, that these studies did not specifically consider relationship conflict. Most of them focused on general team conflict. In the case of relationship conflict, research has found that compromising responses may be less effective than one might expect (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001).

The compromising conflict management style has a chameleon-like identity, as it is a combination of avoiding and integrating on the one hand and yielding and dominating on the other hand. This means that the same compromising behavior may be read in very different ways, depending on the integrative level of the negotiating context. If the situation is perceived as integrative, then compromise is not the behavioral option that would give the best results. However, if the situation is perceived as distributive, then compromise may offer an attractive equilibrium for parties in conflict. Along these lines, Thomas (1992) considers that compromise may be functional on certain occasions, when parties have the same power or when parties’ objectives are mutually exclusive. In contrast, it may be dysfunctional on other occasions, when one party is more powerful than the other or when the subject is sufficiently complex, and the situation has integrating possibilities, in which case, it is feasible to use integration. In this case, research has shown that it is unlikely that relationship conflict can be settled with mutual satisfaction because it is hard to reach an agreement about personal values and goals (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001). Reducing tension and frustration rooted in personal discrepancies is no easy task, because it means changing fundamental concepts of one’s personal identity that have evolved over an entire life. Thus, seeking the middle ground and mutually acceptable solutions through give and take is unlikely to solve personal conflict and may instead make it look bigger and intractable (Harinck et al., 2000).

In accordance with these empirical findings, we propose that:

H4. Compromising conflict management styles moderate the relationships between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion, such that relationship conflicts will have a stronger link to collective emotional exhaustion at higher levels of compromising conflict management styles.

Method
Participants
We conducted a cross-sectional, descriptive and correlational study using questionnaires (Montero and León, 2007). We collected self-report data from 398 service employees (receptionists and waiters) from 42 hotels and restaurants in southern Spain. The initial sample consisted of 99 teams, but usable surveys were obtained from 91 teams (91.1 per cent). In all, 49.7 per cent of the units were receptionists and 50.3 per cent were waiters. This participation rate may seem high compared with those of other studies (Baruch and Holtom, 2008), but this is because the managers of the units had previously agreed to allow their boundary employees to take part in the study during work time. For 57.6 per cent of the
team sample, three members were surveyed, and for 42.4 per cent, more than four members were surveyed. The average team size was 4.94 members ($SD = 3.1$).

Forty-seven per cent of the respondents were women, 55.7 per cent were men and 1.3 per cent did not specify their gender. Participants had different educational levels: elementary school (18.3 per cent), high school (25.8 per cent), high school graduates (23.6 per cent), university graduates (28.6 per cent) and without any level of education (2.8 per cent). With respect to age, 52.3 per cent were in the range between 18 and 29 years, 31.2 per cent between 30 and 39 years, 11.6 per cent between 40 and 49 years and remaining 5 per cent over 49 years. Position tenure ranged from a few months to 32.6 years, with an average of about two years ($SD = 8.45$), and 43.7 per cent of the sample were permanent workers.

**Procedure**
A member of the research team contacted the managers of different hotels and arranged an appointment to present the study and explain the benefits that would be obtained from their participation. After our request for authorization, all the ethics committees of the 42 hotels and restaurants approved the study. The researchers were displaced to answer the questions of employees. Survey packages were given to the professionals who agreed to participate. The participation in the survey was voluntary also for the base employees and managers. Collect data was made by research at one period that not disturb the normal activities. The survey package included a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, an envelope and a survey questionnaire. All the employees completed the survey administered by a researcher in their workplace (hotels and restaurants). Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to participants. Researchers were present to help employees in case of difficulty when filling in the questionnaire.

**Work-unit measures**
*Relationship conflict.* Relationship conflict was measured by a five-items scale (Friedman et al., 2000), validated in Spain (Benítez et al., 2012a, 2012b). Team members were asked to rate how often they perceived issues about relationship conflict within their team. The scale focuses on the active hostility found in relationship conflict and is based on items such as “much plotting takes place behind the scenes” and “one party frequently undermines the other”. Response anchors ranged from 1 (“none”) to 5 (“to a great extent”). The higher the score, the higher the level of relationship conflict experienced. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.87.

*Conflict management styles.* Conflict management styles were assessed using the Spanish version of Rahim’s Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II) (Rahim, 1983) adapted and validated by Munduate et al. (1993). The ROCI-II questionnaire has several forms: A, B and C – relationships with peers, relationships with subordinates and relationships with superiors. As this study analyzed the effects of conflict styles between work team members, we used form A (styles of conflict management between peers). Specifically, work team members were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) the level of frequency with which they tend to act when involved in conflictive interactions with their team peers. The higher values represent a greater use of a certain style of conflict management. The different management styles make up the different dimensions of the scale: avoiding, integrating, dominating, yielding and compromising. All dimensions had four items. An example item of integrating dimension is, “In the event of a difficulty at work with my colleagues, I try to analyze the situation with them to find a solution that is acceptable to everyone”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.80 for this dimension. An example item of avoiding dimension is, “I try not to show colleagues that I disagree to avoid problems”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.70 for this dimension. The third dimension, dominating, also consisted of four
items with an example being “I use my professional prestige and the authority that it gives me to apply pressure in my favor”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.74 for this dimension. An example item of yielding dimension is “I generally do what my colleagues want me to”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.77 for this dimension. We end with an example from the compromising dimension “I normally propose a half-way path to break the deadlock”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.75 for this dimension. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the overall scale was 0.83.

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was measured using three items from Maslach burnout Inventory–General Survey (MBI-GS; Schaufeli et al., 1996). It features items such as “When I finish my working day, I finish exhausted”. All items were scored on a five-point frequency rating scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Cronbach’s alpha was 0.80.

Control variables. We controlled for team size, gender percentage and contract type (temporal vs permanent) percentage in work teams because they may affect the relationship among our study variables, despite this not being of direct theoretical interest (González-Romá et al., 2002).

Analysis and results
Preliminary analyses
The self-report bias warned us about the possibility of inflated relationships because of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, prior to conducting the regression analyses, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in SPSS to test for the discriminant validity of the individual-level measures of relationship conflict, emotion emotional exhaustion and conflict management styles. Specifically, we ran Harman’s one-factor. The common method variance problem arises when the result of one factor has more than 50 per cent of variance. However, our results showed that the common variance of one factor is 20.99 per cent. Thus, common variance method does not seem to affect the relationships among our variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Data aggregation
To test the hypotheses, we had to aggregate work team members’ scores on relationship conflict, emotional exhaustion and conflict management styles (avoiding, integrating, compromising, dominating and yielding). Therefore, before aggregating individual scores, we first detected whether responses showed sufficient within-unit agreement and between-unit differentiation. To do this, we used two complementary approaches (Kozlowski and Klein, 2000): the average deviation index and the interclass correlation coefficient (ICC [1]). To test within-unit agreement, we computed an average deviation index (AD_{\text{MDP}}) based on the deviation from the item mean for all the study variables (Burke et al., 1999). According to Burke et al. (1999), taking into account the number of response options and their verbal anchors, within-unit agreement is acceptable when the values are equal to or less than one (when the response scale is a Likert-type five-point scale). To determine between-unit differentiation, we computed the interclass correlation coefficient (ICC [1]; González-Romá et al., 2002).

The mean $AD$ values obtained for the study variables were as follows: relationship conflict, 0.66 ($SD = 0.23$); emotional exhaustion, 0.72 ($SD = 0.26$); integrating, 0.43 ($SD = 0.21$); avoiding, 0.57 ($SD = 0.21$); compromising, 0.45 ($SD = 0.21$); dominating, 0.45 ($SD = 0.21$); and yielding, 0.51 ($SD = 0.21$). The ICC [1] s obtained for each variable were: relationship conflict, 0.16; emotional exhaustion, 0.29; integrating, 0.22; avoiding, 0.10; compromising, 0.16; dominating, 0.11; and yielding, 0.10. Based on these results, we
concluded that levels of within-team agreement in the present study were sufficient to aggregate work team members. All the study measures displayed sufficient within-group agreement and between-group variance to justify aggregating and analyzing them at the group level.

Descriptive analysis
Descriptive statistics (work team means, standard deviation and correlations) were calculated. As Table I shows, relationship conflict was positively correlated to emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.31, p < 0.01$) and negatively correlated to integration ($r = -0.40, p < 0.01$) and to compromising ($r = -0.27, p < 0.01$), which is consistent with most studies. Only integrating management style was negatively correlated to emotional exhaustion ($r = -0.43, p < 0.05$).

Regression analysis
To test the hypotheses, multiple and hierarchical linear regression models were used to determine the moderator role of conflict management styles in the relationship between relationship conflict and emotional exhaustion following Hayes’ recommendations (Hayes, 2013). The dependent variable was emotional exhaustion. To prevent problems of multicollinearity, this analysis was conducted with centered variables (Aiken and West, 1991). Control variables were entered in the first step. In the second, team averages of relationship conflict, avoiding, integrating, compromising, dominating and yielding were entered. Finally, the interactions between work team average relationship conflict and work team averages of avoiding, integrating, compromising, dominating and yielding were entered. As can be seen in Table II, team relationship conflict was positively related to collective emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.05$). Thus, $H1$ was supported.

The interaction effect between relationship conflict and avoiding conflict management style was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.30, p < 0.05$); the interaction effect between relationship conflict and integrating conflict management style was negative and significant ($\beta = -0.40, p < 0.05$); and the interaction effect between relationship conflict and compromising conflict management style was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.40, p < 0.05$). Finally, the interaction effects between relationship conflict and dominating and yielding conflict management styles were not significant ($\beta = -0.10, n. s.$) ($\beta = 0.07, n. s.$). The interaction term accounts for an additional 10 per cent of the variance in emotional exhaustion. As we expected, data suggested that avoiding, integrating and compromising conflict management styles moderated the link between relationship conflict and emotional exhaustion at the group levels, confirming $H2$, $H3$ and $H4$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relationship conflict mean</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>(0.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emotional exhaustion mean</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Avoiding mean</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Integrating mean</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>-0.40**</td>
<td>-0.27***</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Compromising mean</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.28**</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.59**</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dominating mean</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Yielding mean</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Cronbach’s alpha coefficients are in the correlation matrix diagonal. *$p < 0.05$ two-tailed; **$p < 0.01$ two-tailed.
We used the Aiken and West (1991) method to analyze interaction. This method uses centered means and one standard deviation for calculation of interaction’s slopes. For a better understanding of these interaction effects, we plotted the interaction slopes (Figure 1 to 3). Values for the moderator were chosen 1 $SD$ below and above the mean ($M + 1SD$, $M - 1SD$). Entering these values in the regression equation generated simple regression lines. As Figure 1 shows at high levels of avoiding conflict management style, the positive link between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion was not significant. However, using the avoiding style at a lower level, relationship conflict was positively related to emotional

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Interaction between relationship conflict and avoiding conflict management in the prediction of collective emotional exhaustion

### Table II.
Results of hierarchical regression analysis examining the impact of relationship conflict and conflict management styles on collective emotional exhaustion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Work-unit EE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Control variables</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract type</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Independent variables</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict (Rc)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding (A)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising (C)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating (D)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yielding (Y)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Interactive effects</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_c \times A$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_c \times I$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_c \times C$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_c \times D$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R_c \times Y$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** *$p < 0.05$, two-tailed; **$p < 0.01$, two-tailed*
exhaustion (significance of the slopes was $t = 2.68, p < 0.001; t = -0.92, n. s.$). In the same way, as we expected, (see Figure 2), in the case of high levels of integrating style (1 SD above the mean score), relationship conflict was unrelated to emotional exhaustion. However, at low levels of integrating style (1 SD below the mean score), relationship conflict was positively related to emotional exhaustion (significance of the slopes was $t = 2.96, p < 0.001; t = -1.03, n. s.$). Finally, as Figure 3 shows, the positive relationship between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion was only significant when teams used high levels of compromising style (significance of the slopes was $t = 2.73, p < 0.001; t = -1.03, n. s.$).
Discussion

The goal of this study was to contribute to the conflict literature by testing the link between team relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion in real service organizations and by exploring the moderating role of the conflict management styles used by teams on this link. The results showed two main conclusions. First, there is a positive link between team relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion. Second, this relationship depends on how the team members handle the relationship conflict. Avoiding and integrating conflict management styles in teams buffered the link between relationship conflict and emotional exhaustion, whereas compromising increased this positive link. In sum, the use by teams of high avoiding and high integrating conflict management styles is effective in reducing the link between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion. However, the use of the high compromising conflict management style is ineffective. That is, this conflict management style increases the positive link between relationship conflict and emotional exhaustion within the teams.

The findings of this study confirm the detrimental effect of relationship conflict on well-being at work, increasing the levels of collective emotional exhaustion. This ties in with previous research at the individual level, which considers relationship conflict as a significant source of stress at work (Giebels and Janssen, 2005; Ilies et al., 2011). This is also in consonance with a number of studies showing that relationship conflict increases emotional exhaustion experiences (Dijkstra et al., 2005; Dijkstra et al., 2009). In this case, the results showed that relationship conflict increases not only individual levels of emotional exhaustion but also emotional exhaustion of the whole team. One possible explanation for this may be that the tension and frustration rooted in discrepancies about norms, values and political preferences are difficult to reduce when team members are experiencing relationship conflict (De Dreu et al., 2001; De Wit et al., 2012). In turn, these negative feelings and experiences within the teams cause stressful and anxiety climate, increasing the levels of collective emotional exhaustion.

This result suggests that employees need to share conflict management skills to help them manage their internal functioning, make decisions and work effectively in the ever-increasing team environment of today’s organizations (Tjosvold, 2008). Therefore, acquiring people-related skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication and problem resolution is critical for all levels of service organizations (Analoui, 1995; Tekleab et al., 2009; Tjosvold, 2014).

This study has demonstrated that the conflict resolution mechanism of the team conflict moderates the relationship between conflict and emotional exhaustion at the team level. In fact, findings showed that high collective avoiding weakened the link between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion. In other words, in teams that frequently used the avoiding style, relationship conflict was not positively related to emotional exhaustion. This finding falls in line with several studies in different contexts (Zapf and Gross, 2001), which demonstrate that avoiding responses are effective in bullying. Avoiding does not judge the other party as deserving any concern, and thus, it may hide higher levels of aggressiveness. There are also other studies in project teams (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001) that show that avoiding responses allows the conflict to become less prominent and irritation and annoyance related to interpersonal issues may even go away over time. Thus, avoiding responses could be quite functional in that teams do not escalate the conflict and instead they teach team members the benefits of patience. Thus, when high relationship conflict occurs, the process of avoiding reduces the negative emotion in the team that might otherwise prevent reaching team goals and lead to negative consequences such as emotional exhaustion (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). However, the results also showed that using
avoiding styles frequently is not effective in teams with low relationship conflict. That is, when team’s members are exhausted, avoiding is not useful for solving low level of relationship conflict. One explanation for this is that sometimes using passive styles to deal with personal problems that are of low intensity can lead to misunderstandings and escalation of conflict, especially when work teams are faced with a situation of emotional exhaustion where perceptions can be distorted and social relationships can be destroyed. This style is useful when the issues are trivial or when the potential dysfunctional effect of confronting the other party outweighs the benefits of the resolution of conflict (Lee, 2008).

For that reason, it is important to bear in mind that avoiding is not always an option and rarely leads to conflict resolution, whereas integrative solutions benefit workers’ satisfaction, performance and psychological well-being (Behfar et al., 2008).

In this sense, ours results also showed that, as we expected, in teams that used more integrating conflict management styles, relationship conflict was not related to collective emotional exhaustion. These results tie in with many studies that show that integrating has the greatest potential for producing positive outcomes. For example, Lu et al. (2010) showed that, at team level, teams reported higher creativity and productivity after being trained for cooperative teamwork and constructive controversy. The team approach to find new and creative solutions to problems by focusing on the interest of the entire team helps teams to face the relationship conflict, to develop an open, healthy and constructive atmosphere, reducing its negative effects, such as anxiety and stress, and preventing shared experiences of emotional exhaustion within teams (Greer et al., 2008).

Finally, our findings showed that the compromising conflict management style increased the positive link between relationship conflict and collective emotional exhaustion. In teams using the compromising conflict management style at high levels, the link between relationship conflict and emotional exhaustion increased, whereas in teams using low levels of compromising, this relationship was not significant. One explanation for this is that compromising style involves searching for an intermediate position, through strategies such as splitting the difference, meeting the partner halfway, suggesting a trade-off, maximizing wins while minimizing losses and offering a quick, short-term resolution to the conflict at hand (Hocker and Wilmot, 1998). Therefore, compromising responses requires greater efforts to solve the problem and satisfy some of each person’s need, but not all of them (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). This, in turn, could increase the levels of team members’ emotional exhaustion.

Limitations and future research
Conflict is a multi-dimensional construct (task, relationship and process conflict) (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). The types or dimensions of conflict can affect the quality of the relationship between team members in different ways. Thus, being able to identify the type of conflict that is present in teams is important for managers and team members because this will determine their use of conflict management approaches and subsequent work-unit outcomes. Further research should consider examining the role of three conflict types and the management styles capable of resolving them effectively (Passos and Caetano, 2005).

Practical implications
The findings of the present study have important implications for the management of frontline staff in service organizations. Most fundamentally, the results suggest a win-win model (Peccei et al., 2013) of the relationship between conflict management styles and emotional exhaustion at the work-unit level. Many organizations today include conflict management skills as a requirement for recruitment, selection and performance appraisal for employees,
particularly in management and executive positions (Saeed et al., 2014). The Office of Personnel Management reveals that conflict management skills are listed as a competency goal in the majority of the leadership courses offered to executives (Nussbaum, 2009). For instance, in the private sector, consultants and human resource departments are providing training that includes building skills in conflict management strategies (Deutsch and Coleman, 2000). The trend of implementing programmes in organizations to facilitate management of interpersonal conflict coincides with a growing body of research showing that if conflict is not managed in teams, it can have detrimental consequences for organizational, individual and group outcomes. Else, conflict can significantly affect employee turnover and legal action which will affect the brand of organization, either productively or destructively (Lang, 2009). In fact, it has been shown that relationship conflict is the basis of bullying, and predicts a high percentage of employee turnover and absenteeism, especially in an hospitality industry, where, compared to any other businesses, hotel and restaurants experience higher levels of conflicts. Thus, front-line employee teams deal with all kinds of conflicts. That is, conflicts about personal or laboral aspects and conflict with customers or co-workers. In this sense, they need to develop conflict management skills to manage themselves to work efficiently, which can be achieved by proper training. Accordingly, Garcia (2013) argues that by teaching conflict management skills to front-line employees, conflict can possibly lead to hotels’ growth in terms of innovativeness and productivity, helping staff for proper teamwork and cooperation.

References


Further reading


**Corresponding author**
Miriam Benitez can be contacted at: miriambenitez@uma.es