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SHORT COMMUNICATION

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Is all conflict the same? The role of perceived intensity in understanding its effects

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Abstract

While interpersonal conflict at work continues to draw attention, researchers have rarely considered the role that conflict intensity plays in amplifying individuals' affective reactions to it. Hence, this study examines conflict intensity as a moderator of the relationship between interpersonal conflict and perceived stress, physical symptoms, and job satisfaction, through negative affect. A total of 306 employees from various industries participated in this cross-sectional study. Supporting and expanding an emotion-centered model of conflict, results indicated that the indirect effects of conflict on the study's outcomes were higher when participants perceived the conflict to be of medium and high-level intensity.

KEYWORDS
conflict intensity, emotion-centered model, interpersonal conflict, job satisfaction, job stress, physical health, negative affect

1 | INTRODUCTION

On-the-job stress arising from factors such as interpersonal conflict has been considered a major complaint by US employees over the years (Gallup, 2019). Surveys have indicated that individuals spend up to 42% of their time resolving conflicts, and managers can spend up to 20% of their time involved in conflict-related issues (Gupta, Boyd, & Kuzmits, 2011). Further, it is expected that levels of conflict are unlikely to subside with a workforce that is increasingly diverse in terms of demographics (Parsi, 2017).

The examination of workplace stressor–strain relationships has identified the mechanisms through which stressors, such as interpersonal conflict, impact a variety of employee health and job-related outcomes (Frone, 2000; Mulki, Jaramillo, Goad, & Pesquera, 2015). Applying an emotion-centered model to this relationship, such that affective reactions function as a mediator, has facilitated further understanding of these associations (Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). Still, a call to examine the possible moderators of this stressor–strain relationship remains to be addressed (Hershcovis, 2011). Hence, the purpose of this short communication study was to test the moderating role of conflict intensity on the indirect effects of interpersonal conflict on outcomes of job satisfaction, perceived stress, and physical symptoms.

1.1 | Emotion in the conflict-strain process

Interpersonal conflict is a social stressor that measures disagreements between parties (Spector & Jex, 1998), and has been discussed under the broader workplace aggression construct, comprised of variables such as incivility, bullying, social undermining, and abusive supervision that vary across several defining characteristics, including intensity (Hershcovis, 2011). Interpersonal conflict has been linked to decreased job satisfaction (Ilies, Johnson, Judge, & Keeney, 2011), low performance (Mulki et al., 2015; Nixon, Bruk-Lee, & Spector, 2017), high turnover intentions (Frone, 2000), stress (Mulki et al., 2015), and physical health symptoms (Nixon et al., 2011, 2017).

The emotion-centered model of stress provides a potential mechanism by which conflict impacts well-being and job-related outcomes (see Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). The model posits that the appraisal of stressful incidents at work, such as conflict, can lead to

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averse emotional reactions that subsequently lead to deleterious outcomes. This is consistent with affective events theory (AET), which proposes that both negative and positive incidents at work can lead to emotional states that ultimately influence a variety of behaviors and attitudes (Fisher, 2000; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Indeed, research widely supports the effects of conflict at work on negative emotional reactions, which are salient indicators of psychological distress (Ilies et al., 2011; Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008). Emotion refers to a transient affective state contingent on the environment (Watson, 1988; Watson & Clark, 1984), and research has supported the relationship between emotion and various health and organizational outcomes (Lanz & Bruk-Lee, 2017; Lubbers, Loughlin, & Zweig, 2005). Given the existing body of work, we expect to find replicating support for conflict's relationship to well-being and job-related outcomes, as well as a mediating role for negative emotions.

Hypothesis 1 *Interpersonal conflict at work will be negatively related to* (a) *job satisfaction, and positively related to* (b) *perceived stress,* and (c) *physical symptoms.*

Hypothesis 2 *Negative affect will mediate the relationship between interpersonal conflict and* (a) *job satisfaction,* (b) *perceived stress,* and (c) *physical symptoms.*

1.2 | Appraisal of conflict intensity

Intensity in the context of workplace aggression is attributed to one's perceived severity of the aggressive behavior perpetrated against them (Barling, 1996). A study on nurses found that intensity moderates the relationship between workplace aggression (inclusive of interpersonal conflict), organizational attitudes and psychological strains (Nixon & Spector, 2015). Conflict literature also suggests that intensity is a dimension of conflict that should not be ignored, given it has the potential to influence if individuals appraise such conflict as a demand and how they react to it. For instance, low-intensity conflict may be perceived as benign or even positively in circumstances requiring exchange of ideas (Leon-Perez, Medina, Arenas, & Munduate, 2015). It may be the case that perceived intensity must reach an appraisal threshold that subsequently catalyzes the strain process. Further, even though conflict intensity is deemed pertinent to the conflict process, few studies have actively measured it (see Weingart, Behfar, Bendersky, Todorova, & Jehn, 2015). This short communication study builds on prior research by adopting an emotion-centered model to understanding, more specifically, the conflict-strain process and testing the moderating role of conflict intensity on the conflict-emotion-strain relationships. See Figure 1 for a diagram of the posited first-stage moderated mediation model.

Hypothesis 3 *Perceived intensity will moderate the indirect effects of interpersonal conflict on* (a) *job satisfaction,* (b) *perceived stress,* and (c) *physical symptoms, such that the indirect effect is stronger when intensity is high.*

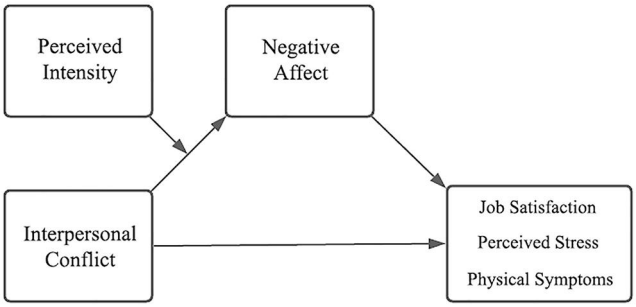

FIGURE 1 Conceptual diagram. Direct and moderated indirect pathways of interpersonal conflict's effect on job satisfaction, stress, and physical symptoms

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants and procedures

The current study was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection, ensuring ethical compliance. A snowball recruitment technique was used where contacts were given a survey invitation and asked to forward the invitation to other co-workers and individuals in their professional networks. Participants were compensated with $10 Amazon e-gift cards for successful completion of the survey. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. A total of 438 individuals began the survey. The survey included ten attention check questions to ensure participants were accurately reading and responding to each item in the survey. Participants who responded incorrectly to more than 20% of the attention check questions were excluded from further analysis, along with anyone who completed the survey in less than five minutes. After screening the data there were 306 surveys that were suitable for analysis (70%). Most of the participants were female (52.8%) and had a mean age of 34.70 (SD = 10.18). The participant demographics were 72.9% White/Caucasian, 9.5% Hispanic, 6.9% Asian, 4.6% African American, 2.3% Native American, 2.0% other, and 1.0% Pacific Islander. Most participants worked full time (83.7%), averaging 39.22 h per week and a mean organizational tenure of 6.39 years. The participants worked in the following industries: management/professional and related 26.3%, education 16.9%, health/medical care 16.9%, service 11.6%, other 11.6%, technical 9.7%, trades/skilled labor 4.4%, and government 2.8%.

2.2 | Measures

Conflict at Work. Interpersonal conflict at work was assessed using Frone's (2000) 8-item modified version of the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS; Spector & Jex, 1998). The scale measured conflict with one's supervisor and coworkers in the past month, with each subscale consisting of four items (i.e., "How often do you get into arguments with your supervisor"). Each item was rated on a

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas and intercorrelations of the study variables

Variable	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interpersonal conflict	1.62	0.66	(0.89)					
2. Perceived intensity	2.60	1.03	0.19**	(0.85)				
3. Negative affect	2.17	0.70	0.40**	0.32**	(0.89)			
4. Job satisfaction	3.90	0.96	−0.32**	−0.15*	−0.65**	(0.92)		
5. Perceived stress	2.59	0.56	0.34**	0.21**	0.52**	−0.39**	(0.73)	
6. Physical symptoms	1.66	0.59	0.34**	0.25**	0.49**	−0.39**	0.40**	(0.88)

Note: $N = 306$ to 234. Values on the diagonal are coefficient alphas.
$^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (All of the time). An average composite measure was created to assess overall interpersonal conflict at work.

Perceived Intensity. Each item in the conflict instrument was rated on its intensity using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Greatly) where participants rated how much their experienced conflict upset them (see Nixon & Spector, 2015). An example item is "In general, how much did these arguments upset you?" Intensity items were averaged to create an overall composite measure of intensity.

Negative Emotions. The Job-Related Affect Well-Being Scale was used to measure negative affect at work (JAWS; Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, & Kelloway, 2000). Participants rated whether their jobs made them feel each of 10 negative emotions in the past 30 days (i.e., "My job made me feel angry"). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Extremely Often).

Physical Symptoms. Physical symptoms were measured using the 18-item Physical Symptoms Inventory (PSI; Spector & Jex, 1998). The PSI was designed to assess a person's perception of somatic symptoms (i.e., discomfort, headache, upset stomach), answered on a seven-point response scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Several times a day).

Perceived Stress. Perceived stress was measured using the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), by Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein (1983). An example item is "In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?" Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Very Often).

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was assessed using the 3-item job satisfaction measure from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Scale (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979). A sample item is "All in all I am satisfied with my current job." Each item was rated on a five-point response scale from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree).

3 | RESULTS

SPSS v. 26 and PROCESS v. 3.3 by Hayes (2017) were used to analyze the data. The means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient alphas of the studied variables are shown in Table 1. Interpersonal conflict was negatively and significantly correlated with job satisfaction ($r = -0.32$, $p < 0.05$), and positively and significantly related to perceived stress ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$) and physical symptoms ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis 1. All indirect effects were significant, lending support to Hypothesis 2a–c. Specifically, as seen in Table 2, negative affect fully mediated the relationship between interpersonal conflict and job satisfaction (indirect ab effect = −0.36, $CI_{0.95} = -0.48$ to −0.25; c' effect = −0.10, $p = 0.15$), and served as a partial mediator in explaining perceived stress (indirect ab effect = 0.15, $CI_{0.95} = 0.10$ to 0.22; c' effect = 0.14, $p < 0.05$) and physical symptoms (indirect ab effect = 0.15, $CI_{0.95} = 0.09$ to 0.22; c' effect = 0.15, $p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 3 proposed a moderated mediation in which the a path was contingent on the magnitude of perceived intensity, such that the indirect effects of interpersonal conflict through negative affect would be exacerbated by higher perceived intensity. The percentile bootstrap 95% CI of the index of moderated mediation was estimated using 5000 bootstrapped samples. Support for Hypothesis 3 was found given the indirect effects of interpersonal conflict on job satisfaction (index = −0.34, $CI_{0.95} = -0.53$ to −0.23), perceived stress (index = 0.11, $CI_{0.95} = 0.07$ to 0.19), and physical symptoms (index = 0.15, $CI_{0.95} = 0.09$ to 0.25) through negative affect were significantly moderated by perceived intensity. The indirect effects of interpersonal conflict on the outcomes were stronger under medium and high levels of intensity, and nonsignificant at low levels of intensity (see Table 2).

4 | DISCUSSION

The present short communication study extends past research by exploring the effects of conflict's intensity on an emotion-centered model of conflict at work. The results lend additional support to the notion that employees who experience higher levels of interpersonal conflict at work report negative emotional reactions to this stressor. In turn, these employees indicate having lower job satisfaction, increased stress, and more instances of physical symptoms, as may also be expected from AET (Fisher, 2000). Further, conflict's intensity moderated the indirect relationship between interpersonal conflict and the study's outcomes. When conflict experiences were perceived as being moderately or highly upsetting, conflict's indirect effects on

TABLE 2 Mediation and moderated mediation estimates for interpersonal conflict and job satisfaction, perceived stress, and physical symptoms

Mediation model												
	Job satisfaction				**Perceived stress**				**Physical symptoms**			
Direct effects	**C**	**SE**	***t***	***p***	**C**	**SE**	***t***	***p***	**C**	**SE**	***t***	***p***
Negative affect as DV												
Constant	1.50	0.10	15.38	0.000	1.50	0.10	15.38	0.000	1.50	0.10	15.38	0.000
Interpersonal conflict	0.42	0.06	7.51	0.000	0.42	0.06	7.51	0.000	0.42	0.06	7.51	0.000
Model R^2	0.16**				0.16**				0.16**			
Outcome as DV												
Constant	5.92	0.15	39.48	0.000	1.58	0.10	16.56	0.000	0.64	0.10	6.20	0.000
Interpersonal conflict	−0.10	0.07	−1.46	0.146	0.14	0.04	3.03	0.003	0.15	0.05	3.14	0.002
Negative affect	−0.86	0.07	−12.88	0.000	0.36	0.04	8.58	0.000	0.36	0.05	7.79	0.000
Model R^2	0.42**				0.29**				0.26**			
Indirect effect	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Conflict on outcome	−0.36	0.06	−0.476	−0.248	0.15	0.03	0.100	0.215	0.15	0.03	0.091	0.215
Moderated mediation model												
	Job satisfaction				**Perceived stress**				**Physical symptoms**			
Direct effects	**C**	**SE**	***t***	***p***	**C**	**SE**	***t***	***p***	**C**	**SE**	***t***	***p***
Negative affect as DV												
Constant	2.24	0.04	55.54	0.000	2.24	0.04	55.54	0.000	2.24	0.04	55.54	0.000
Interpersonal conflict	0.28	0.06	4.61	0.000	0.28	0.06	4.61	0.000	0.28	0.06	4.61	0.000
Perceived intensity	0.23	0.04	5.83	0.000	0.23	0.04	5.83	0.000	0.23	0.04	5.83	0.000
Interpersonal Conflict × Perceived intensity	0.37	0.07	5.37	0.000	0.37	0.07	5.37	0.000	0.37	0.07	5.37	0.000
Model R^2	0.28**				0.28**				0.28**			
Outcome as DV												
Constant	5.86	0.18	32.31	0.000	1.97	0.11	18.25	0.000	0.81	0.12	6.69	0.000
Interpersonal conflict	−0.06	0.08	−0.80	0.427	0.14	0.05	2.82	0.005	0.11	0.05	1.99	0.048
Negative affect	−0.91	0.08	−11.95	0.000	0.31	0.05	6.69	0.000	0.41	0.05	8.00	0.000
Model R^2	0.43**				0.24**				0.28**			
Conditional indirect effect	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Low perceived intensity	0.03	0.10	−0.101	0.271	−0.01	0.03	−0.092	0.036	−0.01	0.04	−0.125	0.047
Medium perceived intensity	−0.16	0.07	−0.280	−0.006	0.05	0.03	0.001	0.104	0.07	0.03	0.004	0.128
High perceived intensity	−0.61	0.10	−0.813	−0.446	0.20	0.05	0.122	0.309	0.27	0.06	0.181	0.403
Index of moderated	Index	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Index	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Index	SE	LLCI	ULC
Mediation	−0.34	0.08	−0.528	−0.226	0.11	0.03	0.068	0.189	0.15	0.04	0.092	0.254

Note: $N = 303$ for mediation model, $N = 231$ for moderated mediation model. All analyses used 5000 bootstrap samples. R^2 = percentage of variance accounted for in outcomes by predictors. Moderator values represent the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentiles respectively. Tests of moderated mediation by conflict source support the same pattern of significant effects for higher levels of perceived intensity.

Abbreviations: C, Coefficient; DV, dependent variable; SE, Standard error; LLCI/ULCI, percentile bootstrap lower/upper limit confidence intervals.

**$p < 0.001$.

the outcomes were stronger. Moderate to high intensity conflict at work may potentially cascade into a stronger negative emotional reaction, and as such could increase the deleterious effects on well-being and attitudinal job outcomes. Such outcomes support the notion that conflict of higher intensity lacks the constructive elements that are likely present in conflict of lower intensity

(see Leon-Perez et al., 2015), and as such exacerbates the emotions felt during the conflict process.

Given the burgeoning media attention on managing conflict within organizations (Fox, 2015; Hanson, 2018), researchers should consider the effectiveness of varying conflict management styles and strategies in resolving disputes varying in intensity. Understanding the alternative approaches to conflict management in effectively dealing with these disputes may mitigate escalation, improve social interaction, and facilitate norms of collaboration within organizational settings, as has been suggested in prior studies not taking intensity into account (Desivilya, Somech, & Lidgoster, 2010; Helms & Oliver, 2015). Further, while there are few studies that consider conflict intensity, it is often conceptualized in terms of temporality, frequency, and its manifestation (i.e., yelling) (Andrews & Tjosvold, 1983; Woodin, 2011); such conceptualizations of intensity ignore victims' perceptions of the conflict itself, which is problematic due to the removal of the individual's appraisal of the stressor from the process. Future studies should also consider how various conflict types (e.g., relationship, task, and process) interact with perceived intensity to affect employee strain and well-being outcomes. The positive effects of task conflict, for example, were contingent on its intensity (Todorova, Bear, & Weingart, 2014).

5 | LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the study include the use of a cross-sectional self-report survey design, which presents the potential for common method variance (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). The use of cross-sectional data precludes conclusions regarding the temporal precedence of variables, therefore impeding conclusions of causality. As such, the indirect relationships in this study should be interpreted with discretion. The current findings, however, are consistent with previous studies using other methodologies but still indicating that negative emotions seem to be elicited by conflict in the workplace, and that such emotions can negatively impact various outcomes (Ilies et al., 2011; Lanz & Bruk-Lee, 2017). Lastly, while the use of self-report may also result in covariation across study variables resulting from the measurement method, Spector (2006) addresses these concerns and suggests self-report is a suitable approach for assessing individuals' perceptions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Mark Burnard, upon reasonable request.

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