

Gender and Organizational Conflict Management: The Mediating Role of Personality

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Abstract

Many authors examined the interplay between gender and conflict management preferences, but those findings were often mixed and inconsistent. In the current paper, we tried to explain those inconsistencies by investigating the mediating role of personality for the relationship of gender and conflict management. Rahim's inventory was used for identifying five conflict management styles, and the Big Five Model theory was a base for assessing participants' personality traits. In an online survey, data were collected from a sample of 1,055 working Poles (52.7% women). Based on the structural equation modeling, we detected multiple indirect mediating paths of gender on conflict management via personality traits, while no direct effect of gender was observed. Despite some limitations, the study sheds light on the role of gender in conflict behavior and the importance of personality traits in conflict management, both from a theoretical and practical perspective.

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In the broad range of gender role stereotypes, it is assumed that gender has a strong and direct influence on conflict management preferences. Women are usually described as more cooperative and caring for others (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001), while men are socially expected to be more dominant and assertive (Eagly, Karau, 1991). It is also suggested that, in general, women can resolve conflicts more effectively (Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, Chin, 2004). However, there is still little known about personality factors as potential mediating mechanisms for the relationship

between gender and conflict management in organizations. The aim of this study is to shed some light on the psychological differences “responsible” for observed gender differences in conflict management styles. Specifically, we propose including personality traits in the Big Five Factor Model (BFM, Goldberg, 1990) as mediating variables in relation to gender-conflict management. Therefore, we aim to fill the gap in the investigation of personal variables underlying gender differences in conflict management styles. In addition, we present our analyses on the comprehensive and diverse sample, including people with different occupations, education, and economic status. Polish sample provides a good cultural context to analyze gender roles at work due to high conservatism and unequal distribution of power and resources between both sexes (Inglehart & Norris, 2005; Siemieńska, 2005).

Conflict management styles

Conflict is an integral component of human functioning (Slabbert, 2004), widely assumed to be disruptive in both social relations and organizational life (Lindelow & Scott, 1989). Stephen Robbins (2005, p. 422) defines it as “a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to affect negatively, something that the first party cares about.” However, in his review article, Tjosvold (2008) emphasizes that conflicts in organizational environment can also be highly constructive and essential to overall effectiveness. This statement questions the traditional policy of avoiding conflicts at all costs and indicates the importance of proper conflict-handling skills, which are vital for efficiency at both individual and group levels (Ahmed, Nawaz, Shaukat, & Usman, 2010).

Conflict management, defined as the process focused on designing “effective macro-level strategies to minimize dysfunctions” and enhancing its constructive functions (Rahim, 2002, p. 208), is becoming an increasingly important area of interest for human resource managers in all types of organizations. Negligence in this area may lead to severe consequences, e.g., sabotaging decision-making and relational bonds (Tjosvold, 2008). The “Managerial Grid” Model (Blake & Mouton, 1964) portrays people in organizations as driven by two primary motivations: concern for one's own goals versus concern for interpersonal relationships (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Thomas suggested naming these dimensions assertiveness and cooperation (1974) while crossing them yields five independent styles: integration, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (Rahim, 1983). The outcomes of those styles depend on the extent to which parties feel their needs have been considered by the opponent (Antonioni, 1998); they may also be described as relatively constant behavioral patterns that one prefers to employ in conflict situations (Ma, 2005; Moberg, 1998).

Gender, conflict management styles, and personality

The nature of relationships between gender and conflict management is widely covered by scientific literature, which delivers detailed but highly inconsistent knowledge in this field. Some of the authors agree with the stereotypical view and conclude that women do indeed prefer styles like compromising (Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987), collaborating (Brahnam et al., 2005), or smoothing (Nelson, Lubin, 1991), while men definitely prefer domination and forcing (Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987; Vinacke, Mogy, Powers, Langan, Beck, 1974, Holt & DeVore, 2005). In other studies, gender-based

differences were not confirmed (Shockley-Zalabak, 1981; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984; Sternberg & Dobson, 1987) or even reversed: portraying women as more competitive than men (Rubin & Brown, 2013).

Findings as mentioned above were described not only in context of biological sex, but also with the perspective of psychological identity. In the research of Neil Brewer (2002), highly masculine individuals preferred a dominating conflict style, feminine individuals chose an avoiding style. In contrast, androgynous people were likely to behave in an integrating way. Although these results are mostly consistent with common stereotypes, it is essential to notice that most of them were carried out with student samples. An examination of gender differences in a natural organizational environment reveals a completely different pattern of results (Davis et al., 2010) in many workplace studies (Chusmir & Mills, 1989; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Renwick, 1977; Watson & Hoffman, 1996) authors found no evidence of a significant relationship between gender and conflict management styles. This fact leads to the natural question about the reasons for such inconsistency and encourages further research on individual and environmental factors responsible for inter-gender differences.

Gender and personality. Previous research examined the gender differences in personality, resulting in men being usually described as significantly more assertive and less anxious than women (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), while women were often classified as higher on Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Weisberg, DeYoung, Hirsh, 2011). Broad results were presented in the meta-analysis by Feingold (1994), who suggested that females were higher than men in Extraversion, Anxiety, Trust, and Tender-mindedness, while insignificant gender differences in, e.g., Social Anxiety, Impulsiveness, and Reflectiveness were observed. Later studies pointed out that women reported themselves to be higher in Neuroticism and Agreeableness than men, while gender differences in Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience were inconsistent or limited to lower-level dimensions (Costa, Terraciano, & McCrae, 2001). Similar findings were also found in the studies conducted in the Big Five Model across 55 cultures by Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, and Allik (2008). What is essential for generalizing those results is that most findings were relatively constant across ages, years of data collection, educational levels, and nations (Feingold, 1994).

Personality and conflict management styles. A multitude of empirical evidence has been found for the relationship between personality and conflict management styles (Antonioni, 1998; Moberg, 2001). Early works (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975) supported significant correlations between Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, McCaulley & Moist, 1985) personality dimensions and conflict styles. However, other studies did not confirm similar findings (Jones & Melcher, 1982). Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Empathy are generally associated with both avoiding conflicts and using less competitive styles - as they motivate parties to build positive relationships instead of focusing on one's own interests (Gill-Oore, Leiter, & LeBlanc, 2015).

Since the 1990s' the empirical studies on personality have been dominated by the paradigm of the Five-Factor Model (FFM, Costa & McCrae, 1992): Agreeableness, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism. In the field of conflict management some of these dimensions seem to be closely related to preferring particular styles, especially Agreeableness, treated even as an alternative measure of Cooperativeness (Wood & Bell, 2008). Also, in the healthcare environment, it was proven that medical staff's personality traits were significantly related to

preferred conflict management strategies (Erdenk & Altuntaş, 2017).

The current study

Based on the lexical approach to FFM (Goldberg, 1990) and empirical evidence from past research on gender, personality, and conflict management styles, we examine the relationships between personality traits and management of conflict. Despite the extensive scope of past research on gender differences in conflict handling, there is still a lot of inconsistency in this field, and little is known about the psychological processes responsible for such differences. Therefore, we propose the examination of personality as a mediator in the relationship between gender and conflict management styles. Congruently with former analyses (Costa et al., 2001; Schmitt et al., 2008), we expect the greatest gender differences in Agreeableness (higher among women) and Emotional Stability (higher among men). Therefore, the analyzed differences in conflict management styles will be related mainly to these two traits. As gender differences in the remaining personal traits are inconsistent, we explore possible mediating effects of all personality traits in the link between gender and conflict management.

Extraversion is a personality trait that seems to be clearly related to leaving the “comfort zone” in social relations, accepting challenges, and aspiring to leadership. Such a definition implies a relationship of an extroverted personality with a dominating style in conflict, characterized by no fear of confrontation. Such a hypothesis was already confirmed in several studies (Antonioni, 1998; Ma, 2005; Park & Antonioni, 2007; Wood & Bell, 2008), where the assertive aspect of the Extraversion structure seemed to be stronger than its pro-social orientation, which could result in a high concern for others (Olekalns & Smith, 1999). Moreover, by its definition (Goldberg, 1999), high Extraversion is related to an eagerness to work with people (be in close social relations) - so concurrently with the previous study (Waithaka et al., 2015), we expect it to be negatively correlated with avoiding strategies.

Intellect is described by Goldberg (1992) as a need for reflection, competence, and creativity, and that is what makes it close to Openness to Experience in the theory of Costa and McCrae (1992). Its correlation with conflict management styles in past research varies across papers: some researchers found it to be positively related to Integrating (Antonioni, 1998; Khalid, 2015; Park & Antonioni, 2007), while others describe it as positively correlated with Obliging, Dominating, and Compromising (Ejaz et al., 2012). We understand Intellect as an ability to find creative conflict resolution - searching further within the range of accessible options concerning self or others. Such solutions are mainly found through Compromising or Integrating (Cooperating), so we hypothesize these two styles to be highly and positively correlated with the personality trait of Intellect.

Finally, Conscientiousness is understood as aiming at efficiency and rationality in one's behavior. Previous studies provided support for its irrelevance in conflict management styles (Park & Antonioni, 2007) or only partial relevance (Khalid, 2015). We assume that focusing on the rational conflict outcome depends somewhat on the organizational context than the personality traits of conflict parties. So, we do not expect to observe any significant correlations between Conscientiousness and conflict management preferences.

In conclusion, we expect that gender differences in conflict resolution styles will be a result of indirect effects of gender via personality traits, mainly of Agreeableness and Emotional Stability.

Method

Participants

A sample of 1873 participants was recruited via a national survey panel, but prior to statistical analyses, we decided to exclude participants with no professional job experience ($N = 304$) and those who did not respond correctly to any of the two “trap questions” ($N = 514$). As a result, we obtained a sample of 1055 persons (52.7% women, 47.3% men), ranging in age from 16 to 79 years old ($M = 37.92$, $SD = 12.82$). In terms of education, 1.6% of participants indicated primary school education, 7.7% vocational (elementary professional school), 44.7% secondary education, and 46.0 % had university education (BA or MA). Among the participants, 70.2% were employed during the time of the survey, while 29.8% had previous working experience but were not employed at this time. Regarding their position at work, 72.2% of currently employed participants were subordinate or stand-alone, and 22.8% were managers. Their average job experience was 14.83 months ($SD = 12.02$).

Procedure and measures

Participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire about their employment status, gender, and age, followed by the self-describing measures with one additional item in each questionnaire. This “trap” question was displayed at random places of each set to control the level of attention (participants were asked to choose one specific answer, for example: “*I strongly disagree*”). No financial reward was provided for participation in the research. The data were analyzed in IBM SPSS 24 software, and for structural equation modelling, the AMOS software was employed.

Personality. All of the participants were asked to fill out the short 20-item Big Five Inventory (IPIP-BFM-20; Topolewska, Skimina, Strus, Cieciuch, & Rowinski, 2014), a Polish adaptation of Goldberg’s (1992) IPIP-BFM-50. It was shortened by the authors based on the Donnellan and colleagues (2006) procedure, which aimed to maximize scales’ internal consistency and independence. Calculation for each BFM personality dimension was made by averaging the scores from four corresponding items; two items per scale were reversely scored. The Cronbach’s alphas are presented in Table 1. CFA for the structure of scale indicated good model fit (see Chen, 2007), with $\chi^2/df = 4.11$, $p < .001$, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .054 (.052-.059), $p_{close} = .052$, SRMR = .052.

Table 1. Zero-order correlations and Cronbach alpha reliabilities ($N = 1,055$)

Scale	Cronbach's α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. STAB	.71	-								
2. EXTR	.81	.28***	-							
3. AGR	.70	.06	.38***	-						
4. CONS	.70	.18***	.16***	.26***	-					
5. INTE	.65	.26***	.40***	.24***	.14***	-				
6. INTEGR	.84	.17***	.32***	.41***	.22***	.29***	-			
7. AVOID	.69	-.14***	-.23***	.08**	.09**	-.17***	.04	-		
8. OBLIG	.80	-.10***	-.13***	.11***	.06	-.17***	.13***	.43***	-	
9. COMPR	.63	.08*	.17***	.31***	.12***	.21***	.62***	.16***	.24***	-
10. DOMIN	.78	-.05	.07*	-.24***	-.08*	.05	-.12***	-.02	-.06	-.05

Note. IPIP-BFM-20 subscales: STAB = Emotional Stability, EXTR = Extraversion, AGR = Agreeableness, CONS = Conscientiousness, INTE = Intellect; ROCI-II subscales: INTEGR = Integrating, AVOID = Avoiding, OBLIG = Obliging, COMPR = Compromising, DOMIN = Dominating.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Conflict Management Styles. The Polish translation of Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983), consisting of 28 items measuring individual preferences for five different conflict management styles, was used. Since no attempt to investigate conflict in any specific hierarchical relationship was made, the opponent was consistently named “the second party” (instead of supervisor, subordinate, etc.). Participants were instructed to recall a similar conflict situation from their past career and to rate each item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's alphas are presented in Table 1. CFA performed for the structure of the scale indicated good model fit (Chen, 2007), i.e. $\chi^2/df = 3.41$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .048 [.044-.052], $pclose = .829$, SRMR = .058.

Results

Structural model

In order to examine the relationships between gender, BFM traits, and styles of conflict management, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. To assess the model fit, we followed broadly used criteria: chi-square should be insignificant, RMSEA and SRMR both below .08 for good fit and .05 for an excellent fit, normalized fit indicator (NFI), comparative fit indicator (CFI) both above .90 for good fit and above .95 for an excellent fit. As in the large samples (n above 200), chi-square tend to be distorted; the relative chi-square is recommended, with a value below 3 for excellent fit and 5 for good fit (Chen, 2007; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

In the first examined model, only gender and conflict management styles were included (gender effects on conflict

management styles were tested). The model indicated good fit to the data, with $\chi^2/df = 3.40$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .048 [.044-.051], $p_{close} = .857$, SRMR = .056. In general, women indicated higher scores on Integrating ($\beta = .07$, $p = .029$), Avoiding ($\beta = .09$, $p = .023$), and Compromising ($\beta = .08$, $p = .035$), while men scored higher on Obliging ($\beta = .11$, $p = .002$) and Dominating ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$).

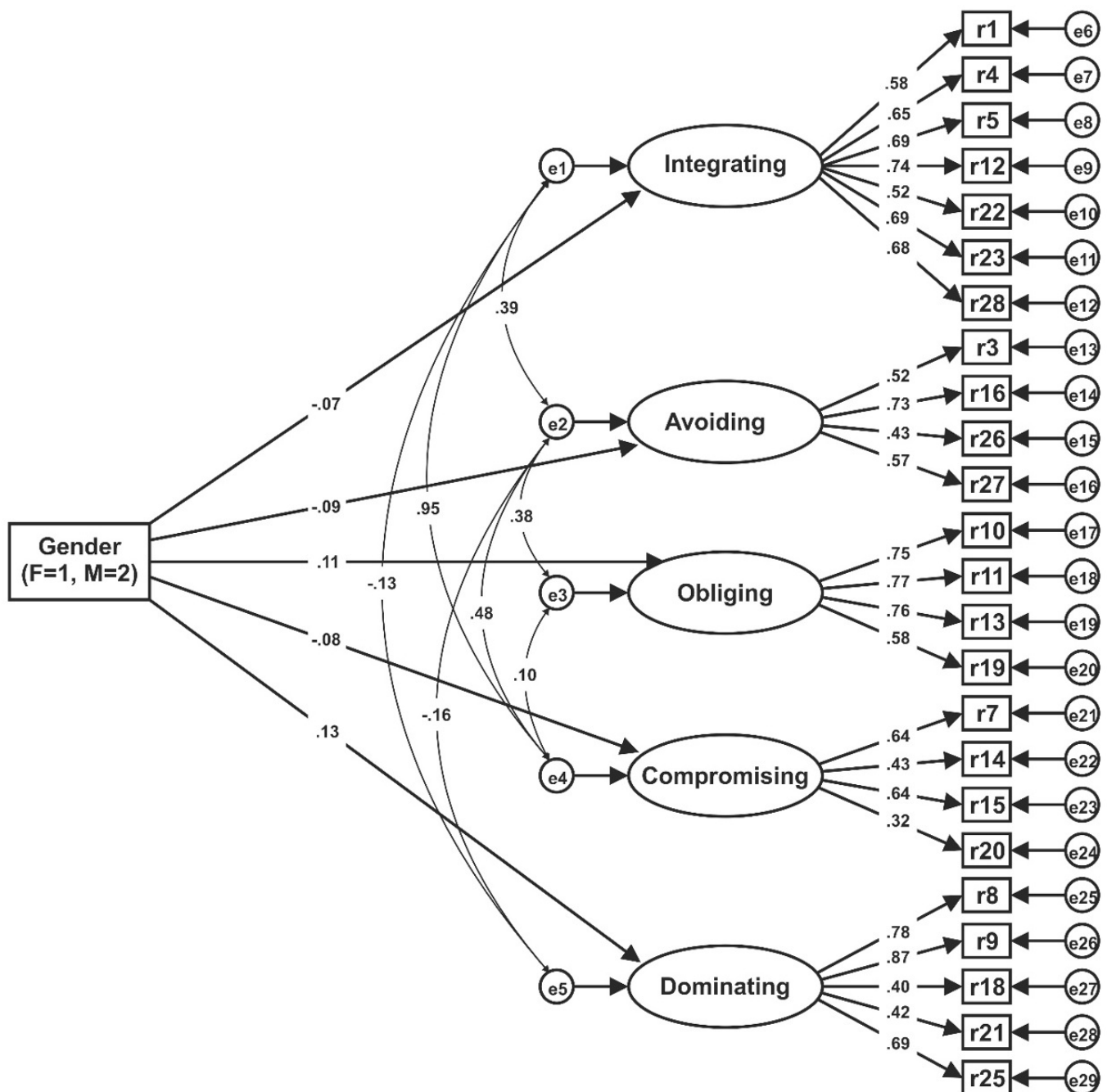


Figure 1. Structural indirect model of interrelationships between gender and conflict management styles (ROCI-II items: r1-r28).

The second model examined the relationship between gender, personality, and conflict management styles. Only the full mediational model was analyzed here, as all competitive models, including direct paths between gender and conflict management styles, occurred to be poorer fitted to the data than the full mediational model, and all direct paths were

insignificant (detailed analyses available on request from the last author).

To obtain a good model fit, we allowed for correlations between measurement errors for items of IPIP-BFM-20: 2 and 12 (Agreeableness scale), 8 and 18 (Conscientiousness scale), 5 and 10 (Intellect scale). Additionally, we allowed for correlations between items constituting different IPIP-BFM-20 scales: 7 and 16, 17 and 18, and 10 and 13. For ROCI-II, we removed four items: 6 and 17 from Avoiding and 2 and 24 from Obliging scale. In addition, we allowed for correlation of errors: for items 4 and 5; 22 and 23; 23 and 28 (Integrating); 26 and 27 (Avoiding), and additionally for items representing different scales (3 and 4, 15 and 18, 19 and 20, 21 and 22, 21 and 26, 27 and 28). We also allowed for correlations between personality traits and conflict management styles.

We compared two alternative models: one assuming direct paths between gender and conflict management styles in addition to indirect effects via personality traits, and the second – assuming only indirect effects of gender. Since the model assuming direct paths was not better fitted to the data than the full-mediational model ($\Delta CFI = .005$; $\Delta RMSEA = .001$, i.e., lower than recommended cut-off .01 for CFI and .015 for RMSEA; Chen, 2007), therefore we focused on the analysis of the full-mediational model.

The final model (see Figure 2) occurred to be good fitted to the data, $\chi^2 (897, n = 1055) = 2355.55, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 2.63$, CFI = .90, SRMR = .06; RMSEA = .039 [.037-.041], $pclose = 1.00$.

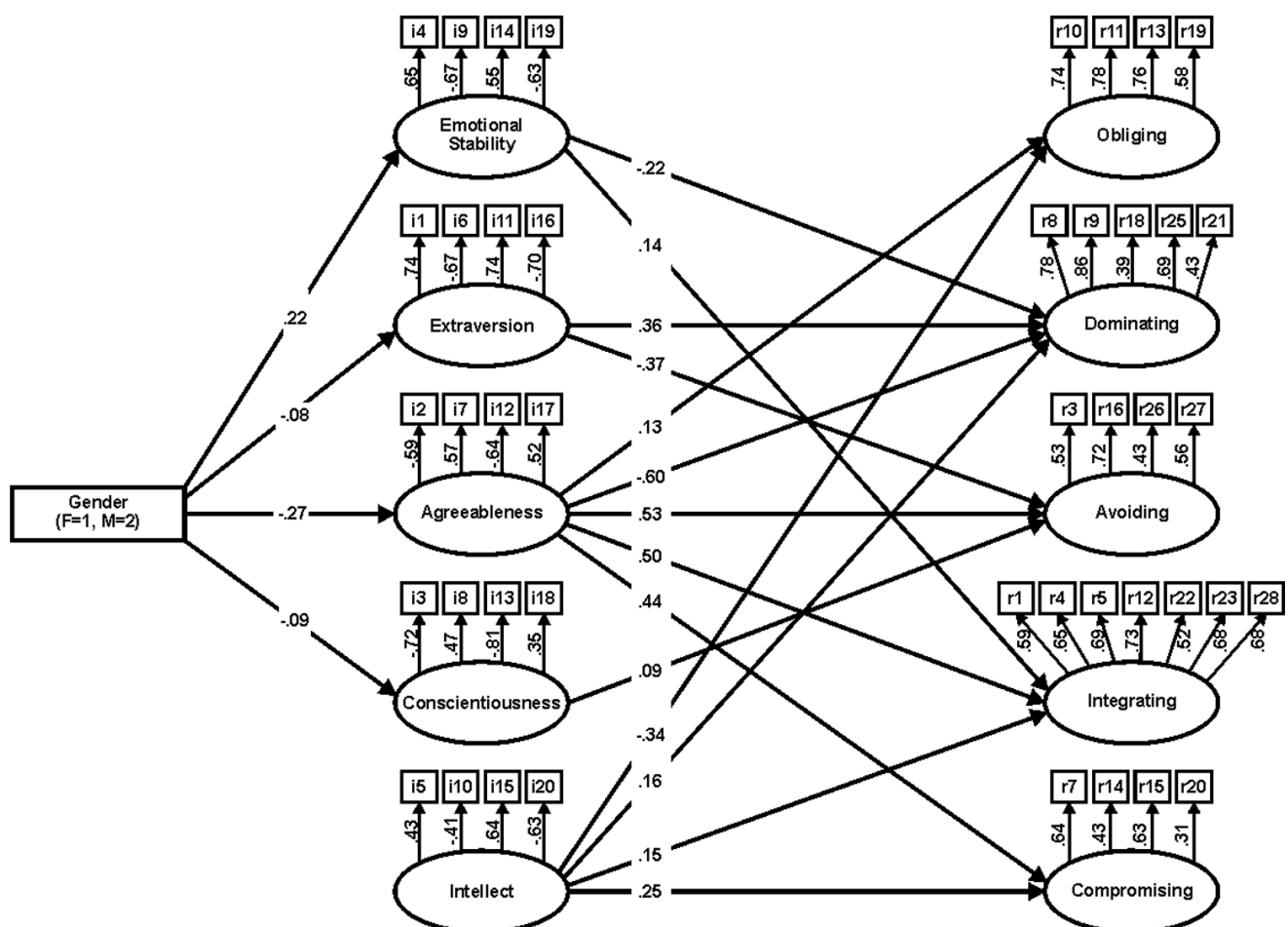


Figure 2. Structural mediated model of interrelationships between gender, personality (IPIP-BFM-20 items: i1–i20), and conflict management styles (ROCI-II items: r1–r28).

Men manifested higher levels of Emotional Stability ($\beta = .22$), but lower levels of Extraversion ($\beta = -.08$), Agreeableness ($\beta = -.27$), and Conscientiousness ($\beta = -.09$). Emotional Stability was positively associated with Integrating ($\beta = .14$) and negatively associated with Dominating ($\beta = -.22$). Agreeableness was positively associated with Integrating ($\beta = .50$), Compromising ($\beta = .44$), Avoiding ($\beta = .53$), Obliging ($\beta = .13$) and negatively with Dominating ($\beta = -.60$). Extraversion was positively related to Dominating ($\beta = .36$) and negatively to Avoiding ($\beta = -.37$). Intellect was positively associated with Compromising ($\beta = .25$), Dominating ($\beta = .16$), Integrating ($\beta = .15$), but negatively to Obliging ($\beta = -.34$). Therefore, gender differences in preferences for conflict management styles were fully explained by gender differences in four personality traits: Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness. Specifically, women's higher preference for Integrating was explained by their Agreeableness but partially reduced by the lower level of their Emotional Stability. On the other hand, higher domination (i.e., focus on self-interest) among men was explained by the lower level of their Agreeableness – however, this relation was partially neutralized via the Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness traits. Levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness seem responsible for a higher tendency to avoid among women, but their higher Extraversion reduces this effect. Finally, higher levels of Obliging and Compromising among women resulted from higher levels of Agreeableness.

Discussion

The present study aimed to answer the question about the actual importance of gender in conflict management styles. We hypothesized that gender would be related to preferences in conflict management styles via personality traits, as former studies indicated the significant role of personality factors in choosing different conflict management styles (Antonioni, 1998; Moberg, 2001). We assumed that gender differences in preferences for particular conflict management styles have a predominantly indirect character. Specifically, we expected gender to be related to conflict management via Agreeableness and Emotional Stability, consistent with past research (Costa & McRae, 1992; Wood & Bell, 2008). Our findings suggest a mediating role of four of five basic personal traits: Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, and Extraversion. Intellect was related to virtually all conflict management styles (apart from Avoiding) but unrelated to gender.

Congruently with predictions, the model assuming only an indirect relationship between gender and conflict management styles was well fitted to the data. In contrast, the competing model (assuming additionally direct effects of gender on conflict management styles) was not better fitted to the data. Therefore, we focused on analyzing the full-mediational model.

We have found that women's higher preference for cooperative (i.e., focusing on others interest) strategies was related to their higher Agreeableness. However, women also indicated higher levels of Extraversion (associated positively with competing styles, i.e., focusing on self-interest), so the effect of gender on the social aspect of conflict management is

quite mixed and ambiguous.

It should be noted that gender is not only associated with cooperative versus competitive strategies but is also linked to Avoiding. Different personal traits mediate male and female preferences for Avoiding. Specifically, men prefer this style due to their lower Extraversion, while women prefer it due to their higher Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Male preferences towards competitive styles were mediated by their lower Agreeableness, but - on the other hand - they also indicated lower Extraversion, which was positively related to Competing.

Finally, what was unpredicted and unexpected in our study was the finding of a positive relationship between Agreeableness and Avoiding. This result can be explained in terms of cultural differences, as our research was conducted in Poland - a country of high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) and low interpersonal trust (Grześkowiak, 2014). Therefore, in such a cultural environment (lack of trust towards mates resulting in uncertainty about the possible outcomes of the conflict), people may prefer an avoiding style (passive strategy) instead of getting engaged in conflict. Moreover, Agreeableness may be closely related to any form of responsiveness to conflict (Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, 2001) – so avoiding can be understood as a form of defensive strategy for conflict-averse individuals.

In general, men and women have preferences both for competing and collaborating strategies. Our findings explain what personal traits are responsible for preferences towards particular styles, and how gender differences in four basic personal traits could explain different strategies in conflict management.

Limitations and suggestions for further works

The proposed paper has certain limitations, both related to methodology and sample. As our research is a cross-sectional self-report study, we cannot arrive at any casual conclusions (all of the results should be treated as purely correlational measures). Using such a simple design we could also not control for other important variables (possibly influencing conflict management), such as opponent's gender or organizational hierarchy. Furthermore, carrying out this research on a Polish sample does not allow for a straight generalization of findings to other nationalities. As culture seems to have a significant impact on the relationship of gender with conflict management (Holt & DeVore, 2005), the current results should be interpreted with caution.

Although our findings are consistent with the existing literature (especially about gender differences in Agreeableness and Emotional Stability), the analysis also delivers some unexpected results. One of them is the positive correlation between Agreeableness and Avoiding style: although similar results were shown in the previous studies about personality and conflict engagement among adolescents (Missotten et al., 2016), the factual underpinnings of this relation require further investigation.

The obtained results offer new evidence in the arena of organizational conflict research. The most interesting is the finding that the relationship between participants' gender and their conflict management styles is fully mediated by personality. In light of those results, the gender differences (understood consistently with common stereotypes) seem to be strongly

overestimated. The advantage of our study is primarily the stereotype-free approach: searching for an explanation of observed differences not in terms of affiliation to the gender group – but in terms of psychological aspects differentiating those groups. This approach is unique (there are no similar studies in the existing conflict management literature) and may be an inspiration for further research about other elements of organizational behavior. Therefore, current research can offer significant input to existing knowledge in the field and to further discussion about gender behaviors in organizations.

Statements and Declarations

Consideration of Ethical Issues

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