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Interpersonal conflict and counterproductive work behavior: the moderating roles of emotional intelligence and gender

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine how interpersonal conflict at work might enhance employees' propensity to engage in counterproductive work behavior (CWB), as well as how this relationship might be attenuated by emotional intelligence. It also considers how the attenuating role of emotional intelligence might depend on employees' gender.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data were collected from 193 employees working in different organizations in Pakistan.

Findings – Interpersonal conflict relates positively to CWB, but this relationship is weaker at higher levels of emotional intelligence. The negative buffering role of emotional intelligence is particularly strong among women as compared to men.

Practical implications – Given that individuals high in emotional intelligence are better at regulating their negative emotions, emotional intelligence training may be a powerful tool for reducing the hostility elicited among organizational members in response to interpersonal conflict and, consequently, their engagement in CWB.

Originality/value – This study uncovered the emotional mechanism that underlies the interpersonal conflict–CWB relationship by gender and makes suggestions to managers on minimizing the harmful effects of interpersonal conflict.

Keywords Emotional intelligence, Gender, Interpersonal conflict, Counterproductive work behavior

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Interpersonal conflict refers to “the manifestation of incompatibility, inconsistency, or disagreement between two or more interacting individuals” (Rahim, 2011, p. 87). The accumulated evidence suggests that interpersonal conflict is alarmingly common in the workplace (Tremmel *et al.*, 2019; Yang *et al.*, 2019). For example, Danielsson *et al.* (2015) reported that among thousands of participants in their studies over the past two years, 84%

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had reported being in some type of conflict situation with their coworkers, and about 50% had experienced it on a weekly basis. In addition to its high prevalence, interpersonal conflict has been found to have detrimental effects on employee job attitudes, health and well-being, nonwork life and performance (for reviews, see [Bonaccio et al., 2019](#); [Kuriakose et al., 2019](#); [Notelaers et al., 2018](#); [Ye et al., 2019](#)). In addition to the negative effects of interpersonal conflict on individuals' work and health-related outcomes, [Zhou et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that effects of interpersonal conflict at work can spill over to employees' negative work behaviors.

One important negative work behavior outcome of interpersonal conflict that has been examined is workplace deviance, also known as counterproductive work behavior (CWB) ([Ma and Liu, 2019](#); [O'Connor et al., 2017](#)). CWB has been defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" ([Robinson and Bennett, 1995](#), p. 556). CWB has been shown to have detrimental effects on both organizational and individual outcomes such as Machiavellianism, frustration, job dissatisfaction, turnover intentions and reduced organizational performance and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) ([Bennett and Robinson, 2000](#); [Chen and Wang, 2019](#); [Dunlop and Lee, 2004](#)), indicating the importance of exploring its potential antecedents and contextual factors to understand how it develops ([De Clercq et al., 2021](#)).

Accordingly, the current study aims to extend the previous research on negative outcomes of interpersonal conflict by examining the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB. Moreover, prior research shows that the effect of interpersonal conflict varies across individuals indicating the presence of moderators regulating the relationship between interpersonal conflict and its outcomes ([Kuriakose et al., 2019](#)). Therefore, in addition, we investigate a moderated-moderation analysis, considering two conditional effects – employees' emotional intelligence (high vs. low) and gender (men vs. women) – as potential moderators. Through examining these relationships, our study contributes to the current literature in three ways.

First, we contribute to the understanding of why interpersonal conflict at work is linked with CWB. Although [Zhang et al. \(2019\)](#) examined the impact of role conflict on employee CWB, research into the interpersonal conflict–CWB relationship remains limited. Previous research suggests that interpersonal conflict at work fosters deviant behavior among employees (e.g. [Ma and Liu, 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2019](#)). Thus, on the basis of the social exchange theory ([Blau, 1964](#)), we answer recent calls to examine the effects of interpersonal conflict at work on employee negative work behaviors, specifically on CWB ([Zhao et al., 2018](#)).

Second, we examine how employee emotional intelligence, as a stable personal resource-depleting job stressor, may moderate the interpersonal conflict–CWB relationship. Although previous studies have examined various contextual and job-related factors (e.g. social support, leadership and conflict management climate) as moderators of the relationship between workplace conflict and CWB (e.g. [Chiu et al., 2015](#); [Einarsen et al., 2018](#); [Morgan et al., 2018](#)), little knowledge exists about how individual differences may influence this relationship. On the basis of the conservation of resources (COR) theory ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)), we examine the moderating role of individuals' emotional intelligence – individuals' ability to understand and manage their own and others' emotions ([Petrides and Furnham, 2006](#)) – on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB. Thus, we contribute to the theoretical understanding of boundary conditions related to the effects of interpersonal conflict ([Gu et al., 2020](#); [Park et al., 2020](#)).

Third, we contribute to research on negative outcomes of workplace conflict by testing whether the buffering role of emotional intelligence might be particularly salient across gender (men vs. women). Previous research suggests that the usefulness of personal resources for mitigating the positive effect of interpersonal conflict cannot be considered in isolation (Sharma *et al.*, 2016). Research suggests that individuals differ fundamentally in their attitudes while dealing with others (Cinamon and Rich, 2002). For example, research has shown that women in particular are better than men in managing their emotions (McIntyre, 2010; Tsaousis and Kazi, 2013). Therefore, we examine gender as a contingency variable for the joint role of interpersonal conflict and emotional intelligence on employee CWB. By examining gender as a moderator of the interpersonal conflict–emotional intelligence interaction on individual CWB, our goal is to add new perspectives to the theoretical knowledge on interpersonal conflict–CWB linkages and indicate whether differences in individual attitudes and gender could be considered together to better understand these theoretical associations.

Finally, another novel feature of the current study is the context and the geographic location in which it is based. The present study was conducted in a developing Asian country context (i.e. Pakistan) where interpersonal conflict indicates a great threat to organization's performance (Shaukat *et al.*, 2017) and has caused much stress to individual employees, intensifying conflict among their families and communities. Thus, the present study provides an opportunity to investigate whether internal conflict at work can manifest in negative work behaviors.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Interpersonal conflict and counterproductive work behavior

Interpersonal conflict refers to a negative interpersonal encounter characterized by a contentious exchange, hostility or aggression (Ilies *et al.*, 2011). It is also referred to “the manifestation of incompatibility, inconsistency, or disagreement between two or more interacting individuals” (Rahim, 2011, p. 87). According to Thomas (1992, p. 653), interpersonal conflict is a “process that begins when one party perceives that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about.” Interpersonal conflict overlaps, yet is distinct from, several other negative workplace phenomena such as workplace bullying or workplace incivility, which are typically described as negative aggressive behaviors that are repeated and long-lasting. So far, only a handful of studies have examined the impact of interpersonal conflict on CWB (Bruck-Lee and Spector, 2006; Haq, 2011; Kessler *et al.*, 2013), which warrants further attention.

CWB is a set of undesirable work behaviors that are intentional and harm, or intend to harm, the organization and/or its stakeholders (Gruys and Sackett, 2003). CWB is either directed toward the organization or its individuals (Bennett and Robinson, 2000). CWB directed toward the organization (CWB-O) includes stealing and damaging organizational property and withdrawal behaviors (Robinson and Bennett, 1995). On the other hand, CWB directed toward individuals (CWB-I) includes psychologically or psychically harming coworker, ignoring others and gossiping about peers (Bennett and Robinson, 2000). In the present study, we examine the effects of interpersonal conflict on CWB-O and CWB-I, rather than on CWB alone, given that previous research suggests that using CWB as an aggregate obscures its relationship with probable antecedents (Naseer *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, researchers argued that both CWB-O and CWB-I contain a set of overlapping behaviors that are detrimental to the organization, with the nature and target of these behaviors being different (Spector and Fox, 2002). Therefore, although we expect similar relationships for CWB-O and CWB-I, we treat them separately so that possible differences may be identified.

The current study uses social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) as a theoretical lens to understand the influence of interpersonal conflict on the respective employees' CWB. Social exchange theory is one of the most important conceptual paradigms used to understand individuals' behaviors in the workplace (Khattak *et al.*, 2020). This theory suggests that individuals develop exchange relationships based on their experiences with others (Cook *et al.*, 2013; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976). In other words, the exchanges that take place between individuals are largely seen as interdependent and contingent on rewarding reactions from others in the social relationship and thus generate obligations (i.e. reciprocity) (Blau, 1964).

The concept of reciprocity is the essence of social exchange theory, which is often framed as a particular form of social exchange (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). According to the norm of reciprocity, people who receive benefits from others feel obligated to reciprocate the same behavior (Gouldner, 1960). The norm of reciprocity is classified into two types (i.e. positive and negative norm of reciprocity). The norm of positive reciprocity induces an individual to return positive treatment for positive treatment, whereas the norm of negative reciprocity induces an individual to return negative treatment for negative treatment (Faldetta, 2020; Gouldner, 1960). According to Gouldner (1960), in the norm of negative reciprocity, individuals may perform negative behaviors against those who treat them inappropriately. In a recent study, Faldetta (2020) found that the norm of negative reciprocity can increase the likelihood that employees engage themselves in CWB. Low *et al.* (2019) also argued that the CWB is social behavior resulting from verbal transactions or exchanges (i.e. interpersonal conflict).

Accordingly, we draw on social exchange theory to explore the effects of interpersonal conflict at work on employee negative reactions, specifically CWB. We suggest that employees encountering conflicting experiences with others at work, in exchange, may return the favor by adopting CWB, including behaviors such as damaging or stealing company property, abusing coworkers and exposing colleagues to risk. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Interpersonal conflict at work will be positively related to (a) CWB-O and (b) CWB-I.

Moderating role of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence can be defined as “an ability to recognize the meanings of emotions and their relationships, and to reason and problem-solve on the basis of them” (Mayer *et al.*, 1999, p. 267). Emotional intelligence also refers to a set of emotional abilities to understand, manage and use emotional information (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Previous research has examined the moderating role of emotional intelligence on the relationships between different variables such as perceived stress and suicidal ideation (Abdollahi *et al.*, 2016), personality and creativity (Jafri, 2020) and perceived threat of terrorism and workplace deviance (Shah *et al.*, 2020). Results of previous studies suggest that emotional intelligence may also serve as a moderator on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB. For instance, emotionally intelligent people are more capable of controlling themselves; therefore, they are more likely to avoid indulging in negative activities that may harm their organizations (Ugwu *et al.*, 2017).

According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), individuals feel stress when they experience actual resource loss, a lack of resource gain or a threat of resource loss. Resources refer to physical objects, individual characteristics, status and social ties (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). According to Shaukat *et al.* (2017), conflict between individuals leads to loss of resources which then manifests in the form of stress. The COR theory also suggests that when

individuals experience the threat of job resource loss, they strive to minimize the resource loss and prevent future resource loss. They make use of the existing resources to offset resource loss. Therefore, in line with COR theory, we argue that employees facing interpersonal conflict will experience resource loss and, as a result, they will strive to offset this resource loss through their existing resources, i.e. through their personal characteristics (Zhao and Guo, 2019). Thus, emotional intelligence as a personal trait (Cheng *et al.*, 2012) could be a valuable resource that has a stress reducing effect and provides the potential to cope with the negative emotional reactions owing to interpersonal conflict.

Research has highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence for individuals dealing with stressful situations (Abdollahi *et al.*, 2016). For instance, Sharma *et al.* (2016) argued that emotional intelligence plays a moderating role in the relationship between workplace conflict and individual emotional and behavioral reactions to such conflict. Soomro *et al.* (2019) argued that though stressful events trigger employee CWB; thus, how employees process their emotions induced by stressful events can significantly affect their engagement in CWB (Balogun *et al.*, 2018; Ugwu *et al.*, 2017). As stated by Chen *et al.* (2019), individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are better able to understand, regulate and make use of emotional information than those with lower levels. Therefore, employees will differ in the propensity to engage in CWB in the face of stressful events such as workplace conflict (Ma and Liu, 2019). Therefore, based on above arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H2. The relationships of interpersonal conflict with (a) CWB-O and (b) CWB-I will be negatively moderated by emotional intelligence, such that the positive relationship is weaker at higher levels of emotional intelligence.

Role of gender

Finally, we highlight the potential role of gender in relation to interpersonal conflict and CWB. The workplace conflict literature calls attention to gender differences in experiencing, perpetrating and responding to conflict at work (Gabriel *et al.*, 2018; Graham *et al.*, 2018; Hopwood *et al.*, 2020). Gender has been found to correlate with CWB targeted at both individuals and organizations (Chiu *et al.*, 2015; De Clercq *et al.*, 2019) and considered as a potential moderator in the relationship between CWB and its predictors, such as personality, job stressors, negative affect and incivility (Samnani *et al.*, 2014; Spector and Zhou, 2014; Welbourne and Sariol, 2017).

To date, very little research has examined the moderating role of gender on the relationship between work stressors and CWB. Interpersonal conflict is considered as one of the most important workplace stressors (Keenan and Newton, 1985). Bowling and Burns (2015) found that men were more likely than women to report engaging in greater amounts of CWB at high (versus low) levels of workplace stressors. They argued that gender differences may emerge because men have greater impulsivity than women (Szabó and Jones, 2019), with control being a central component of being able to refrain from engaging in CWB (Ju *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, Chen *et al.* (2019) found that, as compared to women, men were more engaged in CWB.

Biological and social factors also explain gender differences in emotional intelligence (Fernández-Berrocá *et al.*, 2012). According to the biological explanation, certain areas of the brain committed to emotional processing can be larger in women than men, which makes women better prepared to consider their own emotions and those of others (Baron-Cohen, 2002, 2003; Gur *et al.*, 2002). According to the social explanation, women spend their social time connected to the emotional world (Candela Agulló *et al.*, 2002) and, as compared to men,

are more occupied with maintaining their and others' positive emotions to prevent the deterioration of interpersonal relations (Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson, 2001). Therefore, we expect that the negative buffering effect of emotional intelligence on interpersonal conflict and CWB relation will be stronger for women with high emotional intelligence than men. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

- H3.* The negative buffering effect of emotional intelligence on interpersonal conflict and CWB [(a) CWB-O; (b) CWB-I] relation is moderated by gender, such that this negative buffering effect is stronger for women with high emotional intelligence than men.

Methods

Study context

Pakistan was selected as the empirical context because in Pakistan interpersonal conflict indicates a great threat to organization's performance (Shaukat *et al.*, 2017). More specifically, Pakistan's media, information technology (IT) and telecom sectors have grown rapidly, suggesting a need for careful consideration of intra-organizational issues, such as interpersonal conflicts (Yousaf *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the high demand for services of interrelated sectors of media, IT, and telecom led to intensified competition putting pressure on those who work in these sectors to perform well. In turn, these employees generally face a heavy workload and came across different types of work-related conflict (Yousaf *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, gender and emotions are particularly important in a developing country like Pakistan, which is predominately a male-oriented society where issues of traditional negative gender-role stereotyping for women, sexual discrimination, domestic violence, fundamentalism and intimidation against women, lower literacy and employment rates for women are still prevalent (see UN report: The World's Women, 2010). Hence, it is expected that women in the labor force have to work in a traditional and sexually tense environment, and the presumed male domination of Pakistani organizations and numerical imbalance between genders (Fairhurst and Snaveley, 1983; Kanter, 1977) most likely lead to great discomfort in cross-gender interactions (Badar *et al.*, 2013; Hendrick, 1981). Women in Pakistani organizations, therefore, may rely on their emotional intelligence for better work-related outcomes.

Participants and procedure

Invitations to participate in a survey were distributed among 300 employees working in 15 different organizations of Pakistan operating in the following interrelated sectors: media (e.g. print and electronic), IT (e.g. software and hardware) and telecom. The organizations were either a private, public or a multinational. The organizations were small and mid-sized, and the size of their workforces ranged from a low of 35 to a high of 140. We approached all the organizations using our professional contacts and personally collected the data via paper-and-pencil method. Researchers distributed the questionnaires to participants before the lunch time and collected them after the lunch time, thus ensuring that participants could respond without the presence of the researchers.

As data were collected at single point in time, we adopted several procedural remedies as suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) to address the issue of common method bias. The procedural remedies included ensuring respondents' anonymity, stating in the cover letter that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and that their candor was strongly encouraged, explaining the purpose of the study clearly, ordering items in a way to

reduce priming effects and reducing item ambiguity by first completing a pilot study to reduce item ambiguity.

Out of 300 employees contacted, 211 questionnaires were received representing a response rate of 70.3%. We excluded seven questionnaires as they displayed pattern responses (e.g. providing the same rating for all items) which can jeopardize the integrity of research findings (Meade and Craig, 2012) and 11 questionnaires owing to significant missing data. As a result, the final sample comprised 193 respondents, with a response rate of 64.3%. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic characteristics.

Measures

All the scales were taken from earlier research and presented in English as it is the official language of business organizations in Pakistan (Kundi et al., 2020). Unless stated otherwise, all items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Interpersonal conflict. We measured interpersonal conflict with a five-item scale developed by Spector et al. (1988). Examples of items are "People are often rude to me at work" and "I often get into arguments with others at work." Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.89.

Counterproductive work behavior. We measured CWB using 12 items taken from Aquino et al.'s (1999) workplace deviance scale, which consists of two dimensions. CWB-O was measured using seven items, for example, "I took undeserved breaks to avoid work." Cronbach's alpha = 0.93. CWB-I was measured using five items, for example, "I swore at a coworker." Cronbach's alpha = 0.95. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale varying from 1 = never to 5 = very often. Cronbach's alpha of overall scale was 0.78.

Emotional intelligence. We measured employees' emotional intelligence using 12 items borrowed from Wong and Law (2002) comprised of four subscales, namely, (i) self-emotion appraisal (i.e. "I have good understanding of my own emotions"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.87), (ii) others' emotion appraisal (i.e. "I have good understanding of the emotions of people around me"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.91), (iii) use of emotion (i.e. "I always tell myself I am a competent person"; Cronbach's alpha = 0.89) and (iv) regulation of emotion (i.e. "I am able to

Demographic	Description	Frequency	% of total <i>n</i>
Gender	Male	109	56.5
	Female	84	43.6
Age (in years)	Less than 25	23	12.0
	25–35	115	59.5
	More than 35	55	28.5
Education	Bachelors	41	21.2
	Masters	106	54.9
	MS/MPhil	46	23.8
Work experience	Less than 5	116	60.2
	5–10	54	27.9
	More than 10	23	11.9
Are you a manager?	No	121	62.7
	Yes	56	37.3

Note: *n* = 193

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of respondents

control my temper and handle difficulties rationally”; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.90). Each subscale was measured with four items. Cronbach’s alpha of overall scale was 0.96.

Gender. Employee gender was self-reported, with women coded as 0 and men as 1.

Control variables. We controlled for employee age, education and work experience that might covary with CWB (De Clercq *et al.*, 2019; Soomro *et al.*, 2019). Previous research suggests that the emotional maturity that comes with age may make it less likely that older employees undertake negative work behaviors (Pletzer *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, individual characteristics like education and work experience might also increase employees’ confidence that they can protect themselves against negative repercussions that might arise from their deviant behaviors (De Clercq *et al.*, 2019).

Data analyses

Following the guidelines of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we first conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) including all latent variables (i.e. interpersonal conflict, CWB-I, CWB-O and emotional intelligence) to check the discriminant validity of the measurement model. Afterward, we conducted descriptive analysis and estimated our intended model through ordinary least squares regressions using PROCESS macro-Model 3 (see Hayes, 2017 for details) through statistical package for the social sciences (25th edition). Finally, we used the moderated-moderation model to test whether the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB, moderated by emotional intelligence, is moderated by gender (Figure 1). All estimated effects reported are unstandardized regression coefficients as recommended by Hayes (2017).

Results

Preliminary analysis

After the assessment of missing values and outliers, we tested the distribution of our variables and found that no variable approached skewness $> |3|$ (Chou and Bentler, 1995) or kurtosis values $> |10|$ (Kline, 2015), indicating the normal distribution of our data. Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation and bivariate correlation among the study variables. None of the correlation coefficients exceeded the level of 0.70, indicating the absence of multicollinearity among the variables. Interpersonal conflict was positively correlated with CWB-I ($r = 0.46, p < 0.01$) and CWB-O ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$). Emotional intelligence was negatively correlated with interpersonal conflict ($r = -0.22, p < 0.01$) and CWB-I ($r = -0.25, p < 0.01$), whereas it was not correlated with CWB-O ($r = -0.04, ns$).

Confirmatory factor analysis

Prior to hypotheses testing, we conducted a series of CFAs to examine the distinctiveness of each construct used in the present study. First, a CFA test was performed to measure the model

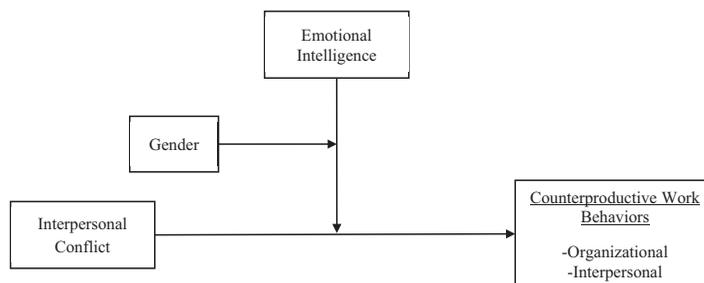


Figure 1.
Research model

Variables	Mean	SD	AVE	ASV	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	2.17	0.62	–	–	–							
2. Work experience	1.52	0.71	–	–	0.26**	–						
3. Education	2.03	0.67	–	–	0.13	0.26**	–					
4. Gender	0.56	0.49	–	–	0.03	0.09	–0.013	–				
5. Interpersonal conflict	2.35	0.80	0.69	0.11	–0.07	0.05	–0.11	0.06	–			
6. Emotional intelligence	3.34	1.01	0.62	0.03	0.16*	0.04	0.07	–0.10	–0.22**	–		
7. CWB-I	2.25	1.01	0.78	0.18	–0.12	0.07	–0.16*	0.15*	0.46**	–0.25**	–	
8. CWB-O	2.55	1.08	0.76	0.15	–0.09	0.01	–0.25**	0.06	0.41**	–0.04	0.66**	–

Notes: $n = 193$; AVE = Average variance extracted, ASV = Average shared variance; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2.
Intercorrelations, means and standard deviations among variables

fit of our intended four-factor model including interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence, CWB-I and CWB-O. Considering the cutoff value criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), our intended model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 794.9$, $df = 371$, comparative fit index = 0.964, root mean square error of approximation = 0.050 and standardized root mean square residual = 0.049).

Next, we compared our intended model against several alternative models including a three-factor model in which the two facets of CWB were combined together ($\Delta\chi^2 = 266.8$, $df = 3$). Theoretically, CWB has two dimensions, namely, CWB-I (directed at individuals) and CWB-O (directed at organization). These two dimensions of CWB are theoretically distinct (Spector et al., 1988), although they are correlated. As a result of this correlation, the comparison with the three-factor alternative where CWB-I and CWB-O load on the same factor is a stringent test of the validity of our four-factor model. Another reason for testing a three-factor model is that very few studies of CWB use Asian samples, and we cannot be sure that individuals in our sample can empirically distinguish between the two aspects of CWB. Additionally, we compared the intended model with a two-factor model in which interpersonal conflict was combined with emotional intelligence and CWB-I was combined with CWB-O ($\Delta\chi^2 = 412.2$, $df = 5$) and a one-factor model in which all variables were combined into one overall factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1,164.8$, $df = 6$). The results of CFA (Table 3) showed that the intended four-factor model had a significantly better fit than the alternative models.

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)
Four-factor model: include IC, EI, CWB-I and CWB-O	794.9**	371	0.050	0.964	0.049	–
Three-factor model: combines CWB-I and CWB-O	1,011.7**	374	0.079	0.855	0.097	266.8 (3)**
Two-factor model: combines IC with EI and CWB-I with CWB-O	1,157.1**	376	0.083	0.811	0.101	412.2 (5)**
One-factor model	1,909.7**	377	0.121	0.613	0.119	1,164.8 (6)**

Notes: EI = Emotional Intelligence; IC = Interpersonal conflict; CWB = Counterproductive work behaviors; df = Degree of freedom; RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = Standardized root mean square residual; CFI = Comparative fit index; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3.
Fit statistics of measurement models

We further assessed the construct validity through convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed through (i) factor loadings and (ii) average variance extracted (AVE) scores of each construct. According to [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#) and [Chin \(2010\)](#), both AVE scores and factor loadings should be greater than 0.5 and 0.6, respectively. Our results showed that the AVE score of each construct was greater than the cutoff value of 0.5, and the factor loadings of interpersonal conflict ranged from 0.81 to 0.87, emotional intelligence ranged from 0.72 to 0.90, CWB-I ranged from 0.87 to 0.94 and CWB-O ranged from 0.84 to 0.92 (all items significant at $p < 0.001$). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the AVE of each construct with its average shared variance (ASV) score, i.e. mean of the squared correlations among constructs ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). All the values of AVE were higher than the ASV constructs, thereby supporting discriminant validity ([Table 2](#)).

Common method variance

To address potential issues with common method variance, both procedural and statistical remedies were applied. As mentioned earlier, we adopted procedural remedies such as ensuring respondents' anonymity, reducing ambiguity in the survey questions and ordering items in a way to reduce priming effects ([Podsakoff et al., 2003](#)). Statistically, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with a principal axis factor extraction and direct oblimin rotation to ensure that each of the factors was perceived as distinct constructs by employees. We found that interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence, CWB-I and CWB-O loaded cleanly on their respective constructs. We also used CFA marker variable technique to determine if there was a common method bias. We used Williams and Anderson's (1991) seven-item task performance scale (e.g. I perform my tasks that are expected of me) as a marker variable. Following [Kundi et al. \(2020\)](#), we ran a model in which the indicators of the study's variables were specified to load onto the latent marker variable ($\chi^2 = 1,657.3$, $df = 522$) and compared it to a model in which they did not load onto the marker variable ($\chi^2 = 1,601.1$, $df = 568$). The results showed that CMV was not present, and so it did not bias the parameters of our model, as evidenced by a nonsignificant χ^2 difference test between the two models ($\Delta\chi^2 = 56.2$, $p = 0.14$).

Hypotheses testing

H1 suggested that interpersonal conflict positively relates to (a) CWB-O and (b) CWB-I. As can be seen in [Table 4](#), interpersonal conflict positively predicted CWB-O ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$) and CWB-I ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), supporting *H1a* and *H1b*.

H2 suggested that the relationships of interpersonal conflict with (a) CWB-O and (b) CWB-I will be moderated by emotional intelligence, such that the positive relationship is weaker at higher levels of emotional intelligence. Our results supported the buffering effect of emotional intelligence ($\beta = -0.51$, $p < 0.01$) on the interpersonal conflict and CWB-O relationship. Moreover, the buffering effect of emotional intelligence on the interpersonal conflict and CWB-I relationship was also significant ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, *H2a* and *H2b* were supported. To clarify the nature of this interaction, [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) plot the effects of interpersonal conflict on CWB at high and low levels of emotional intelligence, combined with a simple slope analysis ([Aiken and West, 1991](#)). The results of the simple slope analysis indicated that the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB-I was significant when emotional intelligence was low ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$) but became insignificant when it was high ($\beta = 0.05$, ns), in further support of *H2a*. Similarly, the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB-O was significant when emotional

Predictors	CWB-I		CWB-O	
	β	SE	β	SE
<i>Control variables</i>				
Age	-0.16	0.09	-0.23	0.17
Work experience	-0.01	0.08	0.08	0.15
Education	0.09	0.08	0.01	0.10
<i>Main variables</i>				
Interpersonal conflict (IC)	0.36**	0.09	0.43**	0.11
Emotional intelligence (EI)	-0.02	0.05	0.11	0.07
Gender	0.24*	0.14	0.05	0.21
IC \times EI	-0.51**	0.06	-0.39*	0.08
IC \times gender	-0.20	0.19	-0.10	0.24
EI \times gender	0.59**	0.20	0.62**	0.20
IC \times EI \times gender	-0.40**	0.14	-0.31*	0.17
R^2	0.48		0.30	
R^2 change	0.04**		0.02*	

Notes: $n = 193$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4. Ordinary least squares regression analysis predicting workplace deviance

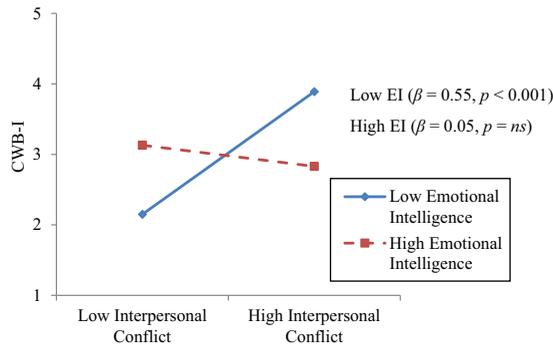


Figure 2. Interactive effects of emotional intelligence (EI) and interpersonal conflict on CWB-I

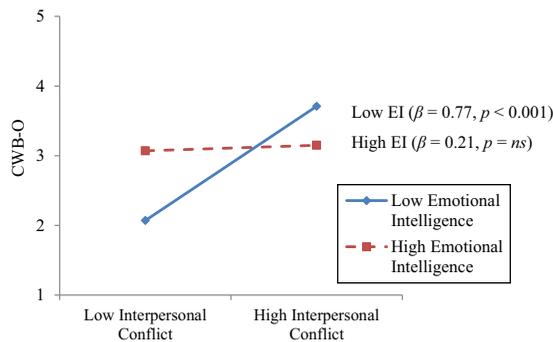


Figure 3. Interactive effects of emotional intelligence (EI) and interpersonal conflict on CWB-O

intelligence was low ($\beta = 0.77, p < 0.001$) but became insignificant when it was high ($\beta = 0.21, ns$), in further support of *H2b*.

Finally, the results supported the three-way interaction effect among interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender predicted in *H3a* and *H3b*. As predicted, there was a significant three-way interaction between interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender (all mean centered) in the prediction of CWB-O ($\beta = -0.31$, standard error (SE)= 0.17, $p < 0.01$). The effect of negative interaction term between emotional intelligence and interpersonal conflict on CWB-O was stronger for women ($\beta = -0.57, p < 0.01$) than for men ($\beta = -0.28, p < 0.01$). Similarly, the three-way interaction between interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender (all mean centered) in the prediction of CWB-I was significant ($\beta = -0.40$, SE = 0.14, $p < 0.01$). The effect of negative interaction term between emotional intelligence and interpersonal conflict on CWB-I was stronger for women ($\beta = -0.45, p < 0.01$) than for men ($\beta = -0.19, p < 0.05$). Thus, *H3a* and *H3b* were supported. To demonstrate the result of the three-way interaction, we followed the graphical procedure of [Aiken and West \(1991\)](#) in [Figures 4](#) and [5](#). As shown in [Figures 4](#) and [5](#), the effects of interpersonal

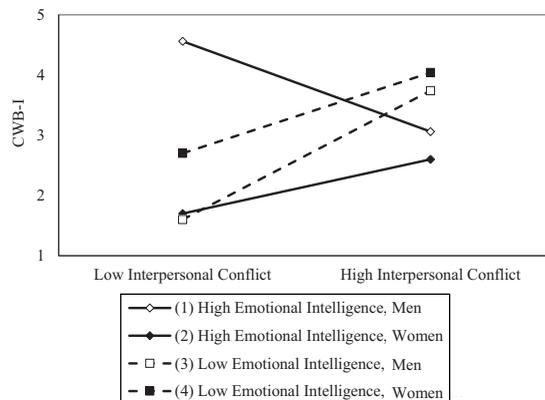


Figure 4. Three-way interactive relationship of interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender with CWB-I

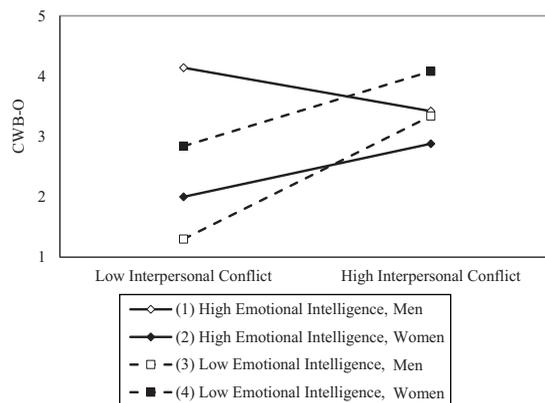


Figure 5. Three-way interactive relationship of interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender with CWB-O

conflict on CWB-I and CWB-O are weaker in case of women as compared to men when emotional intelligence is higher than low. That is, women with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less involved in both CWB-I and CWB-O as compared to men as a result of interpersonal conflict at work.

Discussion

Drawing from social exchange and COR theories (Blau, 1964; Hobfoll, 1989), we investigated the impact of interpersonal conflict on CWB-O and CWB-I along with the moderating roles of emotional intelligence and gender. Our results showed that interpersonal conflict positively influences employee CWB-O and CWB-I (*H1a* and *H1b* supported) likely owing to employees encountering conflicting experiences from others at work, returning the favor by adopting CWB (Low *et al.*, 2019). Our results were consistent with findings reported by prior research. Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006), in their study of 133 dyads of full-time working participants at a university in the USA, tested the impact of conflict with supervisors and coworkers on CWB-O and CWB-I. They reported that conflict with coworkers significantly predicted CWB-I. Haq (2011), in his study of 264 employees from six organizations in Pakistan, tested the impact of interpersonal conflict on job outcomes. He found the positive impact of interpersonal conflict on interpersonal and organizational workplace deviance (similar to CWB). Kessler *et al.* (2013), in their study of 116 employee–coworker dyads, also found that interpersonal conflict led to negative emotions, which in turn led to CWB. Our findings may also align with Chen *et al.* (2005), who found positive outcomes of productive conflict when moderated by appropriate conflict management. The positive moderating influence of high emotional intelligence (like appropriate conflict management) on CWB provides a potential gender explanation for outcomes of interpersonal workplace conflict.

Furthermore, our results indicated that emotional intelligence negatively moderated the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB directed toward the organization and individuals (CWB-O and CWB-I) (*H2a* and *H2b* supported) likely owing to employees high on emotional intelligence having less extreme emotional reactions to stressful events, such as interpersonal conflict, to help them cope with the event (Wong and Law, 2002). In the previous research, researchers also found a negative moderating role of emotional intelligence on the relationships between indirect supervisor conflict and employee deviant behavior (Ma and Liu, 2019), perceived threat of terrorism and workplace deviance (Shah *et al.*, 2020), job pressures and auditors' judgment (Yang *et al.*, 2019), perceived stress and suicidal ideation (Abdollahi *et al.*, 2016) and job insecurity and emotional and behavioral reactions (Jordan *et al.*, 2002), indicating the crucial role of emotional intelligence in controlling emotional reaction to stressful events which may lead to negative consequences.

Finally, our results demonstrated that the negative moderating effect of emotional intelligence on the relationship between interpersonal conflict and CWB-O and CWB-I was stronger for women than men (*H3a* and *H3b* supported) likely owing to innate gender differences (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Fernández-Berrocá *et al.*, 2012; Ju *et al.*, 2019; Szabó and Jones, 2019). More interestingly, while interpreting the slopes of the three-way interactive relationship of interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender with CWB-I and CWB-O (Figures 4 and 5), we found that the high emotional intelligence graph for men revealed a declining slope (more CWB at lower levels of conflict and less at a higher level of conflict), as compared to rest of the graphs which revealed increasing slopes. The reason for this result could be explained by the fact that in a masculine hierarchical culture like Pakistan, high emotional intelligence may give men complete freedom to engage in CWB-I and CWB-O unless there is an environment of pushback, i.e. an environment of high interpersonal conflict. Moreover, in such male-dominated cultures, emotional intelligence is

critical in having men understand that deviant reactions to interpersonal conflict are not useful, so their exposure to such high levels of conflict diminishes CWB. That is, their emotional intelligence helps them see things in the opposite direction of what the culture prescribes.

Theoretical implications

Our study contributed toward theoretical advancements in interpersonal conflict–CWB literature in the following ways. First, on a theoretical level, our study provides additional support for the social exchange theory, demonstrating interpersonal conflict relates to greater employee CWB. This finding is in line with the previous empirical findings (Low *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, this study extends our previous knowledge regarding the potential depth of impact interpersonal conflict can have on employees as the damage created may reach even beyond a psychological level and materialize in behavioral reactions as well. Given these findings, it is critical that future research examine the impact that interpersonal conflict may have on other employee behavioral outcomes, such as work engagement, OCB and task performance. Further, different methodologies (e.g. longitudinal designs) can be used to better understand how the effects of interpersonal conflict unfold on behaviors through assessing across-time effects.

Second, by investigating the moderating roles of emotional intelligence, we contribute to the much-needed understanding of the boundary conditions of the effects of interpersonal conflict (Gu *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2020). While few studies have studied the impact of interpersonal conflict on CWB (Bruk-Lee and Spector, 2006; Haq, 2011; Kessler *et al.*, 2013), they lack an insight about potential moderators between the relationship of interpersonal conflict and CWB. An exceptional study by Ma and Liu (2019) investigated the moderating role of emotional intelligence on the relationship between indirect supervisor conflict and CWB. This study contributes to the understanding about the moderating role of emotional intelligence between interpersonal conflict and CWB.

Finally, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has examined the moderating role of gender on the interpersonal conflict–emotional intelligence interaction on individuals' CWB. Based on prior research, which had shown significant differences in emotional intelligence between men and women (Fernández-Berrocal *et al.*, 2012; Gur *et al.*, 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson, 2001), we had good reasons to believe that gender differences need to be accounted for to better understand the interplay of conflict, CWB and emotional intelligence. Therefore, by testing gender as a moderator of the interpersonal conflict–emotional intelligence interaction on individuals' CWB, we contributed toward the conflict–CWB and emotional intelligence literature by illustrating that differences in individuals' attitudes and demographics should be considered together to better understand the conflict–CWB relationship.

Practical implications

In the present study, we found that interpersonal conflict can trigger CWB among employees, making interpersonal conflict very costly to the organization and its members. Thus, organizations should attempt to reduce interpersonal conflict among employees by implementing appropriate interventions. For example, a job redesign and provision for ombudsman might help avoid/reduce the occurrence of interpersonal conflict (Rahim, 1985). In addition, managers may consider putting in place a protocol to detect and intervene in interpersonal conflicts when they emerge. The absence of early intervention makes it difficult to prevent conflict escalation into a stressful and resource-draining situation that will lead to CWB-O and CWB-I. Moreover, our findings suggest that when emotional intelligence is low

CWB appears to be a higher potential risk for both employees and organizations than when emotional intelligence is high. Thus, recruiting emotionally intelligent employees and providing training programs that develop emotional control capabilities in employees should therefore be a key priority for organizations. However, such interventions can be very costly and time-consuming. Thus, managers should focus more on reducing tensions and conflicts among the employees (Rahim, 1985). This could be achieved by creating awareness among the employees about the detrimental effects of conflict among employee (Ilies *et al.*, 2011), reducing adverse work events and fostering trust among group members (Turesky *et al.*, 2020) and providing/developing a supportive work environment where individuals could be motivated to seek and provide social support to avert interpersonal conflicts.

We also found that as compared to men, women are less likely to be involved in CWB when emotional intelligence is high. Therefore, gender-based employee training to hone employees' emotional intelligence skills can be an alternative to conflict intervention strategies (Hodžić *et al.*, 2018; Mattingly and Kraiger, 2019; Slaski and Cartwright, 2003). Furthermore, we found that male employees with higher emotional intelligence were more engaged in CWB when interpersonal conflict was lower than higher. Thus, managers working in organizations where both interpersonal conflict and CWB are present should adopt a balancing approach where the interpersonal conflict and CWB should be balanced. In other words, managers should work parallel on reducing the conflict among employees and controlling the CWB at work.

Limitations and directions for future research

Some limitations of our study may be addressed in future research. First, the cross-sectional data do not provide sufficiently conclusive evidence of causality for the relations of interest. This limitation may be addressed by empirically testing our model using longitudinal or multiwave/cross-lagged data, i.e. measuring the predictor and outcomes variables at different time points (Ma and Liu, 2019). Second, our construct for CWB included items for both interpersonal and organizational CWB; however, both dimensions of deviance can have different antecedents and consequences which need to be explored in future research. Third, while we focused on the moderation of the emotional intelligence of supervisees, future research could explore how emotional intelligence of supervisors may serve to preempt interpersonal conflict and manage deviant behavior. Fourth, while we focused on the role of gender in the interplay of conflict, CWB and emotional intelligence, future research could study the role of age or generation (e.g. generation X or Y). Fifth, Chen *et al.* (2005) state that appropriate management of conflicts can induce creative problem-solving, interpersonal relationship satisfaction and lead to improved efficiency. Future research could also explore potential positive outcomes of interpersonal conflict. Finally, the present study centers on a sample of Pakistan-based organizations, so cultural factors may be relevant. Even though our theoretical arguments are not specific to this country, Pakistani culture, which scores high on collectivism, power distance and masculinity (Hofstede, 2011), might impact gender and individuals' emotions. For instance, research shows that control of emotion is encouraged in high power distance and collectivistic cultures (Gunkel *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, Hofstede suggests that gender differences are likely to be more pronounced in masculine cultures than feminine cultures (Edgar *et al.*, 2020). Thus, cross-country comparisons could reveal the potential buffering role of emotional intelligence and gender in the interpersonal conflict and CWB relation, in different cultural contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work contributes to the literature relating interpersonal conflict, emotional intelligence and gender to CWB. We find that emotional intelligence and gender shape how employees respond to interpersonal conflict, such that employees with higher interpersonal conflict and higher emotional intelligence evidenced lower CWB. Further, we find that women as compared to men were less likely to be engaged in CWB when faced with interpersonal conflict at high (versus low) levels of emotional intelligence.

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