Conflict personalization: a systematic literature review and the development of an integrative definition

Lilian M. Hoogenboom, Maria T.M. Dijkstra and Bianca Beersma

Department of Organization Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – Scholars and practitioners alike wish to understand what makes workplace conflict beneficial or injurious to, for example, performance and satisfaction. The authors focus on parties' personal experience of the conflict, which is complementary to studying conflict issues (i.e. task- or relationship-related conflict). Although many authors discuss the personal experience of conflict, which the authors will refer to as conflict personalization, different definitions are used, leading to conceptual vagueness. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to develop an integrative definition of the concept of conflict personalization.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted a systematic literature review to collect definitions and conceptualizations from 41 publications. The subsequent thematic analysis revealed four building blocks that were used to develop an integrative definition of conflict personalization.

Findings – The authors developed the following definition: Conflict personalization is the negative affective as well as cognitive reaction to the self being threatened and/or in danger as a result of a social interaction about perceived incompatibilities.

Practical implications – The integrative definition of this study enables the development of a measurement instrument to assess personalization during workplace conflict, paving the way for developing effective research-based interventions.

Originality/value – Conceptual vagueness hampers theoretical development, empirical research and the development of effective interventions. Although the importance of conflict personalization is mentioned within the field of workplace conflict, it has not been empirically studied yet. This paper can serve as the basis for future research in which conflict issue and personal experience are separated.

Keywords Conflict personalization, Workplace conflict, Affect, Cognition, The self

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Whenever people work together, conflicts, defined as "the interaction of interdependent parties who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a

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result of this incompatibility" (Folger *et al.*, 2021, p. 4), are bound to arise. Indeed, worldwide, people spend about 2 h on average per week dealing with workplace conflict (CPP, 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that there is widespread interest in understanding the consequences of workplace conflict and how conflict can be managed to reduce negative outcomes and stimulate positive outcomes by academics as well as practitioners (see Avgar and Colvin, 2016 for a comprehensive collection of studies).

We aim to contribute to a better understanding of the consequences of workplace conflict by building consensus on the definition of conflict personalization, originally defined by Hample and Dallinger (1995) as "a feeling of being personally engaged in a punishing life event" (p. 306). We focus on the personal experience of conflict, which we consider to be complementary to studying conflict issues (i.e. the Conflict Type Approach, CTA, Jehn, 1995, 1997). Through a systematic literature review, we take stock of the various definitions and conceptualizations of conflict personalization that have been published in the scientific literature. Via a thematic analysis of these definitions and conceptualizations, we gather the crucial building blocks for a more precise, integrative definition of conflict personalization. We conclude the paper by developing an integrative definition of conflict personalization and offering suggestions for future research.

Workplace conflict and its outcomes

To explain when and why workplace conflict has positive and negative consequences, throughout the past decades, numerous empirical studies were published that rely on the CTA. In short, the CTA is based on a categorization of conflict *issues* and distinguishes between workplace disagreements about the task at hand (referred to as task conflict) and disagreements that are unrelated to the task (referred to as relationship conflict) [1]. Within the conflict literature, this task versus relationship distinction is also referred to as substantive versus affective conflict (Davis and Harveston, 2001; Rahim, 2002) or cognitive versus affective conflict (Mooney *et al.*, 2007; Parayitam and Dooley, 2009; Ullah, 2022).

According to the CTA, workplace conflict that revolves around the work task(s) may have positive outcomes, such as creative solutions to problems and high-quality decisions (Nemeth, 1995; Schulz-Hardt *et al.*, 2006), whereas relationship conflict (i.e. non-task conflict) on interpersonal issues like values and norms (Jehn, 1995) should have negative outcomes. Indeed, studies have shown time after time that relationship conflicts result in negative outcomes like decreased satisfaction and well-being and increased turnover (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2005; Jehn *et al.*, 2006). However, results with regards to task conflict are less clear; two meta-analyses showed that task conflict can have positive, negative or no effects at all on group performance, suggesting moderating factors play an important role (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012).

Interestingly, whereas task- and relationship-related conflicts are conceptualized as two separate types of conflict, numerous studies have shown that the two types of conflict are actually strongly intertwined (i.e. moderately to highly correlated; for an overview, see De Wit *et al.*, 2012), and the extent to which relationship co-occurs with task conflict has been discussed as an explanation for why task conflict should have harmful or beneficial outcomes (i.e. "pure" task conflict should have positive effects, whereas task conflict mixed with relationship conflict should have negative effects, De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Dreu, 2008).

Unfortunately, the way in which task- and relationship-related conflict is commonly defined and measured complicates understanding and interpreting the above-described results. That is, whereas almost every definition of task conflict emphasizes the perception of disagreement about viewpoints, disagreements, ideas, goals, issues and decisions that are

related to the task and/or task behavior (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Jehn *et al.*, 1997; Simons and Peterson, 2000) without referencing emotions, definitions of relationship conflict do refer to (the perception of) disagreement but are predominantly formulated in terms of expressions like anger, frustration, distrust (Mortensen and Hinds, 2001), tension, animosity, annoyance (Jehn *et al.*, 1997) and friction (Jehn, 1994). This is undesirable, as negative emotionality could just as well occur during task conflicts (Bendersky *et al.*, 2014; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2005; Jehn *et al.*, 2008).

The entanglement of issue and emotion with respect to relationship conflict appears in its operationalization as well. Whereas task conflict is "cleanly" measured through items that assess the extent of conflict about the task, relationship conflict is measured by one item that refers to the conflict issues at stake and three items that concern emotionality (i.e. "friction," "tension," and "emotional conflict," Jehn, 1995) [2]. As a result of the confounding of relationship conflict and emotionality, if conflict parties report a high level of relationship conflict, this can mean different things. First, it might mean that parties experience a lot of non-task-related conflict. Second, it might mean that the experienced conflict, irrespective of whether it is task-related or not, is highly emotional. Third, it might mean that parties refer to the experience of a lot of non-task-related conflict *and* that this conflict is experienced as highly emotional.

We propose that to better understand when and why workplace conflicts have positive or negative consequences, it is important to disentangle effects of the conflict issue from the personal experience of workplace conflict. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of factors that are distinct from the conflict issue as well, such as emotionality (Yang and Mossholder, 2004), psychological safety (Bradley *et al.*, 2012), trust (Simons and Peterson, 2000) and positive emotions (Todorova *et al.*, 2014). Their findings showed that the effects of workplace conflict are not solely dependent on what the conflict is about. In line with these findings, workplace conflicts could be placed within a framework consisting of two orthogonal dimensions; one dimension representing the extent to which the conflict concerns the work task and the other dimension representing the conflict experience, or the extent to which the conflict is personalized.

To illustrate how workplace conflict can be understood in terms of issue and personal experience as two separate dimensions, think, for example, about a disagreement regarding a budget proposal. Such a conflict would be considered to score high on the extent to which it is about the work task. But, with regards to the extent to which it is personalized, it could be a conflict that is personalized to a low, medium or even high extent. Now consider a disagreement during a coffee break on what constitutes (in)appropriate humor at work, a conflict that would be considered to score non-task on the extent to which it is about the work task. Again, this conflict could be personalized to a low, medium or higher extent. Thus, irrespective of the degree to which a conflict is about the work task, it can be personalized to a certain degree.

Even though attention to the personal experience of conflict as a separate dimension that can be distinguished from the conflict issue is quite novel in the scholarly field of workplace conflict, it is considered an important factor in non-academic management books. For instance, Fisher and Ury (1999) advise their readers to separate the people from the problem, which, they argue, is challenging as people have "egos that are easily threatened" (p. 19). And Runde and Flanagan (2010) advise readers to "stay in the now, (. . .) it is not personal" (p. 228) (also see Falcone, 2009; Pitagorsky, 2012; Regier, 2017). Additionally, there is quite a lot of material available online on ways to stop taking things personally at work in general (Bridges, 2018; Strauss Cohen, 2018) and, for example, more specifically, as a skill of an effective leader (Chen, 2013).

Despite the widespread advice to "not take conflict personally," and the available literature on this subject in the field of argumentation and communication (Hample and Cionea, 2010; Hample and Dallinger, 1995; Worley and Aloia, 2019), the scientific field of workplace conflict management seems to be lagging behind in offering clarity on its meaning, antecedents and consequences. As the above overview suggests that the personal experience of conflict is seen as an important factor that affects conflict outcomes, we feel that it deserves more scientific attention.

Personalization of workplace conflict

The personal experience during conflict due to one's perceptions can be understood in terms of *conflict personalization*. In their core publication, Hample and Dallinger (1995) refer to conflict personalization as *taking conflict personally*, which they defined in the following ways: "a negative emotional reaction to participating in conflict" (p. 297), and "a feeling of being personally engaged in a punishing life event" (p. 306).

Although these definitions have subsequently been adopted by some scholars in research on interpersonal conflict (Aloia and Worley, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2015), others have explained taking conflict personally differently. Avtgis (2002), for example, described taking conflict personally in terms of "a predisposition towards interpreting conflict as a punishing or unpleasurable event" (p. 228), whereas Brisini and Solomon (2020) described it as "a form of cognitive bias in which individuals feel victimized by a conflict" (p. 4402).

Yet, other scholars, rather than define or describe conflict personalization, have referred to *the idea* of conflict personalization. For instance, Jehn and Mannix (2001) suggest that it is only possible to enjoy benefits of task- and process-related conflict if group members are "not taking these conflicts personally and do not engage in relationship conflict" (p. 248). In addition (Simons and Peterson, 2000) state that if group members trust each other, they will not misinterpret the task conflict as a personal attack; so trust prevents the detrimental co-occurrence of task- and relationship-related conflict (see also De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, Mooney *et al.* (2007) argue that judgments and attributions of team members cause them to react personally and emotionally when they debate different views about a task. As such, rejection of a task-related opinion might be interpreted as a personal attack that threatens their identity (De Wit *et al.*, 2013; Swann *et al.*, 2004).

Conceptual vagueness

The above short overview shows that conflict scholars have, implicitly or explicitly, used conflict personalization as an explanation for conflict being productive or destructive. Even though there is no heated debate in the literature on how to define conflict personalization, our overview does show that there is conceptual vagueness and that an agreed-upon, precise and integrative definition of conflict personalization currently does not exist. Conceptual vagueness will obstruct three important research goals: theory development, empirical study and effective intervention development.

Firstly, to produce meaningful theory in a given scientific field, a precise definition of the construct that the theory applies to is required to function as a building block for theory, and scholars need a common language to discuss and build on ideas (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016; Locke, 2003). The more precise the definition, the more precise and refined the theory can be. A lack of definitional clarity makes it difficult to distinguish the concept from similar concepts, undermining discriminant validity and increasing the risk of proliferation of different terms for the same concept (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016). For example, conflict personalization and relationship conflict – discussed earlier in the introduction – could be confused with each other if not adequately defined due to the personal element that is part of

both. Scholars, both experienced and new to conflict personalization, risk building upon one variant of a definition. The foundation of the conflict personalization literature should take the form of one precise definition, instead of multiple possibilities to choose from.

Secondly, the absence of a precise conceptual definition negatively affects the quality of empirical research, as specifying and testing antecedents, consequences and correlates of a concept becomes sensitive to errors (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016; Strunz, 2012). A vague definition only provides general information about the nature of the variable, leading to a mismatch between concept and measures and/or manipulations (construct validity) and/or contamination of measures and manipulations (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016; Locke, 2003).

For instance, when conflict personalization is understood by some in terms of a negative reaction to conflict (Hample *et al.*, 2009) but by others as a cognitive bias (Brisini and Solomon, 2020), accurately operationalizing the concept becomes difficult. Should respondents be questioned about whether they have a negative reaction to conflict or, rather, whether they experience any cognitive bias?

Thirdly, the absence of a uniform, precise definition limits the ability of scholars to develop effective interventions for organizations. Interventions based on academic research, so-called evidence-based management, derive their principles from research evidence, which is translated into practices aimed at solving organizational problems. For the principles to be credible, the evidence needs to be clear, and research findings need to be interpretable by both researchers and practitioners (Rousseau, 2006). When practitioners wish to engage in evidence-based managerial practices, should they focus on preventing negative reactions to conflict, train employees to avoid cognitive biases or choose yet another approach?

In summary, precise definitions enable meaningful theorizing, clear operationalizations and clear interventions. In this paper, we therefore aimed to increase clarity on what conflict personalization is. To do so, our paper is divided into two parts. First, we conducted a systematic review of the published scientific literature on the personalization of conflict to find out how conflict scholars have defined and conceptualized the concept. This process revealed the building blocks for an integrative definition. Second, using the results of our systematic review, we constructed an integrative definition of conflict personalization.

Method
For the development of an integrative definition of conflict personalization, we drew on the work of Podsakoff *et al.* (2016). They propose a four-step process:

(1) identify potential attributes;
(2) organize the attributes by theme; determine which are necessary, sufficient and/or shared;
(3) develop a preliminary definition; and
(4) refine the conceptual definition.

Following such a process ensures a systematic and careful approach, which increases the quality of the definition as it allows for more objectivity and reflection. In this method section, we delineate steps 1) and 2). The subsequent steps 3) and 4) are discussed in the definition development section, the second part of our paper.

Literature search
To identify potential attributes of the concept of conflict personalization, we systematically took stock of the published scientific literature on conflict personalization, based on the guidance provided by Denyer and Tranfield (2009) for management and organizational

studies specifically. Online searches for eligible studies on the databases Web of Science, PsycINFO and SCOPUS were performed in March 2021. The search terms were the following: taking conflict personally (without double quotes to allow for multiple sequences), "personalization of conflict," "conflict personalization" and "personal attack." Alerts were activated for all four searches to allow for the inclusion of newly published articles in our review, which led to the inclusion of one recent publication (Young *et al.*, 2023). We included peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books and book chapters and excluded editorials, conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, working paper series and book reviews.

Subsequently, we did a forward and backward search of the two publications on conflict personalization, which were cited over 50 times by May 2021. These were the papers by Hample and Dallinger (1995) and Mooney *et al.* (2007). In total, the abstracts of 763 records were imported into review software Rayyan (Ouzzani *et al.*, 2016).

After checking for duplicates, a total of 660 records remained, and every abstract was analyzed to determine if it should be included in or excluded from the literature review. The abstracts were assessed using the following inclusion criteria:

- within the publication, reference is made to the personal experience of conflict;
- the publication concerns published scientific literature; and
- the publication included at least an English abstract or summary.

At the end of the review process, 41 articles remained. These articles were read thoroughly, with a focus on definitions and conceptualizations of conflict personalization. Please see Supplementary Material Figure 1 for a PRISMA Flow Diagram.

Explicit definitions and conceptualizations

We found that, instead of explicit definitions, many articles offered rather broad conceptualizations and descriptions of conflict personalization. Thus, focusing only on those articles that did provide an explicit definition would result in a very narrow overview, one that reveals only part of the scholarly view on conflict personalization and potentially would paint an incorrect picture of how conflict scholars view the construct.

We therefore decided to include all statements that functioned as a description of conflict personalization, but to differentiate between *explicit definitions* and *conceptualizations* in our coding. A definition is a statement of the exact meaning of a thing or what a word means (*OED Online*, 2022a), and in line with this, we coded all statements about the nature of conflict personalization that included a conjugation of the verb *define* as well as statements preceded by the word *is* as explicit definitions. A conceptualization is the process of forming a concept or idea of something (*OED Online*, 2022b), and in line with this, we coded all other descriptions of the concept of conflict personalization that did not fit our criteria for explicit definitions as conceptualizations. For each article, every relevant text fragment that either explicitly defined or conceptualized conflict personalization was transferred as a separate citation into a column in a spreadsheet file.

The occurrence of both explicit definitions and conceptualizations brings to mind the work of Aristotle on essence and accident (Copi, 1954; Lewis, 1984). To answer the question "what is it," according to Aristotle, the essential and the accidental should be distinguished from one another: "a thing's essential features are taken to be those without which it cannot exist, its accidental features those it has but can exist without" (Gorman, 2005, p. 276). For example, a table's essence could be "a flat surface, resting on one or more legs," while accidents would be "made of wood," "round" or "high." A table could be made of wood, but if it is made of metal, it is still a table. It seems that when defining conflict personalization,

scholars have used either its essence, accidents or both in their (either explicit or implicit) definitions, which could partly explain the conceptual vagueness that arose over the past decades.

Thematic analysis
Our examination of the 41 publications on the personal experience of conflict generated a data set consisting of 10 explicit definitions (10 text fragments) and 41 conceptualizations (90 text fragments). We performed a thematic analysis to identify themes within our data, in which we took an inductive approach and manually coded each text fragment without a predetermined list of potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, for each text fragment, the words we deemed relevant with respect to the meaning of conflict personalization – and as such to the definition and conceptualization of our concept – were highlighted. The following text fragment serves as an example of this primary coding phase: "People who ordinarily take conflict personally are *reflecting* and *projecting* their whole *life experiences* onto the episode" (Hample and Cionea, 2010, p. 372). During this phase, the first author created a list of recurring ideas and terms that could function as the overarching themes, which would jointly capture all the text fragments. A list of five potential themes was discussed and agreed upon between the authors:

(1) affect;
(2) threat/danger;
(3) cognition;
(4) trait/state; and
(5) the self.

Finally, a sixth theme *other* was used to accommodate text that did not define or conceptualize conflict personalization. Eventually, some text was excluded because it concerned synonyms for the term *conflict personalization* ($N = 13$, e.g.: "personalized disagreements," Guenter *et al.*, 2016), circumstances and effects of conflict personalization ($N = 6$, e.g. "climate," Dallinger and Hample, 1995) or considered outliers that did not fit with any theme and were therefore not considered important ("self-fulfilling prophecy," Simons and Peterson, 2000; "likes to engage in arguing while the other is a conflict avoider," Honeycutt *et al.*, 2016; "able to respect," Sung Eun Chung and Meneely, 2012). Afterwards, each text fragment that was not coded as "other" was read again and assigned to one or more of the five themes to generate a thematic map of the data.

Following our initial coding, we conducted an additional coding phase. During our analysis of the theme *affect*, we noticed that multiple text fragments specified a negative connotation and decided to code for this negative affect as a subtheme. Similarly, within the theme *cognition*, we noticed multiple mentioning of (mis)attribution and thus coded for this attribution as a subtheme too. The five themes and two subthemes were given a broad and as neutral as possible definition based on the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster Dictionary to prevent a lengthy (theoretical) deliberation on every concept. These definitions are part of the synthesis of our findings.

After the organization of potential attributes by theme, we determined which are necessary, sufficient and/or shared (step 2) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016). We applied the essence/accidents approach described above (Copi, 1954; Gorman, 2005; Lewis, 1984). For each theme and potential attribute within that theme, we considered whether it was part of the essence, i.e. conflict personalization cannot exist without, or merely an accident, commonly true but not necessary to occur to speak of conflict personalization.

Findings

The quantitative results of our thematic analysis are presented in Table 1. The percentages refer to the frequency of mentioning of a theme – or a subtheme – in the explicit definitions and conceptualizations. A high percentage means that the theme is discussed in a lot of publications, but not necessarily that there is consensus on *how* the theme is related to conflict personalization. The table is followed by a synthesis of these results. The themes will be discussed in order of frequency of occurrence within the text fragments, and each section infers whether and in what way the theme should be considered an essential building block in defining conflict personalization (step 2, Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016). The data set with all text fragments, coding and thematic analysis can be found in Supplementary Material.

Synthesis

Theme 1 – affect. The thematic analysis revealed that in all the explicit definitions (100%) and in 78% of the conceptualizations, *affect* – an emotion, feeling or mood occurring in response to a stimulus (*OED Online*, 2022c) – was used to explain what conflict personalization is (see Table 1).

Affect was understood in similar ways across the definitions and conceptualizations, and we did not find explicit definitions or conceptualizations that opposed one another with regards to the role of affect. For example, affect was part of the following text fragments: "How people experience (the effects of) arguing emotionally" (Labrie *et al.*, 2020, p. 255), "tension and discomfort" (Nicotera and Mahon, 2013, p. 102) and "variability in an individual's affective reactions to (. . .) interpersonal conflict" (Worley and Aloia, 2019, p. 141).

With respect to the nature of affect, there was no reference to positive affect, but negative affect was frequently associated with conflict personalization. Therefore, we looked for consensus on affect being inherently negative during conflict personalization in a subtheme analysis. For the explicit definitions, there was no difference between main- and subtheme; 100% of them referred to negative affect. But the conceptualizations did differ; 63% referred to negative affect specifically (vs. 78% to affect, see Table 1).

In conclusion, affect is part of the essence of conflict personalization, as most publications refer to it. More specifically, we would argue that affect should be limited to *negative* affect, based on our findings and the fact that no publications referred to positive affect.

However, there does not seem to be enough support to limit a definition of conflict personalization to negative affective reactions in terms of specific emotions. In other words, those references to specific emotions concern accidents of conflict personalization; they are likely to occur but not necessary. Eight publications refer to the same set of negative emotions during conflict personalization introduced by Dallinger and Hample (1995) (see Supplementary Material) and state that when personalizing conflict, a person feels "threatened, anxious, damaged, devalued, and insulted" (p. 273). In addition, there was one conceptualization in which the negative affect theme was represented by three of these five emotions: threatened, anxious and devalued (Worley and Aloia, 2019). Still, the other 17 publications within the negative affect category refer to more general, rather than specific, negative affect, for instance, "stronger and more negative emotional reactions to arguments" (Hample *et al.*, 2009, p. 77).

The above is an exemplar of why it is important to separate essence from accidents. A disadvantage of incorporating a set of specific emotions in a definition is that it excludes other reactions, i.e. if a person would feel sadness in response to conflict rather than threat, anxiety or devaluation, this person would technically not qualify as having a negative

Theme	Explicit definitions (10 publications)	Example explicit definition	Conceptualizations (41 publications)	Example conceptualization
Affect	100% (N = 10)	"Taking conflict personally (TCP) has been defined as a negative emotional reaction to participating in a conflict" (Hample and Dallinger, 1995, p. 297)	78% (N = 32)	"Taking conflict personally reflects variability in an individual's affective reactions to (. . .) interpersonal conflict" (Aloia and Worley, 2019, p. 194)
Affect; negative connotation (subtheme)	100% (N = 10)	"Taking conflict personally (TCP) has been defined as a negative emotional reaction to participating in a conflict" (Hample and Dallinger, 1995, p. 297)	63% (N = 26)	"A person feels threatened, anxious, damaged, devalued, and insulted" (Dallinger and Hample, 1995, p. 273)
Threat/danger	80% (N = 8)	"To be more specific, TCP is a feeling of being personally engaged in a punishing life event" (Hample and Dallinger, 1995, p. 306)	61% (N = 25)	"The last set of measures assesses the degree to which people personalize conflicts. When engaged in a face-to-face disagreement, people can orient to a substantive topic, or react as though they had been personally assaulted" (Lewiński et al., 2018, pp. 235–236) (pp. 235–236)
Cognition	10% (N = 1)	"Taking conflict personally, the degree to which people experience negative consequences from conflict, is (. . .) a complex of specific feelings, but also has several cognitive elements, including estimates of how conflicts affect relationship prospects" (Hample and Richards, 2019, p. 190)	76% (N = 31)	"The extent to which individuals take conflict personally aims to assess individuals' reactions to and expectations about arguing" (Kim et al., 2020, p. 123)
Cognition; attribution (subtheme)	0%	N/A	34% (N = 14)	"Team members may misattribute the intentions of others. (. . .) When interpreting task conflicts, team members often wrongly ascribe malicious intentions to others, which is especially likely when conflicting opinions are hard to justify and stakes are high" (Guenter et al., 2016, p. 573)

(*continued*)

Table 1.
Frequency of
occurrence of themes
in publication set and
examples for context

Theme	Explicit definitions (10 publications)	Example explicit definition	Conceptualizations (41 publications)	Example conceptualization
Trait/state	10% (*N* = 1)	"Taking conflict personally, the degree to which people experience negative consequences from conflict, is typically conceived as a state or trait" (Hample and Richards, 2019, p. 190)	41% (*N* = 17)	"Taking conflict personally has been conceptualized a personality trait, such that some people habitually personalize conflict; however, it is also a state that can vary from one conflict to another as a function of more proximal factors, such as relational uncertainty" (Brisini and Solomon, 2020, pp. 4402– 4403)
The self	10% (*N* = 1)	"Taking conflict personally is the feeling that conflict is a negative life event that is aimed at the self" (Wallenfelsz and Hample, 2010, p. 471)	34% (*N* = 14)	"Individuals who take conflict personally perceive conflict as a personal attack on the self and focus less on the content of a conflict" (Curran and Arroyo, 2018, p. 171)

Table 1.   **Source:** Authors' own work

affective reaction to conflict. In addition, it is not clear how many of the specific affective reactions one needs to experience to count as conflict personalization. We therefore conclude that there is sufficient support to further specify *affective reaction* by adding the connotation *negative* and using that as a building block as it concerns the essence of conflict personalization, but not enough support for, nor clear advantages of, indicating a particular kind of negative affective reaction.

Theme 2 – threa*t*/danger. The perception of a *threat* – a sense of oppression or menace (OED Online, 2022d) – and/or *danger* – a liability or exposure to harm or injury (OED Online, 2022e) – was an important theme in the explicit definitions (80%) and was reasonably well supported in the conceptualizations (61%) (see Table 1). We found various possibilities to further specify the general notion of perception of threat/danger.

Within the explicit definitions, the word "punished" is used to describe what a person feels during conflict personalization (Brisini and Solomon, 2020; Miller and Roloff, 2014). Among the conceptualizations, there is the mention of feeling threatened (Hample and Dallinger, 1995; Kim *et al.*, 2015), "defensiveness in the face of an argument" (Hample *et al.*, 2009, p. 77), as a reaction "as though they had been personally assaulted" (Lewiński *et al.*, 2018, p. 235), and the perception that the comment made by the other is harmful (Kim *et al.*, 2009) or stemming from ulterior motives (Xie and Luan, 2014) and thereby constitutes a personal attack.

Now, we can deduce if and how threat/danger is part of the essence of conflict personalization. Based on the occurrence of the theme (see Table 1), *perception of threat and/or to be in danger* is an essential element of conflict personalization. However, although the more specific descriptions of threat and danger above are useful in describing the perception of threat/danger and can potentially be used for future operationalization, we would argue

that these concern accidents of conflict personalization and should not be part of its definition. The differences between the examples are substantial, which makes it difficult to integrate them, and there is no clear majority of definitions and/or conceptualizations that support a particular description. Additionally, further specifying perception of threat/ danger creates a similar problem as discussed earlier with respect to specific affective reactions: it would create a definition that excludes too much. For instance, if conflict personalization is only defined in terms of feeling punished, a person that feels personally assaulted would not qualify as someone who perceives a threat or danger.

Theme 3 – cognition. Concerning *cognition* – conscious intellectual activity (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, 2023a) – as an explanation of conflict personalization, we discovered a notable difference between explicit definitions and conceptualizations. Only 10% of the explicit definitions referred to cognition, whereas we found references to cognition in 76% of the conceptualizations (see Table 1). One would expect that conceptualizations follow a definition with respect to the most important attributes of a concept. Probably, in the case of cognition, a dissimilarity between definition and conceptualizations has developed, and cognition has mostly been used to further explain conflict personalization. However, if cognition is a defining attribute of conflict personalization, it should be incorporated into the definition.

When reviewing the conceptualizations within the cognition theme, we discovered variety in the way in which scholars talk about the cognitive aspect of conflict personalization. Firstly, conflict personalization is seen as a cognitive experience (Hample *et al.*, 2019), cognitive appraisal (Curran and Allen, 2016) or cognitive reaction (Demir and Hample, 2019; Hample *et al.*, 2021; Santibáñez *et al.*, 2021). Secondly, some refer to expectations (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Worley and Aloia, 2019) and the application of past experiences (Aloia and Worley, 2019; Hample and Cionea, 2010). Third, we found mention of pessimism about the future of the relationship (Hample and Richards, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Xie *et al.*, 2015). So, we did not find majority support for a particular clarification of cognitive reaction.

More particularly, *attribution* – the ascribing of an effect to a cause (*OED Online*, 2022f) – was mentioned in multiple publications and therefore specifically analyzed as a subtheme. Although attribution was not part of any explicit definition, 34% of the conceptualizations did include some reference to the idea that people personalize a conflict when they attribute certain goals or intentions to the other party (see Table 1).

In more general terms, there is mention of attributing "the contradictions to personal rather than institutional or situational factors" (Malterud and Nicotera, 2020, p. 389). Also, people are believed to personalize a conflict when they attribute the activity of the other to an intention to harm (Hample and Richards, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2009).

Additionally, we found mention of *misattribution* in publications that discuss why people experience a conflict as a personal attack. For instance, according to Guenter *et al.* (2016), people try to make sense of the behavior of their colleagues in order to give an appropriate response. When they "wrongly ascribe malicious intentions" (p. 573), criticism or a difference of opinion is misattributed as a personal attack. Xie and Luan (2014) maintain that when people misattribute conflicting behavior as unjustifiable or stemming from ulterior motives, they experience a personal attack. Similarly, Peterson and Harvey (2009) state that people can misinterpret others' comments or actions as a personal attack, even if the conflict is beneficial to the quality of decision-making.

Based on these findings, there seems to be sufficient support for including *cognitive reaction* as a building block for developing a definition of conflict personalization; it is part of the essence. However, the results do not give reason to specify a particular cognitive

reaction. Although (mis)attribution was used in some publications to explain conflict personalization, we conclude that these are accidents and not part of the essence. When someone personalizes a conflict, it is possible that actions of the other party are (mis) attributed as intentionally hurtful, but that is not necessarily the case. In other words, during conflict personalization, people have a cognitive reaction of some sort (i.e. it is part of the essence), but what that reaction looks like can vary to such an extent that it is incorrect to say that a particular cognitive reaction should always occur to speak of conflict personalization at all.

Theme 4 – trait and state. Regarding conflict personalization as a personality *trait* – a particular feature of mind or character (*OED Online*, 2022g) – and/or *state* – the mental or emotional condition of a person at a particular time (*OED Online*, 2022h) – we found reference to the subject in 10% of the explicit definitions and 41% of the conceptualizations (see Table 1).

Even though the frequency with which this theme occurs in the definitions and conceptualizations is lower than the frequency with which some of the previous themes are mentioned, in general there is agreement within this theme that conflict personalization is both an enduring preposition or readiness to take conflict personally – a trait – and a temporary feeling that is immediately stimulated by the present conflict situation – a state (Avtgis, 2002; Dallinger and Hample, 1995; Hample, 2015; Solomon and Brisini, 2019). It is also considered "relationship-dependent, where it is relatively stable within a specific relationship but can wax or wane in other relational contexts" (Young *et al.*, 2023, p. 186).

Yet, some publications were less clear on whether conflict personalization is a trait or state; their descriptions could fit both. For example, Nicotera *et al.* (2014) refer to it as a "set of attitudes predisposing one to internalize conflict" (p. 252) and Mooney *et al.* (2007) as a "tendency (. . .) to take cognitive debates personally" (p. 752). Additionally, Hample *et al.* (2009) refer to "communication-relevant predispositions and behaviors" (p. 77).

We critically assessed whether trait and state are part of the essence of conflict personalization (i.e. are vital attributes) and should be included in the integrative definition. After consideration, we decided that the theme *trait and state* is not a building block, even though for conflict personalization to occur, a trait and/or state will be present. Including trait and state would not differentiate conflict personalization from other reactions to social interactions, as all reactions presumably have their basis in either or both personality traits and temporary states. So, although personal characteristics trait and/or state could be argued to be part of the essence of conflict personalization, as they are human characteristics and humans experience conflict personalization, it is not necessary to include the terms in the definition. Still, in empirically studying conflict personalization, it could be useful to incorporate both trait and state variables to better understand when and how people personalize their workplace conflicts.

Theme 5 – the self. With respect to a focus on *the self* – the union of elements (such as body, emotions, thoughts and sensations) that constitute the individuality and identity of a person (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, 2023b) – we found that 10% of the explicit definitions and 34% of the conceptualizations referred to this theme (see Table 1). Even though the number of text fragments that refer to this subject is lower than most of the other themes, there was agreement within those publications that do discuss this theme on the role of the self in conflict personalization.

During our review, we found various examples that enlighten the role of the self during conflict personalization. For instance, Wallenfelsz and Hample (2010) explicitly define conflict personalization as "the feeling that conflict is a negative life event that is aimed at the self" (p. 471). Within the conceptualizations, there is mention of the self in terms of a

focus on the self and self-defense (Hample and Dallinger, 1995) and a situation wherein "face becomes an issue, overwhelming the substantive grounds of conflict" (Dallinger and Hample, 1995, p. 306). Similarly, Curran and Arroyo (2018) argue that conflict personalization is perceived as a personal attack on the self, during which people focus less on the content of a conflict (see also Hample and Irions, 2015; Lewiński *et al.*, 2018; Rapanta and Hample, 2015). Hample and Anagondahalli's (2015) conceptualization holds that people experience conflict as a person-centered matter rather than an issue-centered matter. Guenter *et al.* (2016) argue that people tend to identify with the position they take in the argument, and by doing so, this position becomes part of someone's self-concept. As a result, criticism of a position is seen as a threat to the self-concept.

We conclude that the self is an important differentiating characteristic in defining conflict personalization and should be considered as part of the essence. After all, if *the self* is not included in the definition, it is unclear *what* is perceived to be threatened and/or in danger, and the definition would thus allow for other possibilities, such as physical danger. So, we argue that if people experience the conflict as revolving around their self, it is personalized. In addition, by including *the self* as a building block, we can make a more precise distinction between a merely negative affective and cognitive reaction to conflict and the point at which a conflict truly becomes personalized.

Concluding remarks

Through our systematic literature review and thematic analysis, we have established five themes that reflect the various elements of conflict personalization: affect, perception of threat/danger, cognitive reaction, trait/state and the self (in order of frequency). We argued that only four of these are essential building blocks for our integrative definition of conflict personalization: negative affective reaction, perception of threat/danger, cognitive reaction and the self.

An integrative definition of conflict personalization. At this point, we enter the second part of our study, in which we use the four building blocks derived from our review to construct an integrative definition of conflict personalization. We did so based on several definitional guidelines, which safeguarded the process itself and provided argumentation for the choices we made.

Construction of a definition

In the introduction of this paper, we gave an elaborate description of the phenomenon that we consider *conflict personalization*. Creating clarity and agreement on what observations of reality are to be defined is an important step in definition development (Locke, 2003). In short, the personal experience of workplace conflicts can differ from conflict to conflict and from person to person.

To develop the definition, we used the *definition per genus and difference* structure, which has its basis in logic (Copi, 1972). In this structure there is:

(1) the term that is defined;

(2) the class or "genus" to which the term belongs; and

(3) the differentiating characteristics or "difference."

For example, a planet (term) is a celestial body (class) moving in an elliptical orbit around a star (differentiating characteristics).

The term we wish to define is conflict personalization (1). The class to which conflict personalization belongs would be the intraindividual reactions in social interaction(s) about

perceived incompatibilities (2) (Folger *et al.*, 2021). Finally, by distinguishing essence from accident, we can uncover the necessary attributes of conflict personalization. Through the thematic analyses, we have determined *the essence*, i.e. the differentiating and fundamental characteristics (3) of conflict personalization: negative affective reaction, perception of threat/danger, cognitive reaction and the self. These are the building blocks that can be used to construct an integrative definition.

We propose the following integrative definition of conflict personalization: *Conflict personalization is the negative affective as well as cognitive reaction to the self being threatened and/or in danger as a result of a social interaction about perceived incompatibilities.* The building blocks of negative affective and cognitive reaction have been included without any modification. But we decided to integrate perception of threat and/or danger and the self into *a threat/danger to the self* because it clarifies *what* is perceived as being threatened/in danger and explains the role of the self during conflict.

To assess the quality of this definition, we have reviewed the development process and final text using several practical criteria. In his work on logic, Copi (1972) argues that a definition should state the generally agreed meaning and should not be too broad or too narrow. These criteria are met through a systematic literature review and thematic analysis to determine the degree of consensus on inclusion of specific attributes of conflict personalization. Also, Chan *et al.* (2006) emphasize that conditions and/or effects cannot be part of a definition, as that would decrease the internal validity of subsequent empirical research. Therefore, we made sure that the thematic analysis was focused on finding building blocks only, and text on antecedents and consequences of conflict personalization was excluded.

In addition, a proper definition should not be circular or tautological (Copi, 1972; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016), and this criterium is fulfilled by making sure there are no synonyms of conflict personalization in the definition, like "taking conflict personally" or "personalized disagreement." Moreover, a definition should not be expressed in ambiguous, obscure or figurative language and should not be negative where it can be affirmative (Copi, 1972). We ensured that the wording was clear by working with the more general terms from the thematic analysis and offering a dictionary entry for each of them. Also, the definition is framed in an affirmative way; wording such as "to not feel safe" with respect to the self was avoided.

Discussion
In this paper, our aim was to construct an integrative definition of conflict personalization as an essential step to understanding why some workplace conflicts are beneficial and others are injurious to individual and organizational processes and outcomes, such as performance and satisfaction. Typically, workplace conflict is studied by categorizing it on the basis of the issue the conflict is about; the distinction that is most frequently used by conflict researchers distinguishes task conflict (i.e. disagreement about the job at hand) from relationship conflict (i.e. disagreement about personal issues; see Jehn, 1995, 1997). However, as the findings on the positive and negative effects of workplace conflicts remain mixed in studies examining task- and relationship-related conflict as independent variables (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012) and the entanglement of issue and emotion within the definition and operationalization of relationship conflict (Bendersky *et al.*, 2014; Jehn *et al.*, 2008), we argued that the personal experience of conflict could be important and deserves more attention.

Our systematic review of the literature demonstrated that there exists conceptual vagueness on what conflict personalization entails. Notably, even in publications by

Hample, whose work contains a number of studies on conflict personalization, there is variation in how the concept is defined (see, for example, Hample *et al.*, 2019; Hample and Anagondahalli, 2015; Hample and Dallinger, 1995; Hample and Richards, 2015). Through our systematic review of the literature, a thematic analysis and a thorough definition development process, we developed an integrative definition of conflict personalization: *Conflict personalization is the negative affective as well as cognitive reaction to the self being threatened and/or in danger as a result of a social interaction about perceived incompatibilities.*

The overarching contribution we offer with this integrative definition of conflict personalization is that it constitutes clarity for conflict scholars with regards to what conflict personalization is. We hope this will contribute to broadening the scholarly perspective on workplace conflict, which in turn can lead to a better understanding of the consequences of workplace conflict.

Theoretical implications

First, via our integrative definition of conflict personalization, we aimed to provide the field of workplace conflict with a clear, univocal concept that can be integrated into current theory and empirical studies. Although conflict personalization is generally presented and discussed as if it has a single meaning, our review showed that there was, in fact, substantial variation in how authors explained the construct. We offer a solution to this by presenting an integrative definition.

Second, we integrate the fields of argumentation and communication with the field of workplace conflict. Most empirical work on conflict personalization has been published in journals on argumentation and communication, mainly with a focus on how differences between nationalities are associated with conflict personalization (Hample *et al.*, 2021; Hample and Anagondahalli, 2015), conflict personalization during family conflicts (Curran and Allen, 2016; Aloia and Worley, 2019) and conflict personalization in non-specified interpersonal conflicts (Wallenfelsz and Hample, 2010; Worley and Aloia, 2019). However, to our knowledge, scholars that focus on interpersonal workplace conflict have not integrated conflict personalization in their empirical studies, even though some do refer to the concept (Bradley *et al.*, 2012; Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Mooney *et al.*, 2007). Developing an integrative definition is an essential first step towards integrating conflict personalization in studies on workplace conflict.

Third, our definition enables studying conflict issue and conflict experience as orthogonal dimensions of workplace conflict. The integrative definition of conflict personalization is an important first step towards this, as it will allow scholars to develop measurement scales that enable studying effects of the personal experience of specific conflicts on outcomes separately from the effects of conflict issues. A person's take on the conflict matters, and the personal experience of a conflict is not necessarily in line with the conflict issue. Workplace conflicts could be placed within a two-dimensional framework based on the more objectively determined extent of revolving around the work task (applying the emotion-free definition and scales of relationship conflict, see Jehn *et al.*, 2008, and note 2 on page 6) and the relatively subjective extent of conflict personalization. We expect a significant improvement in understanding the course and outcomes of workplace conflict.

Limitations

Despite the best efforts, each academic study has its limitations. Firstly, during a literature search, there is always a risk of missing certain publications that could have been relevant.

In some publications, clearer abstracts and/or keywords are provided than in others, which impacts their findability. We have mitigated this risk by using multiple search engines, subscribing to an alert for new publications and incorporating a systematic inclusion/ exclusion phase during which all abstracts were carefully read.

Second, when conducting a thematic analysis like ours, there is a risk of bias, as the researcher has an active role in identifying patterns and themes, determining which ones are interesting, and the way they are reported. Themes do not just reside in or emerge from the data, waiting for the researcher to discover them. We reduced this risk by following a step-by-step guide for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), continuously discussing the coding decisions within our team and substantiating our conclusions by disclosing all our preliminary coding and subsequent categorization into themes (see Supplementary Material).

Third, in constructing a definition, there is – again – the risk of bias through opinion and preferences of the researcher. The goal is to offer a definition that is as concise as possible while also integrating all relevant characteristics. Basing our choices on a blueprint of how a definition should be structured (Copi, 1972), which elements to include, and how to evaluate the quality of the definition (Locke, 2003; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2016) provided a foundation for a more objective approach and facilitated sharing and evaluating the thought process.

Applying the definition in future research
The definition that resulted from our literature review and thematic analysis can function as the basis for developing a measurement scale that captures the dimensions of negative affective reaction, cognitive reaction and the perceived threat/danger to the self by containing subscales for each of these key themes. This would also allow researchers to examine whether certain elements of conflict personalization are more or less strongly related to conflict processes and outcomes.

Even though the existing Hample and Dallinger (1995) Taking Conflict Personally Scales (TCP Scales) are widely used, they do not fully reflect the essential attributes of conflict personalization as revealed by our systematic literature review. According to Hample, the four subscales direct personalization, persecution feelings, stress reaction and like/dislike valence are emotional reactions, and the two other subscales negative relational effects and positive relational effects (i.e. relationship projections) are cognitive reactions (Hample, 2015). Below, we briefly compare the essential attributes of our integrative definition of conflict personalization to these TCP scales.

With respect to negative affect, the TCP scales do tap into stress but do not offer items on other negative affective reactions like sadness, fear or hurt. For cognitive reaction, the TCP scales only yield information on the expectations about the effects of the conflict on the relationship. Yet, our thematic analysis showed that cognition is considerably broader and could include – for example – past experiences, cognitive bias or attribution (accidents of conflict personalization). We did not find consensus on a particular cognitive reaction that always occurs during conflict personalization (i.e. the essence of conflict personalization). Therefore, we propose to study if further specification of "cognitive reaction" is possible based on additional (empirical) data collected after this first operationalization phase.

Concerning the perceived threat and/or danger to the self, there are no items in the TCP Scales that focus on the self as such. Even though some items of the Persecution Feelings scale hint on the self, such as: "I think that people often attack me personally" (Hample and Dallinger, 1995, p. 313), these scales are meant to assess an emotional reaction and cannot grasp the self-concept or the way the self is being perceived to be threatened. Unfortunately, this paper does not allow for a more elaborate discussion of the self and how its role during

conflict personalization could be determined empirically. However, we do suggest looking into existing work on identity threat (Banaji and Prentice, 1994; Ellemers *et al.*, 2002) and face threat (Carson and Cupach, 2000; White *et al.*, 2004). Even though these terms were not mentioned specifically in the papers in our literature review, we do think they are relevant, and it would be helpful to consider research on these constructs when developing measures for conflict personalization.

Here, it is important to clarify that the separation of negative affective reaction and cognitive reaction is justifiable for conceptual and scientific purposes, but that they often overlap in social life (Lazarus, 1999). For most people, feelings and cognitions are not entirely distinct during interpersonal conflict. Appraisal theories could offer a basis for understanding the linkage between negative affective reaction and cognitive reaction during conflict personalization. Most appraisal theories are based on the assumption that "emotional responses are elicited as the organism evaluates the relevance of environmental changes for its well-being" (Brosch, 2013, p. 370). For conflict personalization, the emotional response would be the negative affective element, and the evaluation of the relevance would be the cognitive element.

Such new measurement instrument enables the empirical study of the extent to which workplace conflict has positive or negative consequences. This is a crucial but unanswered question within the field of workplace conflict; findings vary and moderators are expected to play a substantial part (De Dreu, 2008; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). As a start, a model could be put to the test with conflict issue as independent variable (i.e. task or relationship as measured with the "clean" measure, which excludes references to emotion; Jehn *et al.*, 2008), conflict personalization as the moderator, and performance and satisfaction as the dependent variables (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003, p. 743 for commonly used measures of performance and satisfaction). Based on empirical research (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012), we then firstly would expect that low levels of conflict personalization will increase the likelihood of potential positive outcomes of task conflict on performance and satisfaction, while higher levels of conflict personalization will negate potential positive outcomes and increase the negative effects of task conflict. Secondly, concerning relationship conflict, we would expect that lower level of conflict personalization will at least neutralize the negative effects on performance and satisfaction, while higher levels conflict personalization will increase negative effects of relationship conflict. Furthermore, we could explore the possibility of positive effects of non-personalized relationship conflict. People having a less threatening and/or endangering experience of the conflict would be expected to be more able to focus on the issue instead of the self. This in turn could, for instance, positively influence performance (Aloia and Worley, 2019; Carnevale and Probst, 1998; Fisher and Ury, 1999; Hample and Dallinger, 1995).

In addition, should studies indeed show that conflict personalization is a predictor of workplace conflict outcomes, we propose to study under what conditions people personalize their workplace conflicts and what conditions prevent them from doing so. Subsequently, those results can be translated into effective interventions that are not aimed at preventing workplace conflict as such but instead at decreasing the personalization of the conflicts that inevitably occur. For instance, conflict expression directness and oppositional intensity (Weingart *et al.*, 2015) affect perceptions and emotions and thereby could increase conflict personalization. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the association between other aspects of conflict communication and conflict personalization. Additionally, perspective-taking ability (see for a review, Ku *et al.*, 2015) could be associated with conflict personalization. Arguably, people who can recognize the perspective of the other conflict party would be less inclined to perceive a threat or danger to the self as they – at least partly

– better comprehend the motives of their counterpart. As a result, we would expect them to personalize the conflict to a lower extent. Research could examine whether individual differences in perspective-taking abilities and/or situational factors that enhance perspective-taking affect conflict personalization.

With respect to organizational conditions, we suggest studying the effect of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). It has been theorized that people do not take conflicts personally in highly psychologically safe groups because of a sense of openness (Bradley *et al.*, 2012). High levels of psychological safety could make people feel less at risk for rejection or embarrassment, and thus their perception of a threat or danger to their self should decrease, and they should be less likely to personalize conflicts. Likewise, the association between trust (Simons and Peterson, 2000) and conflict personalization is a potential avenue for further research. Possibly, the role of trust could take two forms: it could act as a buffer and decrease the likelihood of conflict personalization (due to the assumption of benevolence and honesty), but it is also conceivable that in a group characterized by high levels of trust, conflict is perceived as a betrayal of that trust, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict personalization.

Practical implications
The main practical implication of our study is that it creates the possibility of creating a measurement instrument based on the integrative definition of conflict personalization. Thereby, it becomes possible to determine if conflict personalization during workplace conflicts has consequences for performance and satisfaction and under which conditions conflict personalization is more or less likely to occur. This is essential to develop effective research-based interventions.

Conclusion
Understanding when and why workplace conflict is beneficial and/or injurious is both relevant and difficult for scholars and practitioners. We argued that studying workplace conflict in terms of conflict personalization can contribute to our understanding, as it allows scholars to examine the personal experience of conflicting parties distinctly from the conflict issue and place workplace conflict in a two-dimensional framework. However, the field of conflict personalization was characterized by conceptual vagueness, which hampers theory development, creates operationalization and analysis problems and limits scholarly capacity to develop effective interventions. Our systematic review of the literature and subsequent thematic analysis identified four building blocks of conflict personalization: negative affective reaction, perception of threat/danger, cognitive reaction and the self. Subsequently, using these building blocks, we constructed the following definition of conflict personalization: *Conflict personalization is the negative affective as well as cognitive reaction to the self being threatened and/or in danger as a result of a social interaction about perceived incompatibilities.*

In addition to contributing to the scholarly field of workplace conflict, we hope our work will eventually help support organizations through effective intervention development. Organizations could potentially benefit from their workplace conflicts if they are able to prevent injurious outcomes like a decrease in performance or satisfaction. By understanding the role of conflict personalization better, we can work towards research-based interventions that help people to handle their workplace conflict productively and limit the negative consequences to a minimum.

Notes

1. Other conflict types have been discussed and examined, such as process conflict (Jehn *et al.*, 1999), which refers to conflict about disagreements about how to do the task or how to delegate resources, and status conflict (Bendersky and Hays, 2012), which refers to conflict about people's relative status positions in their group's social hierarchy, but the majority of workplace scholars distinguish between conflict about tasks and conflict about non-tasks (De Wit *et al.*, 2012).

2. Despite the availability of a revised, emotion-free definition and corresponding clean operationalization of relationship conflict since 2008 ("Relationship conflicts are disagreements and incompatibilities among group members regarding personal issues that are not task-related", Jehn *et al.*, 2008, p. 467), the original scales (Jehn, 1995) are still the most commonly used (e.g. Desivilya *et al.*, 2010; Kozusznik *et al.*, 2020; Ullah, 2022). We strongly recommend the use of the adapted definition and scales.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

Corresponding author

Lilian M. Hoogenboom can be contacted at: l.m.hoogenboom@vu.nl