

# The Role of Personality in Task and Relationship Conflict

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**ABSTRACT** Two studies explored the extent to which dispositions influence the attributions individuals make about the type of conflict they experience. Traits from the Five-Factor Model of personality (FFM) were linked to the tendency to experience task-and relationship-oriented conflict. Results provide some support for the idea that individuals have stable tendencies in the attributions they make about their conflict experiences across time, partners, and situations. Agreeableness and openness were related to reports of relationship conflict at the individual level. However, the strongest effects of personality on conflict attributions were found in the analysis of dyads. This analysis revealed that partner levels of extraversion and conscientiousness were associated with individuals' tendencies to report relationship conflict. Moreover, mean levels of extraversion and conscientiousness in a pair were associated with reports of relationship conflict. Differences between partners in extraversion were associated with more frequent conflict and a greater likelihood of reporting task-related conflict. Implications of these findings with

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respect to the role of personality in interpersonal relationships are discussed. Finally, these studies provide confirmatory evidence that conflict attributions have a meaningful impact on relationship satisfaction.

### **THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY IN TASK AND RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT**

The relationship between personality and conflict has captured the attention of researchers for decades. One line of research has focused on the degree to which individuals differ in the strategies they use in response to conflict. This work demonstrates that individuals differ in their propensity to avoid, accommodate, compromise, compete, or collaborate with others (Rahim, 1983; Schneer & Chanin, 1987; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). More recent work has focused on affective responses to conflict (Berry & Willingham, 1997; Côté & Moskowitz, 1998; Suls, Martin, & David, 1998), the extent to which personality is related to exposure and reactivity to conflict (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), and the role of trait-related motives in explaining conflict behavior and reactions to conflict (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996).

There has also been some examination of the mutual influence of self and partner personality on interpersonal conflict, primarily between friends, roommates, or married couples (Buss, 1991; Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Thomsen & Gilbert, 1997). Some of this “partner” research has focused on the attributions individuals make about their conflicts. Attributions about conflict are important, because they have been found to be associated with relationship satisfaction and marital dysfunction (Fincham & Beach, 1999). For the most part, such attributions are assumed to be a stable style or trait-like (Fincham & O’Leary, 1983), although most studies have been cross-sectional, and there has been little research exploring the association between personality and attributions (see Karney & Bradbury, 2000, for an exception).

In the past 5 years, organizational researchers have become interested in the attributions individuals make about conflict at work. Accumulating evidence indicates that attributions made about the nature of work group conflict (e.g., task vs. relationship conflict) are related to individuals’ satisfaction with the group and to group

performance. However, little attention has been paid to the factors that influence individuals' attributions about conflict type. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to investigate the role of personality in the attributions individuals make about the nature and source of their conflicts. Specifically, we test the proposition that attributions about task and relationship conflict are stable across time, situations, and partners. We then explore the association between the Five-Factor Model of personality and these attributions.

This is an issue of importance to personality psychologists for several reasons. First, there is considerable evidence that both marital satisfaction and work group satisfaction are influenced by the attributions one makes about conflict. Yet, little is known about the extent to which such attributions represent veridical assessments of events or the extent to which they are influenced by individuals' idiosyncratic interpretations of these events. Second, there is growing support for the notion that attributions about marital events can increase the probability of conflict behavior (see Fincham & Beach, 1999, for a review). Moreover, there is evidence that conflict attributions guide individuals' subsequent attempts to manage conflict (Jehn, 1995). Broadly, this work represents an effort to increase our understanding of how individual dispositions affect both daily experiences and overall subjective well-being for individuals and their partners, with a focus on interpersonal conflict.

### *Task and Relationship Conflict*

Prior research has established that conflict can vary on a number of dimensions. Pinkley (1990) found that individuals tend to frame conflict along three distinct dimensions: task vs. relationship, emotional vs. intellectual, and compromise vs. win. Most subsequent research has focused primarily on the task/relationship dimension. Task conflict refers to conflicts which arise over substantive issues (such as differences of opinion or ideas about the correct way to approach a task or solve a problem), and relationship conflict refers to socioemotional or interpersonal disagreements that are usually associated with feelings of annoyance and animosity (Jehn, 1995). Moreover, in relationship conflict, the cause of the conflict is attributed to factors associated with the conflict partner or the relationship between the partners, as opposed to the situational attributions made in task conflict.

There are two general characteristics that distinguish task-related conflict from relationship-related conflict: a) whether the conflict is about a task vs. interpersonal relationships, and b) whether the conflict involves viewpoints, ideas, or opinions vs. affect, feelings, or emotions. Therefore, conflicts about where to eat on Friday night, where to spend Christmas, or whether a couple can afford a new car would be task-related conflict. In contrast, relationship-based conflicts are focused on characteristics of the conflict partners or their relationship. Therefore, conflicts that revolve around the tendency of one partner always to be late, or fail to express his or her views, or to withdraw from problems would be classified as relationship-related conflict. However, whether a conflict is task or relationship oriented is a matter of individual perceptions. Where to eat on Friday night might be both an emotional- and relationship-based conflict, if the decision becomes a discussion of one partner's unwillingness to try new things and lack of concern for the others wishes (e.g., "We always goes to the same place because you don't listen to me and don't care about my feelings."). Thus, the distinction between task and relationship conflict is not necessarily an objective one. Rather, it is a distinction made by the individuals who experience the conflict. Moreover, research evidence (Pinkley, 1990; Simons & Peterson, 2000) lends support to the idea that individuals do make such a distinction in their conflicts.

The distinction between task and relationship conflict is important because of the implications each has for individual and group attributions and subsequent behavior. Most research comparing the two types of conflict has focused on their differing effects on work groups, not on individuals (see Wall & Nolan, 1986, for an exception). Relationship conflict tends to be associated with a variety of negative consequences: diminished satisfaction in interacting with and commitment toward others (Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999; Jehn, 1995), lower quality decisions, less consensus over issues, less acceptance of decisions (Amason, 1996; Janssen et al., 1999), and poorer overall group performance (Jehn, 1997). Relationship conflict is thought to have its negative effects on group decision making by encouraging hypothesis-confirming negative attributions for others' behavior (Janssen et al., 1999; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Thus, there is substantial evidence that relationship conflict can be detrimental for the individuals involved in the conflict and for the groups in which the relationship conflict resides.

In contrast to relationship conflict, task conflict appears to have less harmful, or even positive, consequences. Task conflict is associated with better quality group decisions (Amason, 1996; Janssen et al., 1999), greater likelihood of using integrative styles of conflict management (Wall & Nolan, 1986), better group performance (especially when tasks are complex; Jehn 1995, 1997), and increased satisfaction with the group decision and a desire to remain in the group (Amason, 1996). However, task conflict is not always beneficial to group relations and performance. Jehn (1995), for example, found that even though task conflict was associated with improved performance, it reduced group members' satisfaction. This finding was confirmed in studies by Amason (1996; Amason & Sapienza, 1997) and appears to be true when task conflict is at extremely high levels.

Although Pinkley's (1990) original work treated task and relationship conflict as a single bipolar dimension, subsequent empirical work (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995) suggests that task and relationship conflict may be separate, but correlated, dimensions. Simons and Peterson (2000) found a substantial relationship between task and relationship conflict ( $r = .57$ ). However, a factor analysis showed that their respondents were able to distinguish between the two. Furthermore, they hypothesized and found that trust moderated the relationship between the task and relationship conflict. High levels of task conflict coupled with low levels of trust led to high levels of relationship conflict. In contrast, when trust levels were high, only a weak association between task and relationship conflict was found.

### *Implications for Interpersonal Relationships*

Although most prior research on conflict type has examined its effect on work and decision-making groups, the effects of attributions about conflict type may have an impact on personal relationships as well. Studies examining conflict at the interpersonal level have focused primarily on interactions between those in close relationships, such as dating couples, marital partners (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Thomsen & Gilbert, 1997), or roommates (Fuller & Hall, 1996; Lepore, 1992). As a rule, these studies do not differentiate conflict types. Rather, they examine the more general effects of conflict on relationships. However, in a recent review of the research on marital conflict, Fincham and Beach (1999) observe that it is often the attributions spouses make about one another's behavior that determines

whether marital conflict will have constructive or destructive consequences. Thus, we expect that, consistent with what is found in work groups, relationship conflict will have more destructive effects on interpersonal relationships than will task conflict.

Work on attributions in marital conflict has focused on three aspects of partner attributions: causality, responsibility, and blame. In contrast, research on attributions about work group conflict has focused almost exclusively on the task/relationship dimension of conflict. Yet, these approaches may not be independent of each other. For example, the Relationship Attribution Measure developed by Fincham and Bradbury (1992) to measure attributions about conflict in interpersonal relationships includes one question that refers specifically to relationship conflict: "My husband's behavior was due to something about him (e.g., the type of person he is, the mood he was in)."

Although much is known about the outcomes associated with task and relationship conflict, there has been no attempt to examine factors that influence the extent to which conflicts are attributed to task or relationship concerns. Commonly used measures of task and relationship conflict ask individuals to report on the type of conflict they experience (Amason, 1996; Jehn 1995). Individual reports are frequently aggregated to the group level on the assumption that individuals within a group have had the same conflict experiences. Organizational researchers have treated reports of task and relationship conflict as veridical assessments of individuals' behaviors. In contrast, the literature on attributions made about marital conflict tends to assume that conflict attributions represent stable trait-like tendencies (Fincham & O'Leary, 1983) and neuroticism has been explicitly linked to attributions (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994). However, there is some recent contradictory evidence. Karney and Bradbury (2000) found that after controlling for marital satisfaction, there was no association between neuroticism and level of attribution.

We expect that the truth lies in the middle ground between these two approaches. It is likely that attributions made about conflict are influenced by a number of factors, not all of which are grounded in the actions and behaviors of the various parties to the conflict. For example, there is substantial evidence that individuals' dispositions influence their work attitudes (Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986), their assessments of the specific characteristics of their work (e.g., job complexity; Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000), and even their formal evaluation of others' behaviors (Bernardin, Cooke, & Villanova,

2000). As with these attitudes, it is plausible to expect that attributions about conflict may be affected by both interpretations based on individual dispositions and by objective facts of the conflict situation.

To date there has been no research to determine whether conflict attributions are more state- or trait-like. Because the attributional process seems key in determining whether conflict will have constructive or destructive effects on the relationship, we believe it is important to determine whether there are stable characteristics of individuals that make them more or less likely to attribute conflict to situations (task) versus persons or relationships with people (relationship). Therefore, in the following section we explore some possible associations between task and relationship conflict and specific personality traits.

### *Personality and Conflict*

There are several ways in which personality may be related to conflict. McAdams (1995) argues that individual differences in personality can be described at three levels: what a person has (traits—Level I), what a person does (contextually influenced strategies, goals, and concerns—Level II), and how the person makes meaning of his or her experiences (life narratives—Level III). With respect to the relationship between personality and conflict, we might expect that certain traits (Level I) will be related to conflict specific motives and conflict specific behaviors (Level II). For example, Graziano and colleagues (Graziano et al., 1996; Graziano, Hair, & Finch, 1997) argue and provide evidence that the trait of agreeableness is associated with motives to maintain harmonious social relationships, which in turn influence conflict-related behaviors, and interpretations of conflict events and partners. Although interpretations of experiences (Level III) generally refers to the interpretation of aggregate life experiences, it is possible that certain traits influence the ways in which individuals interpret or make sense of specific conflict experiences. Thus, we expect personality to influence both conflict behavior and subsequent interpretations of conflict episodes.

Interpersonal conflict necessarily involves more than one individual. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the personality of both individuals (actor and partner) might influence the experience of conflict. An *actor effect* represents the degree to which individuals' reports of conflict are affected by their own standing on the personality variable of interest (e.g., an individual's level of agreeableness may

influence the amount of conflict he or she experiences). A *partner effect*, on the other hand, represents the extent to which the personality of one partner in a conflict affects the conflict experience of the other (e.g., a partner's level of agreeableness may influence the amount of conflict experienced by an actor). In the following section, we consider the influence of an individual's own personality (actor effects) and the influence of a partner's personality (partner effects) on the experience of conflict. Although we do not offer specific hypotheses with respect to dyads, we will also examine the extent to which mean levels of each personality trait within a dyad affect conflict experiences. Finally, we will examine the extent to which personality differences between partners will influence their reported conflict.

In examining the relationship between personality and conflict, we use the Big Five as an organizing framework. Whereas numerous personality traits have captured the attention of psychologists over time, there is some agreement among personality researchers that the Five-Factor Model (FFM) provides a comprehensive structure for the study of personality (Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997). Although this taxonomy has not been universally accepted (see Block [1995] for a critique), the robustness of the FFM across measures and cultures has led to widespread acceptance of the model.

Because the FFM represents a taxonomy of personality rather than a personality theory per se, there is a considerable paucity of underlying theory to guide some of our hypotheses (e.g., openness to experience and conscientiousness). Thus, although we use current theory and empirical data to guide our efforts, to a certain extent this work is exploratory with the intention of gaining knowledge that can be used in theory development. In the following section, we briefly describe each of the five traits and discuss their possible association with task and relationship conflict. Because it is likely that frequency or amount of conflict might influence individuals' attributions about conflict type, we also consider the influence of personality on the amount of conflict experienced.

*Agreeableness.* Individuals high in agreeableness are described as altruistic, trusting, cooperative, compliant, and "moved by others' needs" (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Those who score low on this trait are cynical, tend to experience and express hostility, prefer to compete with others, and have been described as ruthless and cruel (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990). This trait is of particular importance to the study of conflict as agreeableness is the trait most



concerned with interpersonal relationships (Graziano et al., 1996). Prior research has linked low agreeableness to the tendency to experience more frequent conflict (Suls et al., 1998), to elicit more conflict from partners, and to like partners less (Graziano et al., 1996). Controlling for the influence of the other four traits, low agreeableness was found to be the most powerful predictor of anger and upset in married couples (Buss, 1991). For these reasons, and because agreeableness has been associated with the motive to maintain positive social relationships, we expect that agreeableness will be negatively associated with both frequency of conflict and relationship conflict.

*Conscientiousness.* There is no known research examining the relationship between conscientiousness and conflict. This is not completely surprising, as the hallmarks of conscientiousness are dutifulness, orderliness, and achievement orientation—characteristics that are unlikely to be related to interpersonal experiences such as conflict. However, Fuller and Hall (1996) found that differences in living habits were a source of conflict between partners. Since both disorganization and laziness (low conscientiousness) and excessive neatness or fastidiousness (high conscientiousness) might be the source of conflict with a partner, an association between partner conscientiousness and relationship conflict would not be surprising. However, we cannot confidently predict the direction of the relationship.

*Extraversion.* Extraverts are generally positive, social, energetic, joyful, and interested in other people (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1997). In addition to these trait descriptors, many conceptualizations of extraversion also include adjectives such as dominant, assertive, domineering, and forceful (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990). Apparently, in conflict it is the dominant, forceful dimension of the trait that comes into play, as extraversion has been related to a preference for both dominance and competition as conflict resolution strategies (Schneer & Chanin, 1987) and the tendency to approach (vs. avoid) arguments and to be argumentative (Blickle, 1997). In addition, extraversion has been positively associated with anger and anger intensity in both individuals and their partners (Buss, 1991; Geist & Gilbert, 1996; McFatter, 1998) and the tendency to express feelings in response to conflict (Berry & Willingham, 1997; Geist & Gilbert, 1996), but not to the amount of conflict with peers (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). Although the

tendencies of extraverts might lead one to think they would experience more conflict, empirical evidence suggests that they do not (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). Therefore, no association between extraversion and frequency of conflict is expected. However, since extraverts appear to both express and elicit anger in conflict, we do expect to find an association between extraversion and relationship conflict.

*Neuroticism.* Neuroticism can be described as the tendency to experience negative affect and emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and guilt. The most frequently studied of the five-factor traits, neuroticism has also been studied in relationship to conflict. It is positively related to both frequency of conflict and affect intensity associated with that conflict (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; McFatter, 1998; Suls et al., 1998). In addition, individuals high on neuroticism are more likely to experience anger and hostility (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1984), and, when asked, have the greatest number of complaints about their partners (Buss, 1991). However, those high on neuroticism do not tend to express their anger (Berry & Willingham, 1997; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Geist & Gilbert, 1996) and they avoid arguments (Blickle, 1997). Furthermore, their partners do not report high levels of anger nor anger intensity (Buss, 1991). Therefore, we expect to find an association between neuroticism and frequency of conflict but offer no specific hypothesis about neuroticism and conflict type. However, because those high on neuroticism tend not to express their anger, we do not expect to find associations between partner neuroticism and conflict reports.

*Openness to experience.* Individuals high on openness to experience are described as creative, inquisitive, introspective, and attentive to inner feelings (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Hofstee, deRaad, & Goldberg, 1992). Because openness is the least studied of the five-factor traits, we know little about the association between openness and conflict. However, several pieces of evidence suggest such a relationship. First, one study found that the intuition scale from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is closely related to the openness factor (Costa, McCrae, & Holland, 1984), was negatively correlated with a compromising strategy in response to conflict (Chanin & Schner, 1984). Second, in two studies, Blickle (1995, 1997) found that openness was positively correlated with the tendency to approach (vs. avoid) arguments. Because these studies suggest that open individuals

do not shy away from conflict, we expect open individuals will experience conflict more frequently. Furthermore, because openness is the best five-factor predictor of argumentativeness—the tendency to pursue intellectual arguments that are focused on positions rather than people (Blickle, 1995, 1997)—attributions of task conflict are more likely to be made by individuals who score high on openness than by those who score low on this trait.

To test these ideas, we conducted two longitudinal studies. In a preliminary study, we explore the extent to which individuals are consistent in the way they interpret conflict across time, partners, and conflict episodes. In the second study, we explore the relationship between the five-factor model personality traits and attributions of task and relationship conflict and the effect of such attributions on relationship satisfaction.

## **STUDY 1**

### **METHOD**

#### **Participants and Procedure**

Participants in this study were 48 undergraduate management students at a Midwestern university. Partial course credit was awarded for participation. In addition, individuals who participated were eligible to have their names entered into a drawing for \$100. Participants were predominantly white (83%) and split nearly equally between men and women (54% male), with a mean age of 21 years.

In the first stage of the study, participants were given a set of four (out of six) conflict scenarios, randomly ordered. Participants were asked to read the first scenario and then answer a series of questions about the nature of the conflict described in the scenario. This process was repeated for the remaining three scenarios. Following completion of the conflict scenarios, participants were asked to keep a daily “conflict journal” for 2 weeks. A packet containing instructions and 14 journal pages along with 14 return envelopes was distributed and participants were instructed to complete one journal page each day. Upon completion of the daily journal, participants were asked to seal the journal page in an envelope addressed to one of the authors and to return it by campus mail. Participants were informed that they would be allowed to miss no more than 2 days per week. That is, they were encouraged to make journal entries each day but were allowed to turn in a complete journal with at least 10 entries over the 2-week period.

## Measures

*Conflict scenarios.* Following procedures similar to Graziano et. al. (1996), a set of six conflict scenarios was developed for this study. Although responses to hypothetical conflicts may not predict behaviors in face-to-face conflict episodes (Graziano, 1987; Greenberg & Folger, 1988), our concern here was on assessing the degree to which individuals are consistent, across contexts and conflict partners, in their tendencies to frame conflicts in a certain way. Thus, the use of hypothetical scenarios in combination with journal reports provides a rigorous test of our hypothesis. In order to increase the probability that student participants would perceive the scenarios as realistic, we initially asked 35 undergraduate students (not involved in this study) to tell us about their most recent conflicts. From these stories, we chose six scenarios that met two criteria. First, we chose conflicts that were universal in nature for undergraduate students (conflicts about shared expenses, problematic roommates, managing academic and social activities, and conflicts at work). Second, we chose conflicts that contained information about both the specific tasks involved in the conflict (e.g., how to spend pooled food dollars) and about the people involved (e.g., personalities). Thus, each scenario contained details about the task and about the disputants and their relationship. Attempts were made to balance scenario content along the task and relationship dimensions. The resulting scenarios were two to three paragraphs in length.

*Journal narrative.* There were several questions on each journal page. First, participants were asked to note the number of conflicts they had experienced that day. Second, participants were asked to write a brief (several paragraphs) description of a conflict they had experienced that day. If participants did not experience conflict on a given day, they were asked to briefly describe a situation that might have become a conflict if not properly handled. This procedure was used in an attempt to prevent participants from minimizing their time investment in the study by simply reporting no conflict. Thus, all participants were required to complete a daily entry—whether or not they experienced conflict. Following completion of each journal page, participants were asked to complete an eight-item questionnaire regarding the type (task or relationship) of conflict they had just described. The survey was printed on the reverse side of the journal page.

*Conflict measures.* The conflict measures in this study were based on Jehn's (1995) measures of task and relationship conflict. There were four items each for task and relationship conflict including such items as, "In general this conflict is about things, such as money or possessions" (task) and "This is

mostly a personality conflict" (relationship). For the scenarios, items were altered slightly to reflect the specific content of each scenario (e.g., "This conflict tends to focus on how the job should be done" [task item]) whereas, for the journals, items were worded to encompass a variety of conflict episodes (e.g., "In general the conflict is about concrete issues [such as plans, time, or how to get something done]" [task item]). The four items in each scale were averaged to form a single score for task and relationship conflict. Responses were made on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*.

## RESULTS

To assess the extent to which individuals were consistent in their tendencies to make attributions about task and relationship conflict, we first examined the reliability of their attributions for the four scenarios. For both task and relationship conflict, attributions about the conflict were consistent across scenarios ( $\alpha = .71$  for task and  $.69$  for relationship). Thus, conflict attributions for each of the four scenarios were averaged to form an overall scenario score for task conflict and an overall scenario score for relationship conflict. For the journals, we included data only for the days that participants reported actually having a conflict (i.e., responses to the task and relationship items were excluded if participants did not report experiencing conflict on a particular day). The total number of responses per participant included in the analysis ranged from 3 to 14 ( $M = 9.52$ ). The attributions individuals made about conflict type from day to day also showed some consistency ( $\alpha = .66$  for both task and relationship attributions). Therefore, daily attributions about task and relationship were averaged to form an overall journal score for each type of

**Table 1**  
Intercorrelations Between Scenario Reports and Journal Reports for Task and Relationship Conflict

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Relationship—scenario	.75			
2. Relationship—journal	.30*	.77		
3. Task—scenario	.29*	.21	.81	
4. Task—journal	.18	-.07	.39**	.89

Notes.  $N = 48$ . Scale reliabilities are on the diagonal. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

conflict. As indicated in Table 1, we found significant correlations between participants' tendency to attribute the conflict in the scenarios to task or relationship conflict and their tendency to make task and relationship attributions about their own conflicts as reported in their journals ( $r = .30$  for relationship and  $r = .39$  for task conflict). Although these correlations are only moderate in magnitude, they are noteworthy in that they are consistent with the notion that individuals are somewhat stable in the types of attributions they make about their conflicts, across time, situations, and partners.

Based on this preliminary evidence that individuals exhibit some stability in their attributions about task and relationship conflict, we conducted a more extensive follow-up study. In the second study, we explored the relationship between personality and attributions about task and relationship conflict. In addition, we examined the effects of each type of attribution on relationship satisfaction.

## **STUDY 2**

### **METHOD**

#### **Participants and Procedure**

Participants for this study were roommates living in several residence halls of a large Midwestern university. As an incentive for participation at each stage of the study, participants were offered the opportunity to have their names entered into a drawing for prizes ranging from \$50.00 cash to a \$200.00 gift certificate. Participants were encouraged to enroll with their roommates. However, individuals whose roommates did not participate in the study were included. Thus, all participants lived with a roommate, but only some participants enrolled in the study in pairs. A total of 263 individuals, including 60 roommate pairs, were enrolled. Participants were predominantly white (79%) and female (75%), with a mean age of 18.6 years. Participants had known their current roommates for an average of 19 months, and 36% percent were living with a roommate of their choice.

This study was longitudinal, conducted over a period of 3 months, and included a series of three surveys distributed via e-mail. The first survey contained personality measures and demographic items. The second survey, distributed approximately one month later, included measures of conflict type and frequency. The final survey, distributed another month later, repeated the conflict measures and included questions about participants' satisfaction with and intent to remain living with their roommates. There was some attrition throughout the course of the study. At Time 2,

responses dropped to 226 individuals (including 45 roommate pairs). At Time 3, there were 212 individual responses (including 41 pairs). Overall, 203 individuals (including 39 roommate pairs) completed all three surveys.

### Measures

*Personality.* The 60-item NEO Personality Inventory, NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) was used to measure the Five-Factor Model of personality.<sup>1</sup> This widely used measure exhibits relatively high internal consistency, high test-retest reliability, and strong convergent and discriminant validity (Botwin, 1995). It consists of five 12-item scales, one scale to measure each domain (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness). Responses were on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Items were summed to form an overall score for each of the personality traits. It should be noted that the NEO-FFI is generally used with a 5-point response scale. Because we used a 7-point scale in this study, means and standard deviations (see Table 2) cannot be compared to population norms.

*Conflict measures.* We measured both frequency of conflict and attributions about conflict (task or relationship) in the second and third surveys. The task and relationship conflict scales were based on Jehn's (1995) measures as described in Study 1. In the final survey, six additional items were added to the conflict scale (three each for task and relationship). Whereas the previously described eight conflict type items referred specifically to conflicts in the past month, the additional items were worded to reflect participants' overall attributions about type of conflict experienced with their roommates during the semester. Items included "In general, the conflicts I have had this semester with my roommate tend to be about issues associated with one of us (personality, style) or our relationship" (relationship item) and "Overall, we tend to fight about specific things such as how we share our space, money, time management, what we do on Thursday night, or who uses the computer" (task item). Responses were made on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. Items were averaged to obtain a single score for task conflict and relationship conflict for each of the

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**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations Among Personality Traits, Conflict Variables, and Relationship Outcomes-Individual Data**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Neuroticism	46.53	12.47	.84															
2. Extraversion	61.41	9.42	-.33	.79														
3. Openness	57.39	10.05	.09	-.08	.75													
4. Agreeableness	62.20	9.67	-.38	.41	-.09	.77												
5. Conscientiousness	59.66	10.56	-.29	.32	-.16	.33	.83											
6. Frequency	2.39	.77	.26	-.07	.22	-.22	-.09	.84										
7. Relationship - T2	2.89	1.25	.18	-.13	.18	-.24	-.05	.42	.84									
8. Relationship - T3	2.92	1.14	.11	-.09	.15	-.21	.00	.51	.57	.80								
9. Relationship composite	2.91	1.03	.15	-.12	.18	-.24	-.02	.53	.80	.95	.81							
10. Task - T2	3.00	1.14	.17	-.05	.08	-.10	-.09	.27	.37	.28	.34	.73						
11. Task - T3	3.23	1.12	.14	-.01	.27	-.13	-.21	.38	.30	.42	.42	.59	.76					
12. Task composite	3.12	1.01	.17	-.03	.23	-.13	-.18	.38	.36	.41	.44	.81	.95	.82				
13. Satisfaction	4.71	1.45	-.10	.21	-.14	.07	-.09	-.46	-.32	-.51	-.50	-.07	-.17	-.15	.82			
14. Intent to Stay	3.84	1.64	.04	.05	-.10	-.01	-.14	-.35	-.32	-.46	-.46	-.15	-.24	-.24	.75	.89		
15. Sex	1.25	.43	-.15	-.06	-.06	-.08	.01	-.07	-.05	.03	.00	.03	-.06	-.03	-.04	-.09	—	
16. Chosen	1.64	.47	-.12	-.07	-.16	-.06	-.02	-.16	-.05	-.09	-.08	.01	-.09	-.06	.26	.34	.05	—

*Notes.*  $N = 152$ . Correlations .16 and above are significant ( $p < .05$ ). Reliabilities are reported on the diagonal. NEO-FFI responses were on a 7-point scale rather than the traditional 5-point scale. Thus, means and standard deviations cannot be compared to norms.



two time periods and a general measure of each at Time 3. In the second and third surveys, we also measured frequency of conflict (e.g., “On average, how frequently did you experience conflict with your roommate in the past month”). Responses ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 3 = *about once per week* to 6 = *more than once per day*.

*Satisfaction and intent to remain with roommate.* A six-item scale was used to measure satisfaction with the roommate (two items) and intent to remain living with the current roommate (four items). Items include “I am unhappy with my current roommate” (satisfaction, reverse scored), and “I hope to continue to live with my current roommate in the future” (intent to remain with roommate).

### Analysis

When analyzing data collected from dyads, it is important to consider the possibility that the scores of two persons (e.g., roommates) may be correlated (Kenny, 1996). To assess the degree of dependence in these data, we estimated intraclass correlations (ICCs) for the conflict and personality variables. Results of this analysis indicated significant ( $p < .01$ ) relationships between roommates' reports of conflict frequency (ICC = .45) but not their attributions of task and relationship conflict (ICC's .15 and .07, respectively, *ns*). There were also significant ICCs for three of the personality traits: agreeableness (ICC = .45), extraversion (ICC = .53), and conscientiousness (ICC = .55) but not for openness (ICC = .12) or neuroticism (ICC = .16). Thus, we have sufficient evidence to conclude that at least some of the roommates' responses are systematically related.

Whereas dependency in responses of both members of a roommate pair will not affect the magnitude of correlations between variables, tests of significance may be biased. Furthermore, when examining dyadic data where some variables are systematically related, special procedures for determining unique actor and partner effects can be used. Because our data set included some individual and some paired reports, we split the data into two separate data sets. For the individual level analyses, we included responses from all the individuals who participated in the study without a roommate and one of each of the roommate pairs (one partner was randomly selected for inclusion), hereinafter referred to as the *individual data*. This practice is not generally recommended as it does not use the responses of each individual (Kenny, 1988). However, in the present case it is justified, as treating the data this way allows us to include the responses of individuals who enrolled in the study without a roommate in the individual analyses, while using the data from both roommates in our analysis of the pairs (referred to as the *paired data*).

## RESULTS

Prior to conducting the analyses of interest, we examined the relationship between the general and specific measures of task and relationship conflict at Time 3 and found them to be highly related ( $r = .82$  for relationship and  $r = .75$  for task). Also, as expected based on Study 1 results, we found a substantial relationship between reports of task conflict and Time 2 and Time 3 ( $r = .60$ ), and likewise for relationship conflict ( $r = .55$ ). Thus, all three conflict reports (one from Time 2 and two from Time 3) were averaged to form a single measure of task and relationship conflict. In Table 2 we include the Time 2 and Time 3 measures as well as the aggregate task and relationship measure. We do this to demonstrate the general consistency of relationships between personality and relationship conflict. However, it should be noted that there is a nearly perfect correlation between the Time 3 and the composite task and relationship measures.

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and variable intercorrelations for the individual data. Intercorrelations among the FFM traits are consistent with those commonly found between the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Sex was unrelated to any of the study variables. However, having chosen one's roommate displayed a slight, albeit significant, association with both openness to experience and conflict frequency. Also, as might be expected, individuals who chose their roommates were more likely to be satisfied and were more likely to intend to remain living with their roommate. We also note that, consistent with prior research (Simons & Peterson, 2000), there is a .44 correlation between task and relationship conflict.

### Personality and Conflict

As reported in Table 2, agreeableness, openness, and neuroticism were related to the amount of conflict reported. Those who scored high on agreeableness tended to report fewer conflicts, whereas individuals scoring high on neuroticism and openness tended to report more conflict. In terms of the association between personality and relationship conflict, as expected, we found a negative association between agreeableness and the tendency to attribute conflicts to relationships. In addition, a small but positive association between openness and

relationship conflict was found. This association was significant at Time 2 and for the combined measure but failed to reach significance at Time 3. For task conflict, we found small associations with neuroticism, openness, and conscientiousness, but these associations were inconsistent over time. Thus, the effects of personality on attributions of relationship conflict appear to be more stable than the effects of personality on attributions of task conflict.

To examine the joint effects of the five personality traits on conflict, we regressed the aggregate measures of frequency, task conflict, and relationship conflict on the five personality traits. This approach adjusts the effects of each trait for the influence of the other traits. As shown in Table 3, there are slight differences in the pattern of relationships. Once the effects of the other traits are controlled, only neuroticism and openness predict frequency of conflict; the regression coefficient for agreeableness was not significant (although it was marginal,  $p = .059$ ). Associations between the personality traits and relationship conflict are consistent with those found in Table 2; both agreeableness and openness predict relationship conflict. However, in the case of task conflict, only openness remained a significant predictor; regression coefficients for conscientiousness and neuroticism were not significant. Multiple correlations between the five traits and conflict attributions were .31 for both task and relationship conflict.

In order to examine the unique effects of actor and partner personality on the attributions individuals make about conflict type,

**Table 3**  
**Multivariate Effects of Personality on Conflict**  
**Variables – Individual Data**

Personality trait	Frequency	Relationship conflict	Task conflict
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Neuroticism	.20**	.09	.13
Extraversion	.07	-.01	.11
Openness	.19**	.17*	.21**
Agreeableness	-.17	-.23**	-.07
Conscientiousness	-.02	.10	-.12
Multiple R	.35**	.31**	.31**

Notes.  $N = 152$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

we now turn to an analysis of the paired data. As noted earlier, the paired data set includes only those 78 individuals (39 pairs) who completed the study with a roommate. Thus, for each pair, we have personality and conflict reports for both roommates. In estimating the effects of self (actor) and roommate (partner) personality on reports of conflict, we used procedures recommended by Kenny (1996) for a “partner effects” model where the dependent variable response (conflict report—Roommate 1) of one member of the dyad may be influenced by the independent variable response of both members of the dyad (personality report—Roommate 1 and 2). This procedure allows us to partition variance into two mutually exclusive components: actor effects and partner effects.

Table 4 presents our analysis of actor and partner effects. With respect to agreeableness, we found that individuals high in agreeableness tend to report fewer conflicts (actor effects). However, having an agreeable partner was not associated with reduced conflict. Furthermore, in the paired data we did not find actor or partner effects for agreeableness on relationship conflict. For conscientiousness, we did find a significant partner effect for relationship conflict. Individuals with roommates scoring high on conscientiousness were more likely to attribute their conflict to their roommates or the relationship (relationship conflict). A similar effect was found for extraversion; having an extraverted partner was associated with relationship conflict. Unexpectedly, we also found that individuals

**Table 4**  
Effects of Self (Actor Effects) and Roommate (Partner Effects) Personality on Conflict: Paired Data

Variable	Actor effects					Partner effects				
	N	E	O	A	C	N <sub>r</sub>	E <sub>r</sub>	O <sub>r</sub>	A <sub>r</sub>	C <sub>r</sub>
Conflict										
frequency	.35**	-.17*	.24**	-.18*	-.16	-.11	.06	.03	-.07	.00
Relationship										
conflict	.03	.15	.17*	.00	.13	-.16	.34**	.05	-.01	.28**
Task conflict	.10	.08	.23**	.03	-.10	.10	.12	.01	-.02	.02

*Notes.* N = neuroticism; E = extraversion; O = openness; A = agreeableness; C = conscientiousness. *N* = 78 (39 pairs). Subscript r indicates roommate personality (e.g., A<sub>r</sub> = roommate agreeableness). \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01.

who scored high on extraversion reported fewer conflicts, although their partners did not. With respect to neuroticism, our findings are consistent with our expectations and past research. Individuals scoring high on this trait tended to report more conflicts. However, neuroticism was unrelated to reports of task or relationship conflict and was unrelated to the conflict reports of partners (i.e., no partner effects were found). Finally, individuals' scores on openness to experience were related to reports of more frequent conflict and to reports of relationship conflict and task conflict. However, the partners' level of openness to experience was unrelated to frequency or attributions about conflict type. Thus, we found individuals' own level of agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience to be related to the amount of conflict they experienced, but only openness was related to attributions about conflict type. In terms of partner effects, these data indicate that the roommates of both extraverted and conscientious individuals were significantly more likely to attribute the source of their conflicts to their roommates or their relationship with their roommate.

The dyadic analysis presented in Table 4 represents a statistical separation of the effects of each partner's personality on conflict attributions. In addition, it may be practically useful to look at the combined effects of the partners' personalities on their conflicts. In Table 5, we take a slightly different approach to our dyadic analysis by examining the impact of mean levels of each trait within a roommate pair on reports of conflict. Results indicate that regardless of

**Table 5**  
Relationships Between Mean Level of Personality Trait in Each Pair and Mean Level of Conflict Reported

	Mean frequency	Mean relationship conflict	Mean task conflict
1. Mean neuroticism	.24	-.13	.00
2. Mean extraversion	-.12	.49**	.20
3. Mean openness	.27	.23	.24
4. Mean agreeableness	-.22	-.01	.01
5. Mean conscientiousness	-.16	.39*	-.08

*Notes.*  $N = 39$  roommate pairs. Mean refers to the mean level of the trait in the roommate pair and mean level of conflict reported in the pair. \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ .

individual roommate scores on a trait, mean levels in the pair make a difference for some traits. There was no relationship between mean levels of personality and the frequency of conflict in the pair. Nor was there a statistically significant relationship between mean trait levels and task conflict. However, we did find that when the both partners were high on extraversion and conscientiousness (high mean levels in the pair), the pair tended to experience more relationship conflict.

Our final dyadic analysis examined the extent to which absolute personality differences between roommates were associated with conflict (see Table 6). Only differences between individuals on Neuroticism predicted the pairs' reports of relationship conflict. However, differences between partners on extraversion did predict the amount of conflict individuals reported. Differences in extraversion were also associated with reports of task conflict.

### Conflict and Outcomes

Examination of the relationship between satisfaction and intent to remain in the relationship (see Table 2) revealed a strong ( $r = .75$ ) association between the two outcome measures. In addition, they displayed similar associations with attributions about conflict type. Thus, in our examination of the effects of task and relationship conflict on relationship outcomes, satisfaction and intent to stay were summed to form a single measure of relationship satisfaction.

**Table 6**  
Relationships Between Personality Differences Between Partners and Mean Level of Conflict Reported

	Mean frequency	Mean relationship conflict	Mean task conflict
1. Differences in neuroticism	.07	.35*	-.04
2. Differences in extraversion	.41**	-.11	.31*
3. Differences in openness	-.13	-.30	-.18
4. Differences in agreeableness	.03	-.09	.13
5. Differences in conscientiousness	.02	-.28	.10

*Notes.*  $N = 39$  roommate pairs. Differences for each trait refers to the absolute difference between the two individual in each roommate pair for each trait. \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ .

To address the issue of whether attributions about task and relationship conflict differentially predict outcomes, we estimated the effects of personality and conflict attributions on relationship satisfaction using hierarchical regression. In the first step (Model 1), we entered only the personality variables. Because individuals who had chosen their roommates exhibited greater relationship satisfaction, we entered this variable next (Model 2). Finally, we entered the conflict variables (Model 3) into the equation. As shown in Table 7, attributions about relationship conflict (but not task conflict) negatively predicted relationship satisfaction. After controlling for the effects of personality, having chosen one’s roommate, and the total amount of conflict, we find that attributing conflict to relationship issues had substantial and deleterious effects on relationship satisfaction. However, the same was not true for task conflict.

**Task and Relationship Conflict**

Consistent with past research (Simons & Peterson, 2000), we found that reports of task and relationship conflict are related (see Table 2).

**Table 7**  
**Impact of Personality and Conflict on Relationship Satisfaction – Individual Data**

	Relationship satisfaction		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Neuroticism	.01	.07	.14
Extraversion	.15	.19*	.19**
Openness to experience	-.14	-.08	.02
Agreeableness	.01	.04	-.08
Conscientiousness	-.20*	-.19*	-.14*
Chosen		.34**	.29**
Conflict frequency			-.21**
Task conflict			-.02
Relationship conflict			-.38**
$R^2$	.06	.17**	.41**
$\Delta R^2$		.11**	.24**

Notes. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . Values in the first nine rows represent beta weights. Chosen is dummy coded 1 = not chosen, 2 = chosen.

One explanation for this relationship is that high levels of task conflict may lead to relationship conflict over time (Pelled, 1996). Since relationship conflict (but not task conflict) has negative effects on roommate satisfaction, it is important to understand the nature of the association between the two types of conflict. Because we measured task and relationship conflict at two points in time, we can explore the relationship between them. In Table 8 we report the results of regressions estimating the effects of each type of conflict on changes in the other. That is, we explore the degree to which initial reports of task conflict predict subsequent reports of relationship conflict as well as the opposite. In these data, an initial report of task conflict is not associated with later reports of relationship conflict, nor is the opposite true. However, since it is possible that the effects of one type of conflict on the other may occur early in the relationship, we also estimated these regressions for those individuals ( $N = 132$ ) who had known each other one month or less at the start of our study. Results were consistent with those reported in Table 8. Thus, our data do not lend support to the notion that task conflict early in a relationship will lead to relationship conflict over time.

## DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of these studies was to examine the role of personality in the attributions individuals make about the conflicts they experience. We addressed two general questions: Are there stable individual differences in the tendency to make task and/or relationship attributions about conflict? Does personality predict these tendencies?

**Table 8**  
Effects of Task and Relationship Conflict on Each Other Over Time

	Relationship conflict—time 3	Task conflict— time 3
	$\beta$	$\beta$
Relationship Conflict—Time 2	.54**	.12
Task Conflict—Time 2	.09	.56**
Model $R^2$	.33**	.38**

Notes.  $N = 199$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



We also explored the role of partner personality in conflict attributions. With respect to the first of these questions, our findings support the idea that individual differences matter. As indicated by small, and non-significant, intraclass correlations in Study 2, there was little agreement between roommates in attributions of task and relationship conflict even when reporting on their conflict with each other. More importantly, across time (Study 1 and Study 2) and when responding to the conflicts of others and describing their own conflict (Study 1), individuals exhibited some consistency in their tendency to frame conflicts as task or relationship. Although the association between conflict attributions across time and situations was only moderate ( $r = .30$  and  $.39$  for relationship and task conflict), our findings do suggest that individuals differ in their general tendencies to attribute their conflicts to task or relationship concerns.

One possible interpretation of these results is that individual differences in personality may influence attributions individuals make about the nature and source of conflict. Study 2 provides some evidence in support of this proposition. In the individual analysis, we found that individuals who scored low on agreeableness and high on openness to experience were more likely to attribute their conflicts to relationship issues. With respect to task conflict, we found that those high on neuroticism and openness to experience and those low on conscientiousness were more likely to report that their conflicts were based on specific issues or tasks. However, it should be noted that these relationships were small (between  $.18$  and  $.24$ ), as might be expected if dispositions represent only one of many factors (e.g., context or partner) that influence conflict attributions. Furthermore, although these results lend support to the notion that individuals' personalities matter, stronger effects were found when we conducted the dyadic analysis. Results indicated that the strongest effects of personality on conflict attributions arise from partner personality or the combination of personality traits within a dyad.

Overall, there appear to be several issues worthy of note in terms of the personality-conflict relationship. In terms of agreeableness, our findings were somewhat inconsistent between the individual and paired data sets and somewhat inconsistent with prior findings. Although there was a small association between agreeableness and conflict frequency in the individual data, there were no significant actor or partner effects in the paired data. Moreover, although the correlation was in the expected direction ( $r = -.22$ ), the mean level of agreeableness in a pair

was not associated with frequency of conflict. Since the individuals in our data sets were predominantly female, we thought that gender effects might explain these results. Both Graziano et al. (1996) and Asendorpf and Wilpers (1998) found that the association between agreeableness and conflict was stronger for men than for women. However, post hoc analysis of our data did not support this conclusion. The association between agreeableness and frequency of conflict was the same for men and women ( $-.23$ ,  $n = 36$ ; and  $-.23$ ,  $n = 116$ , respectively). For task and relationship conflict, similar results were found ( $r = -.21$  and  $-.25$  for men and women respectively for task conflict, and  $r = -.20$  and  $-.12$  for men and women, respectively, for relationship conflict). Thus, in our sample, there is no evidence of gender effects for agreeableness.

Our dyadic analysis indicates that extraversion plays a key role in the attributions individuals make about the conflict they experience. Our results are consistent with prior empirical evidence suggesting that extraverts do not experience more conflict (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). However, the partners of extraverts tend to attribute their conflicts to their extraverted partner or their relationship with their partner. Moreover, mean levels of extraversion in a pair are associated with reports of relationship conflict. Finally, differences in extraversion between partners are associated with more conflict and task-related conflict.

These findings for extraversion and agreeableness are interesting when considered from a theoretical perspective. In most conceptualizations of the personality domain, extraversion and agreeableness share a dimension of affiliation or affection for others (DePue & Collins, 1999; Watson & Clark, 1997). Graziano and Eisenberg (1997) argue that the trait of agreeableness is the foundation of individual motives to maintain positive social relationships (i.e., affiliation motives). With respect to extraversion and affiliation, DePue and Collins (1999) argue that extraversion has three central characteristics: affiliation, (valuing close interpersonal bonds), agency (being assertive and dominant), and impulsivity, which they argue should not be included in extraversion. Furthermore, in the circumplex model of interpersonal behavior (see Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996), both extraversion and agreeableness occupy space on the warm-agreeable end of the communion dimension. However, extraversion and agreeableness fall on opposite ends of the agency dimension, with extraversion close to the dominant pole and agreeableness closer to the submissive pole (see Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997).

Although extraversion and agreeableness share a facet of warmth and affection toward others, it is clear from our results that the traits have a very different influence on conflict. Our results, although weak, are generally supportive of Graziano and Eisenberg's (1997) contention that agreeable individuals are motivated to maintain positive social relationships. With respect to the motives of extraverts, there are several competing theories about what constitutes the "core" of extraversion. Theorists have suggested that it may be positive emotionality, sociability, or reward sensitivity (see Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000, for a review of this topic). Whereas none of these approaches provide insight with respect to our data, a return to the circumplex framework with its emphasis on dual motives of communion and agency may be fruitful. Considering prior findings about the dominant behavior of extraverts in conflict (Buss, 1991; Geist & Gilbert 1996) and our results, which indicate that both partner extraversion and mean levels of extraversion in a pair are associated with relationship conflict, it may be that the most salient motive for extraverts, at least in conflict, is agency (or domination). Thus, it is possible that, especially during conflict, the extravert's motives with respect to agency may outweigh his or her motives with respect to communion. In a recent study, Fournier and Moskowitz (2000) found that, whereas communal behaviors had a linear relationship with positive affect (the more communal behaviors reported by a participant, the higher the positive affect), the association between agentic behaviors (dominance) and positive affect was curvilinear. That is, agentic behaviors were associated with positive affect up to a certain point, at which level agentic expression predicted a decline in positive affect. Although similar curvilinear effects were not identified in our data, our data do support the notion that at a certain level (high extraversion), dominant behaviors may be associated with affective conflict (i.e., relationship conflict). Much has been written about extraversion, but there has been little attention paid to the ways in which competing motives for affiliation and dominance play out in an extravert's interpersonal relationships. It may be that agency motives (the dominance dimension) becomes most salient in conflict situations. This topic presents an opportunity for future research on the role of extraversion in conflict.

Since conscientiousness tends to be associated more with self-control and achievement orientation than with interpersonal relationships, our findings regarding conscientiousness are noteworthy. Partners of highly conscientious individuals tended to report relationship conflict.

Furthermore, mean levels of conscientiousness in a dyad were associated with reports of relationship conflict. It is interesting to note that differences in conscientiousness, which one might expect to predict conflict, did not. There is little theory or research on the role of conscientiousness in interpersonal relationships to guide an explanation of these results. However, Hogan and Ones (1997) do suggest that both criticality and inflexibility may be associated with high conscientiousness and Blickle (1997) found that achievement was associated with argumentativeness (for men only). One might also expect some characteristics of low conscientious individuals (unreliability, untidiness) to influence roommate conflict. To be certain that the association between conflict and conscientiousness was not curvilinear (both high and low conscientiousness might be related to conflict), we regressed conscientiousness and conscientiousness squared on each of the conflict outcomes. Results of this analysis were not significant.<sup>2</sup> Because the achievement dimension of conscientiousness, particularly in the workplace, is associated with many positive outcomes (e.g., integrity, motivation, and performance) future research should more fully examine the role of conscientiousness in conflict.

Based on our results, openness to experience is worthy of further attention in the study of conflict. Perhaps due to their tendency to be argumentative, individuals scoring high on this trait have more frequent conflict. Further, they are more likely to attribute their conflicts to task issues. Although there is empirical evidence that task conflict is neither good nor bad for relationship satisfaction, the position-oriented conflict of open individuals is the sort of conflict that has been found to be beneficial to work group performance (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995, 1997). However, individuals who score high on openness to experience also tended to attribute their conflicts to relationship concerns, which can have detrimental effects on both relationships and work group performance (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Since this is the first study to explore the relationship between openness and conflict attributions, future research should attempt to replicate these findings.

With respect to neuroticism, our results are consistent with prior research. Although individuals who score high on this trait report more

2. At the suggestion of a reviewer, we also conducted this analysis for all of the FFM traits. No evidence of curvilinear relationships was found.

conflict, their partners do not. Nor did high mean levels of neuroticism in a pair influence conflict attributions. However, it was interesting to note that differences between partners in neuroticism scores were associated with reports of relationship conflict.

Clearly, the relationship between personality and the attributions individuals make in interpreting conflict is complex. On one hand, we found evidence of individual differences in the tendency to attribute conflicts to task or relationship issues. On the other hand, our strongest personality predictors of relationship conflict were partner effects, difference effects, and mean level effects, implying that individuals' conflict interpretations may be partner specific. Thus, it is likely that the attributions individuals make about any particular conflict episode are a function of their own personality and the personality of their partner, in combination with factors of the situation. Because we examined only conflict attributions and not conflict behaviors, we cannot separate the extent to which conflict behaviors mediate the association between personality and conflict. A critical next step in this research is to begin to separate the joint and interactive effects of behaviors and cognitions on conflict attributions. From the standpoint of conflict management, such work would be particularly useful. However, this work can also advance our knowledge of the ways in which personality influences relationship quality.

All in all, the results of these studies raise as many questions about the role of personality in conflict attributions as they answer. However, our results are clear and consistent with past research regarding the outcomes associated with conflict. As expected, the amount of conflict an individual reported was detrimental to relationship satisfaction. Moreover, attributions of relationship conflict negatively predicted satisfaction, even after controlling for the effects of conflict frequency. It is noteworthy that task attributions had neither a destructive nor a constructive influence on relationship satisfaction. Moreover, contrary to some hypotheses (Janssen et al., 1999; Jehn, 1997; Pelled, 1996), in this study, task conflict did not lead to relationship conflict. Thus, continued research devoted to understanding the antecedents of conflict attributions is in order.

In interpreting the results of these studies, some limitations should be considered. First, roommate relationships may be unique in that they are close, personal relationships, yet they tend to be relatively short

term. Thus, we cannot be certain that the effects of personality and conflict found in this study will be the same for individuals in long-term relationships (e.g., marriage) or those in relationships that are less personal in nature (e.g., work groups). Second, because we measured relationship satisfaction at only one point in time, we cannot be certain that attributions about relationship conflict influence satisfaction rather than the reverse. Third, because relationship conflict items include attributions about the partner's personality and the relationship with the partner in the same item, we cannot examine the unique effects of each. Finally, because we have only perceptions of conflict in these studies, we were not able to assess the extent to which actual events (e.g., actor and partner behaviors) influence the attributions individuals make about task and relationship conflict. On the other hand, it may be that agreeable individuals behave in such a way as to keep their conflicts focused on the issues, preventing them from becoming conflicts about the relationship. On the other hand, they may actually have the same conflict experiences as do less agreeable individuals; they may simply interpret them differently. This is an important question that might be addressed in future research.

Despite their limitations, these studies make an important contribution in that they are the first to consider the effects of personality on individuals' attributions about task and relationship conflict. Furthermore, these studies provide support for the idea that when individuals attribute their conflicts to factors associated with their partners (relationship conflict), they find the relationship less satisfying. With respect to theory, these studies both lend support to existing theory and point to the need for further theory development. In terms of agreeableness, our findings are consistent with emerging theory. The negative association between agreeableness and relationship conflict is entirely consistent with the notion that agreeable individuals are motivated to maintain positive interpersonal relationships. With respect to extraversion, these results lay the groundwork for further examination of the ways in which competing motives of agency and communion influence the personal relationships of extraverts. Since extraversion includes facets of both dominance and affiliation, an examination of the separate influence of each of these facets on relationship conflict and relationship satisfaction may be fruitful. In examining the results in Table 7, it is interesting to note that relationship conflict appears to have a suppressor effect on the positive association between extraversion and relationship satisfac-

tion. In effect, the relationship conflict associated with extraversion reduces the otherwise positive association between extraversion and relationship satisfaction. Finally, given the negative outcomes associated with relationship conflict in both interpersonal relationships and work groups, further research addressing its personality antecedents is warranted.

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