

# THE COMPOSITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT IN IRISH CONSTRUCTION SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES: A CASE STUDY

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Although the adversarial environment in which the construction labour force operates is widely accepted, further analysis of the composition and types of conflict present, is absent. This paper aims to categorise the various types of interpersonal conflict (IPC) that manifest because of these relationships. This is carried out by completing a literature review, to identify the variety of categories of IPC. 20 Semi-structured interviews, based on these findings allow participants to detail their experiences with IPC. Interviews are conducted with employees of a singular Irish construction SME. Task and relationship conflict are the most prevalent forms of IPC found. The research highlights high levels of co-occurrence between conflict types due to interactions with external factors. The findings of this research supplement previous works which highlight the link between conflict types, conflict management strategies, and team outcomes. These findings will enable management to effectively categorise the type of IPC present and subsequently implement the optimal conflict management strategy.

Keywords: disputes, task, relationship, interpersonal conflict, SME, Ireland

## INTRODUCTION

The presence of conflict in an organisational environment is irrefutable (Barki and Hartwick, 2002). Subsequently, the academic world has produced an abundance of research over the last 70 years, to encapsulate the complexities at play (Deutsch, 1990; Wall and Callister, 1995; Barki and Hartwick, 2002; Schulze, *et al.*, 2014). As organisations expand and undertake more complex projects, Kiernan, *et al.* (2021) suggests that their reliance on diverse and multidisciplinary teams increases accordingly. Consequently, diversity in teams is on the rise and so too are the differentiating characteristics within the group, with Mauersberger, *et al.* (2019) having stated that once two or more individuals are misaligned in this regard interpersonal conflict becomes inevitable. In conjunction with this Rispen and Demerouti, (2016) described workplace conflict as being “omnipresent” and although conflict at work is not sought after, there is much research to suggest it has become common place in all work environments (Narayanan, *et al.*, 1999).

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In this regard, the construction industry has long been noted for its conflict burdened environment and the adversarial nature in which it operates (Vaux and Dority, 2020). The industries' ability both domestically and foreign to create disputes is unparalleled (Spillane, *et al.*, 2011). The relationship between conflict and deficient performance is irrefutable and is acknowledged as a primary source of project inefficiency (Zouher Al-Sibaie, *et al.*, 2014). The litigious nature of the industry has had profound implications on projects for decades and is often used as a justification to the poor performance of the sector. The critical factors of dispute creation have been continually identified in academic studies (Brockman, 2014; Assaf, *et al.*, 2019). Meng, (2012) suggests that although commonality has been found across a multitude of studies, due to the infinite and incalculable complexities at play throughout the life cycle of a construction project, the source of disputes will inevitably vary from project to project.

Hahn, (2000) suggested that the amount of time spent by employees on interpersonal conflict can range between 25 to 50% of their day. Despite the inevitability of conflict within the industry further analysis of the types of interpersonal conflict seen in Irish construction SME's is absent. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by categorising the various types of IPC present in Irish construction SME's. Once there is a clear understanding of the composition and types of conflict which exist, management will subsequently be able to implement the optimal conflict management strategy for individual occurrences. The importance of this can be seen in Behfar and Peterson, (2008) research where teams dealing with process conflict that employed "discussed / debate and open communication" based around fact driven conversation saw high/ increasing performance and team satisfaction. In contrast teams dealing with process conflict which employed "rotating, responsibilities and avoided / ignored" saw consistently low/ decreasing performance and team satisfaction.

### **Conflict Types in an Organisational Environment: A Review**

When carrying out a critical review of literature about conflict in an organisational environment it is important to note that not all conflicts are equal. Mauersberger, *et al.* (2019) found that although the word "conflict" carries negative connotations, in reality the word covers a vast array of types of "incompatibilities" between parties. This is hugely important when discussing this topic as Rispens and Demerouti, (2016) suggested that persons experience different emotional responses dependant on the what the conflict is centred around. It is also of note that the word "conflict" covers an array of interactions between parties and the levels or severity of the incident may differ drastically while being encompassed under the same term. As this came to light academics sought about categorising conflict by "type" and more advanced interpersonal conflict theory ensued (Barki and Hartwick, 2002). There are three types of conflict which have been consistently highlighted as common place in organisational environments. The tri-partite classification includes "Task Conflict" being concerned with disputes emerging from disagreements stemming from task related activities (Lee and Kwon, 2001). "Relationship Conflict" of which is focused on disputes which usually emerges from personal incompatibilities between parties Amason, (1996) and "Process Conflict" categorised by discrepancies in methods and procedures team members should use.

Early studies such as Hammond, (1965) suggested that all conflict which emerged while parties were conducting tasks were strictly cognitive. Consequently, this claim meant that one could rule out any further understating of the parties' values or

motivation as modern-day social scientists aim to have. As knowledge was furthered a more complete understanding of task conflict emerged. Lee and Kwon, (2001), Kiernan, *et al.* (2021), Meier, *et al.* (2013) are examples of numerous academics who found commonality in their views of task conflict, stating that it occurs when there are disagreements about the task, such as opinions or judgement. The most widely accepted holistic definition is that of Jehn, (1995), "Task conflict exists when there are disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions."

A study by Puck and Peregernig, (2014) suggests that although task conflict is a key indicator of performance, there is still room for debate as to the "how" and "why" this is the case. Studies have yielded a variety of results including finding negative effects, and finding positive effects (Puck and Peregernig, 2014). Although contrary to each other both findings are found in logical and practical theory. Those proclaiming a negative relationship between performance and task conflict suggest that it is inherently disruptive, resulting in undesirable emotions and substandard cooperation resulting in lower performance (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Vodosek, 2005). According to Puck and Peregernig, (2014) information processing theory and self-verification theory and heavily involved in the theoretical foundation of these ideals. Those presenting a case for a positive correlation argue that conflict which occurs in this regard correlates to a more detailed execution due to parties arguing a variety of points resulting in the most optimal output being found. In accordance with this Deutsch, (1973) found task conflict to be stimulating for team members, thus increasing curiosity and interest.

Negative emotions play a significant role in all interpersonal conflict (Barki and Hartwick, 2002). Regardless of the outcome, interpersonal conflict is often poignant. This is exacerbated by conflict, which can be defined as "affective or relationship conflict" as it usually emerges from personal incompatibilities between parties (Amason, 1996). According to Jehn, *et al.* (1997) widely cited definition relationship conflict is categorised by, "disagreements and incompatibilities among group members about personal issues that are not task related".

Similarly, to task conflict there is a certain level of ambiguity in the terms used when discussing relationship conflict. Relationship conflict is often cited as "emotional / affective conflict". However there has again been commonality found across a multitude of studies, with "personal incompatibility" often being referred to as being a defining characteristic with numerous studies citing these terms in their definition (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Cheung and Chuah, 2000).

In contrast to "task conflict" there is little to no research identifying any potential upside in an organisational context when relationship conflict emerges, as they are often the most difficult to resolve as it stimulates a strong emotional response from the involved parties. Perhaps the most cited fallout from the presence of relationship conflict in an organisation is the negative personal implication it has for employees. Research such as Meier, *et al.* (2013) suggest that relationship conflict indicates disrespect and is the expression of tension and rejection. This stimulates a strong emotional response from personnel, with studies highlighting the negative repercussions (Semmer, *et al.*, 2007).

This final part of the tripartite is process conflict, researchers in IPC rarely place the lens of focus on process conflict due to its similarity to task conflict (Behfar, *et al.*, 2011). However, due to the procedural heavy environment in which the construction

industry operates it is common. Comparably, Jehn, (1997) and Jehn and Mannix, (2001) saw the differentiating qualities of process conflict, with Weingart, (1992) expressing the belief that employees possess the ability to distinguish between task and process conflict. Process conflict pertains to the "how" a task should be accomplished with Jehn and Mannix, (2001) defining it as, "an awareness of controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed". Similarly, to task conflict, research indicates correlations between process conflict and lower team performance (Vaux and Dority, 2020).

*Table 1: Interpersonal conflict types, characteristics, and sources*

Conflict Type	Definition	Characteristics	Source
Task Conflict	"Task conflict exists when there are disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions." (Jehn, 1995)	Disagreement over ideas.	(Amason, 1996)
		Opinion differences within the group.	(Barki and Hartwick, 2002)
		Disagreement about work being done.	(Jehn, 1995)
		Low levels of emotion	(Vaux and Dority, 2020)
Relationship Conflict	"Disagreements and incompatibilities among group members about personal issues that are not task related" (Jehn, <i>et al.</i> , 1997)	Primarily cognitive in nature.	(Vaux and Dority, 2020)
		Negative emotions.	(Jehn, 1995)
		Focused on personal incompatibilities.	(Amason, 1996)
		Not task related.	(Jehn, <i>et al.</i> , 1997)
Process Conflict	"An awareness of controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed" (Jehn and Mannix, 2001)	Personality differences.	(Jehn, <i>et al.</i> , 1997)
		Disagreement.	(Jehn and Mannix, 2001)
		Relates to resource allocation.	(Jehn, 1997)
		Task responsibilities.	(Jehn and Mannix, 2001)

## METHOD

Having completed a comprehensive critique of the appropriate literature, a case study of a singular Irish construction SME is carried out. A case study is selected as this pilot study is the first study in what is to be a wider research plan. This provides opportunity to gain a valuable insight into the subject area while also seeing how interpersonal conflict interacts within an organisation as a whole. This is an invaluable insight for the competent execution of the wider research plan. The limitations of a singular case study must also be acknowledged, with Yin, (2009) highlighting the absence of methodological guidelines as an area of key concern. However, the "freedom" a case study provides, which is highlighted by Maoz, (2002) provides the opportunity to simultaneously address a gap in literature, while letting the study provide context for future research. The selected case study is an Irish registered construction SME of which deals with both domestic and commercial construction projects. The organisation directly employees between 25-40 personnel, depending on the current workload with a further 75-100 personnel through sub-contractors. This study is focused on IPC events between parties employed directly by the case study. Semi structured interviews based on, but not limited to, the tri-partite classification of IPC identified in the literature are conducted with personnel employed by the case study. Semi structured interviews are used as they provide the ability to gather open ended qualitative data while acquiring participants viewpoint, thoughts, and feelings on the subject matter. This study is inclusive of employees whose place on the internal management hierarchy varied, ranging from directors to general operatives (GO's).

This allows for a holistic in-sight into IPC within the construction SME rather than from the viewpoint of a singular management level. Due to the nature of the research and potential for sensitive information to be discussed there are no audio or visual recordings of interviews, as interviewees feel most at ease when no recording is taking place (Harvey, 2011). The participating company is kept anonymous and is referred to as 'case study' for the entirety of the paper. This is to ensure a comfortable and safe environment is created to ensure participants feel able to express their true feelings and experiences with IPC. All information from interviews is gathered through shorthand note taking and developed further post interview in accordance with (Rutakumwa, *et al.*, 2019). Shorthand note-taking allows for timely and accurate tracking of interview content such as key phrases and specific language without interrupting the process. Once the notes are developed further post interview, they are sent to the interview participant to verify their authenticity.

20 semi-structured interviews are conducted with employees of 'case study'. All interviews take place face to face at a location and time chosen by the participant. Participants are fully briefed and informed of the purpose of the research, its intended use, all their obligations, and rights. As this study is focused on IPC events which took place with parties employed by a singular construction firm participants are asked, to ensure the party of which they had the IPC event was directly employed by the same organisation. The interviewer has minimal further involvement and participants are encouraged to give honest recollections of their experience with IPC at work. The interview data is then accurately presented in a consistent manner to allow for efficient comparison. The data is then analysed and compared to the conflict types identified in the literature. This is conducted by establishing the presence or lack thereof, the defining characteristics of each conflict type highlighted in the literature.

## **FINDINGS**

Interviews begin with a brief introduction to the participant to gain an understanding of their experience and role within 'case study'. Throughout 20 a total of 43 IPC events are discussed. These events include a wide variety of IPC of which differ drastically in severity and encompass a wide range of incompatibilities between parties. These include IPC events centred around issues such as but not limited to 'general operatives leaving site early, disagreements on quality standards, lack of progression of work, perceived lack of respect, smart remarks being made, and disagreements over construction details'. As the study progress the results indicate that categorising conflict using singular definitions would be negligent regarding representing the true composite of the IPC events discussed. Interviewees cited a total of 15 IPC events which comprise of singular conflict types. Subsequently, 65% of IPC events instead had conflict types co-occur in complex ways, because of an incalculable number of external factors. Participants use of language such as "because of", "due to the fact", and "as a result of" allude to IPC being a dynamic, complex event in which the severity and composition change according to the context in which it is occurring.

An early study by Barki and Hartwick, (2002) which attempts to conceptualise the construct of interpersonal conflict uses a Ven diagram to depict the properties of IPC. This is an effective method to demonstrate the dynamic composite of IPC events discussed in interviews. Figure 1 below depicts several findings. Firstly, the number of IPC events which can be characterised as a singular conflict type, (3 task, 7

relationships, 5 process). It also depicts the IPC events in which a co-occurrence of conflict types is present (17 task and relationship, 6 task and process, 4 process and relationship). Finally, Figure 1 illustrates the singular IPC in which all three conflict types occur.

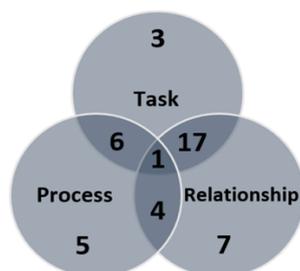


Figure 1: Number of each IPC type identified

## DISCUSSION

This paper is focused on the classification of interpersonal conflict types in Irish construction SME's. The ability to understand the composition and categorise the conflicts which are an inevitability in the Irish construction industry is quintessential to its effective management and mitigation. It is evident throughout both the literature review and the interview process that the classification of conflict is a complex multifaceted endeavour. This is due to the vast number of variables at play and the ability for conflict types to co-occur in unique ways. To align with the thematic presentation style of the paper the discussion is broken into the appropriate themes.

Construction projects are in essence the continues completion of a series of tasks (work packages) which are pre-defined in the scope of works. Subsequently, 27 of the IPC events discussed in this study can be attributed to an isolated task or situation related to a task. Interviewees cite task related IPC including, "we couldn't agree as to how long the job should be taking him", "we had a difference of opinion on execution methods", "he wasn't doing enough". At inception these IPC are typically cognitive in nature and void of emotion, prime examples of task conflict. Three out of the 43 IPC incidents are categorised as solely comprising of task conflict. The literature is divided as to the implications of this "pure" task conflict with numerous studies yielding contradictory results (Jehn, 1995, Rispens and Demerouti, 2016).

This contrast in the literature is justified by Meier, *et al.* (2013) who alludes to task conflict being a doubled edged sword, with it leading to better insight and problem solving while also inevitably meaning someone's opinion gets challenged or disregarded. The same study suggested any positive benefits of task conflict can only be realised when there is little to no relationship conflict present. Pertaining to this, although interviewees often describe incidents stemming from incompatibilities related to tasks, these conflicts frequently escalated drastically to co-occur with relationship conflict, due to a variety of reasons; these included, "perception of bad attitude", "illogical excuses / justification", "poor existing relationship" and "reasons beyond comprehension of interviewee". This co-occurrence is highlighted; accordingly, 18 of the IPC events present in this study comprise of task and relationship conflict.

When discussing this escalation interviewees often depict the other party as being "illogical, emotional or beyond reason", often noting the other party's "pride". In the IPC incidents discussed only two participants take responsibility for the escalation of

the conflict with both citing "bad mood" as the key emotional driver. Both these instances come from interviewees who place highly on the internal management hierarchy of 'case study'. A Jehn, *et al.* (2008) study suggest that employees possess the ability to detach emotional from task related conflict, in 'case study' this is more common amongst higher level personnel. When questioned about their lack of emotional involvement one interviewee states 'at the end of the day, I don't care by who or how a job is done, if its correct and within the budget'. Another participant refers to "letting it roll off my sleeve" when discussing how an event of IPC could have escalated after a negative emotion response from the opposite party to a simplistic task related issue.

Isolated instances of relationship conflict are the most cited singularly occurring type of IPC throughout the interview process, with seven out of forty-three. These IPC events arise when parties have incompatibilities around non task related personal issues and typically involve elevated levels of negative emotion. Examples of relationship conflict initiators cited in the interviews include "he was showing videos of me out at the weekend to the lads", "he wouldn't stop about my clothes being too small" or "we started messing about the hurling and it just got heated". The severity of the IPC events differs drastically.

Many of the incidents of relationship conflict are categories as minor and interviewees cite no long latest implications with one interviewee stating that 'when you are with the same crew so much a 15-minute blow out isn't a big deal and is usually over something trivial, it is usually forgotten about after half an hour'. The isolated instances of relationship conflict highlighted by participants were in the majority a result of "horseplay/ banter" aligning with the findings of Brockman, (2014) who cited this as a trigger of conflict in the construction industry. Interviewees are aligned in their view that this "horseplay/ banter" was essential for workplace moral and was "part and parcel" of the industry. One interviewee state that "sometimes you just unlucky and say the right thing on the wrong day" when discussing the potential for conflict to arise from banter. The most common conflict type present is in fact relationship conflict with a total of 29 instances.

Although process conflict does not receive equal levels of attention in the literature due to its similarity to task conflict, due to the unique nature of the construction sector it is prevalent, 16 incidents. Resource allocation is essential in construction a common trigger, "we clearly needed the load-all more than the roofers", "it wasn't possible to pour the floor with three men", " we needed the good consaw" and "he didn't understand what we were doing, sure how could he know how many men we needed". When recalling IPC events which involved process conflict negative emotions resulting in the co-occurrence of process and relationship conflict was mentioned 4 times. Jehn and Mannix, (2001) cited task responsibilities as being a defining characteristic of process conflict, due to the structure of 'case study' and the structure of Irish construction SMEs task responsibilities becomes an area of dispute. Interviewees cited numerous IPC events stemming from the classic principle of "that's not my job", with trades disagreeing on the completeness of previous works.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper contributes to the understanding of IPC composition in Irish construction SMEs. The construction sector is the most litigious industry. Inferior performance of the industry is often linked to the elevated levels of disputes, as these are lengthy, capital intensive, and tarnish essential relationships. Subsequently, the ability for

management and the general workforce to both manage and mitigate conflict within the industry is essential. The best way to rectify an issue is at its source and interpersonal relationships, moreover, IPC is a pillar of all disputes seen within the Irish construction industry. Task and relationship conflict were the most prolific IPC types highlighted in this study.

Due to the nature of the construction industry labour resources are often assigned to pre-defined work packages. Subsequently IPCs often stem from task related issues. High levels of negative emotions often occur resulting in escalation. A key observation made was the ability of those who placed higher on the internal management hierarchy to express lower levels of emotion when involved in IPC, resulting in cross management IPC escalation levels in 'case study' being lower than that of the general workforce. High levels of co-occurrence were also seen as IPC interacted with external factors outside the scope of this study. This research helps facilitate construction management practitioners to employ the optimal conflict management strategy as there is a furthered understanding of the type of IPC, they are tasked with managing.

The importance of correct conflict management strategy for different conflict types was highlighted in research which demonstrated the critical links between conflict types, conflict management strategies, and team outcomes. As IPC events progress / escalate and new stimuli are introduced such as negative emotions and supplementary information, it is important to revisit the classification of the IPC as the composition can change. This will ensure the implementation of optimal conflict management strategy as the incident progresses. This pilot study has provided several theoretical findings on which the wider study plan can be built. Firstly, there is opportunity to examine the impact of external influences such as weather, personal issues, and stress on conflict within the industry. Secondly, a comparative study between management and the general workforce to analyse the level of IPC escalation. Finally, through-out the study the crossover language amongst conflict definitions and ambiguity of terms used introduces a certain level of confusion to the literature. A modern study to provide clarity and commonality to language used in construction IPC literature would allow for continued growth in the area.

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