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RESEARCH NOTE

Adults' narratives of positive and negative conflicts

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Email: anni.tamm@ut.ee**Funding information**Estonian Research Council, Grant/Award
Number: PSG296**Abstract**

The study aimed to find out which features of conflict contribute to making it a positive experience and which features lead to conflict being evaluated negatively. The sample included 65 adults who provided narratives of positive and negative conflicts. The narratives of positive and negative conflicts were similar in the context and topics: Adults most frequently narrated about conflicts at work and in close relationships that were about differences in values, relationship issues, and resources. The findings suggest that desirable outcomes contribute most strongly to conflicts being viewed positively. In narratives about negative conflicts, participants described undesirable outcomes, but also the conflict process and negative emotions. The behavior of the conflict parties and reaching a solution were the two specific features determining whether the conflict was viewed as positive or negative. The findings have practical implications for improving conflict resolution.

1 | INTRODUCTION

While previous studies help to understand how adults resolve different types of conflicts (e.g., Keener & Strough, 2017; Weitzman, 2001), we know very little about how adults make sense of their conflict experiences. The way people perceive conflict influences how they deal with it. For example, people who view conflict as a negative event and associate it with lack of caring and respect from others tend to use dominating and avoidance strategies frequently (McDonald & Asher, 2013; Ricco & Sierra, 2017). Thus, an insight into not only how people view conflict, but also how they interpret the conflict process may help to better understand their conflict resolution.

In theory, conflicts have a potential to promote social and cognitive development, relationships, and individual well-being (Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Nevertheless, people of different ages hold mainly negative views of conflict (Baumeister et al., 1990; Dudley et al., 1996; Feiring et al., 2018; Longaretti & Wilson, 2006). It is not well understood why conflicts are perceived negatively and which features could contribute to making conflict a positive experience. In previous studies, conflict beliefs and interpretations have often been assessed with predefined categories. Researchers have described the following positive features of conflict: positive outcomes (e.g., a better mutual understanding), the use of negotiation and the willingness to try to understand other's point of view, and reaching a solution (Ben-Ari & Hirshberg, 2009; Feiring et al., 2018; McDonald & Asher, 2013; Simon et al., 2008). A negative view of conflict has been said to stem from undesirable outcomes (e.g., harm to relationships or individual well-being), strong negative emotions, feelings of being betrayed and disrespected, and negative behaviors of the other person (Ben-Ari & Hirshberg, 2009; Feiring et al., 2018; McDonald & Asher, 2013; Simon et al., 2008). Baumeister et al. (1990) analyzed adults' narratives of situations where someone angered them or they angered somebody. According to their findings, negative consequences and damage to relationships might indeed be some of the main features that lead to a negative evaluation of conflict. Lasting negative consequences and lasting negative emotions, regret, and self-blame might also be important. Adults mentioned desirable outcomes and happy endings as positive aspects in their narratives about anger.

In this study, we collect adults' written narratives of their previous interpersonal conflicts. Narratives enable us to examine how people construct and understand their experiences and what they consider meaningful (Baumeister et al., 1990; Baumeister & Newman, 1994). We aim to find out how adults make sense of their conflict experiences. Which features of conflict contribute to making it a positive experience and which features lead to conflict being evaluated negatively?

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

The sample included 65 adults (78.5% women) from Estonia ($M_{age} = 29.6$ years, $SD = 10.04$, range 19–54). Approximately half (53.8%) of them had higher education and 46.2% had secondary or lower education.

2.2 | Measures and procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with the APA ethical guidelines. The data were collected in autumn 2020 and spring 2021 on an online platform. The survey link was distributed via social media and on the university's website. On average, it took 30 min to complete the survey.

2.2.1 | Narrative method

Conflict was defined to the participants as a disagreement characterized by incompatible goals, ideas, values, or behaviors (Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Participants were asked to recall their

previous interpersonal conflicts and write two narratives: one about a conflict that they considered to be a positive experience and the other about a conflict that they considered to be a negative experience. The following questions and prompts aided them in their narrative writing: When and where did it take place? Who were involved? How did it begin and how did it end? How did the persons involved act? Explain as thoroughly as possible why you consider it to be a positive (or negative) experience.

2.3 | Coding scheme

A total of 128 narratives were coded: 65 narratives of negative conflict and 63 narratives of positive conflict experiences. One participant did not write a narrative about a positive conflict and in one case, the narrative was not about a conflict situation. The narratives were first coded for context and topic (see Table 1). Context reflected where and with whom the conflict took place and was coded by using the categories developed by Weitzman (2001). Topic reflected the main issue of the conflict. The categories were derived from the data.

We content analyzed the narratives to find the features that made the conflict experience positive and negative. We read and re-read the responses to identify and label the meaningful units in the narratives, organize them into categories, and finally generate the main themes underlying the categories. We identified eight categories in case of positive conflicts and 13 categories in case of negative conflicts (see Table 2). These features were organized into three themes: how the person saw the conflict process, its outcomes, and how he or she felt about what happened. We coded all features that the participant mentioned as factors contributing to making the experience positive or negative. We used dichotomous coding: 0 = the feature was mentioned, 1 = the feature was not mentioned (Baumeister et al., 1990).

Both authors of the article coded independently all the narratives. The inter-coder reliability was calculated on 20% of narratives: it was 92% for context, 80% for topic, 85.4% for features

TABLE 1 Conflict context and topic categories

Context	Description
Not mentioned	Not mentioned or unclear
Work, school	At work with colleagues or clients. At school with fellow students or teaching staff
Personal	Family members, romantic partner, friends
Impersonal	Acquaintances, strangers
Topic	
Not mentioned	Does not remember the conflict topic or generalizes across situations
Resources	Conflict is about resources: material objects, time, money, or job. People have different views on how the resources should be obtained, shared, or used
Values and ideas	People have different views on what is right and wrong, or how something should be done
Relationships	Conflict is about forming, maintaining, and ending relationships. People have different views on interpersonal expectations and on how one should treat others
Aggressive behavior	Physical or verbal aggression-initiated conflict

TABLE 2 Features of positive and negative conflicts

What made it positive?	What made it negative?
<p>Process</p> <p>Positive behavior</p> <p>Participants used negotiation, were considerate and open-minded.</p> <p>“The parties expressed their views clearly and gave explanations.”</p>	<p>Negative behavior of both parties</p> <p>Participants were emotional and showed little consideration toward and understanding of each other's perspectives.</p> <p>“We lacked a common understanding, there were many accusations.”</p> <p>Negative behavior of the other party</p> <p>The other party was irrational, used destructive behaviors, or did not make an effort to resolve the conflict.</p> <p>“The other party did not agree to discuss things reasonably, but instead even became dangerous to me.”</p> <p>Include other issues</p> <p>Conflict escalated or became personal. New issues emerged.</p> <p>“He started to attack the other party personally.”</p> <p>Recurring conflict</p> <p>Participants faced the same conflict repeatedly.</p> <p>“It was a recurring situation. Similar to some other that had occurred and where I had hoped that it would never happen again.”</p>
<p>Outcomes</p> <p>Found a solution</p> <p>Conflict was resolved. Participants reached a mutually satisfying solution.</p> <p>“We found a solution to our problem.”</p> <p>Improved relationship</p> <p>Conflict led to greater mutual understanding and closeness.</p> <p>“We've never been as close as after that conflict, because we felt like we could talk more to each other.”</p> <p>Positive consequences for the respondent</p> <p>Conflict led to positive material or psychological outcomes for the respondent. The respondent got what he or she wanted.</p> <p>“Thanks to it, my life took a direction I had not imagined.”</p> <p>Positive consequences for others</p> <p>Conflict led to positive material or psychological outcomes for others involved.</p> <p>“From that point forward, work run more smoothly and it was beneficial for all.”</p> <p>Learning experience</p>	<p>Found no solution</p> <p>Conflict was not resolved.</p> <p>“It was the first fight where things remained unresolved.”</p> <p>Damaged relationship</p> <p>Conflict damaged or posed a threat to the relationship.</p> <p>“I was losing my very dear friend.”</p> <p>Negative consequences for the respondent</p> <p>Conflict led to negative material, physical, or psychological outcomes for the respondent.</p> <p>“I already felt sorry for my tooth on that day, because I knew that it would never grow back.”</p> <p>Negative consequences for others</p> <p>Conflict led to negative material, physical, or psychological outcomes for others involved.</p> <p>“A negative outcome for the person and for the whole company.”</p> <p>Did not teach anything</p>

TABLE 2 (Continued)

What made it positive?	What made it negative?
Participants learnt something about themselves or other people, or acquired new skills. “I learnt that when I think I’m doing something good, I could get into a conflict instead, because I do not actually know what is good for others.”	Conflict did not teach anything to the participants. Nothing was gained from the conflict. “I did not see that there was much I could learn from that situation.”
Affect	
Positive emotions	Negative emotions
The respondent felt positive emotions during the conflict.	The respondent felt negative emotions and was psychologically hurt.
“It felt good.”	“Negative emotional reaction (anger, feelings of injustice) made it negative.”
	Disappointed in the other party
	The respondent became disappointed in the other party and learnt something negative about others.
	“People who could have protected me, did not do it. Everyone was only trying to save themselves and I was made to look like the culprit.”
	Regrets over own behavior
	The respondent had regrets over his/her behavior during the conflict.
	“I could not choose the right words and express my emotions without being whiny.”
	Surprising or confusing
Exciting experience	Conflict was surprising or confusing to the respondent because he or she did not do anything wrong or the issue in hand was trivial.
It was an exciting experience. It makes a great story to tell to others. Conflict positively challenged the respondent.	“It seems as if we had cut ties with each other for a completely trivial reason.”
“It was a pretty interesting experience that I can now tell others about.”	

making the experience positive, and 88.5% for features making the experience negative (see also Table 4). The differences were discussed until a consensus was reached.

3 | RESULTS

Most participants described conflicts at work or in close relationships. Conflicts were most frequently over differences in values and ideas, relationship issues, and the distribution of resources (see Table 3). A chi square test showed no significant differences in context and topics between conflicts viewed positively and negatively.

On average, participants named 2.83 ($SD = 1.32$) features when explaining why the conflict experience was negative and 1.95 ($SD = 0.83$) features in their narratives about positive conflicts. Table 4 shows the percentage of participants mentioning the specific features from the three larger categories as contributing to making the conflict positive and negative. The behavior of the conflict parties and reaching a solution were the two most frequently mentioned features determining whether the experience was positive or negative. In narratives about negative

TABLE 3 The context and topics of recalled conflicts

	Positive conflict %	Negative conflict %
Context		
Not mentioned	4.8	1.5
Work, school	41.3	40
Personal	47.6	46.2
Impersonal	6.3	12.3
Topic		
Not mentioned	7.9	7.7
Resources	20.6	20
Values and ideas	33.3	32.3
Relationships	33.3	33.8
Aggressive behavior	4.8	6.2

TABLE 4 Features making the conflict positive and negative

Feature	Mentioned in narrative %	Intercoder agreement %
Positive conflict		
Positive behavior	41.3	66.7
Found a solution	41.3	91.7
Improved relationship	30.2	91.7
Learning experience	30.2	100
Positive consequences for the respondent	28.6	83.3
Positive consequences for others	9.5	75
Positive emotions	7.9	75
Exciting experience	6.3	100
Negative conflict		
Negative behavior of the other party	52.3	84.6
Negative emotions	50.8	100
Found no solution	33.8	100
Negative consequences for the respondent	30.8	69.2
Disappointed in the other party	26.2	61.5
Damaged relationship	20	76.9
Recurring conflict	15.4	84.6
Surprising or confusing	13.8	100
Include other issues	10.8	100
Negative consequences for others	9.2	69.2
Regrets over own behavior	9.2	100
Negative behavior of both parties	6.2	92.3
Did not teach anything	4.6	100

conflict, 60% of participants mentioned at least one process feature, 72.3% mentioned at least one outcome, and 69.2% at least one affective feature. In narratives about positive conflict, these percentages were 41.3, 88.9, and 14.3, respectively. A chi square test confirmed that the process, $\chi^2(1) = 4.49, p = .034$ and affective features, $\chi^2(1) = 39.6, p < .001$ were more often described in case of negative conflict. A higher percentage of participants mentioned at least one outcome feature in a narrative about positive than negative conflict, $\chi^2(1) = 5.60, p = .018$.

4 | DISCUSSION

As far as we know, this is the first study that examined adults' conflict narratives with the aim of finding out which features of conflict contribute to making it a positive or negative experience. As claimed by Baumeister et al. (1990), it is largely a matter of cognitive meaning making: Individuals focus on those features that are most meaningful to them in the particular conflict situation and help them to make sense of their experience. Our findings indicate that these features relate to the way adults see the conflict process and its outcomes, and the way it makes them feel.

The context and topics of conflicts viewed positively and negatively did not differ. Nearly 90% of adults narrated about conflicts with those they interact most frequently with – colleagues and fellow students, family members, romantic partners, and friends. Although most conflicts in adulthood emerged around social issues (i.e., relationship issues and values), conflicts over objects and resources were also relatively frequent.

The features that the researchers have previously outlined as potentially contributing to making the conflict experience positive and negative (Ben-Ari & Hirshberg, 2009; Feiring et al., 2018; McDonald & Asher, 2013; Simon et al., 2008) were identified in adults' narratives along with several unique features. We divided them into three larger categories: how the person sees the conflict process, the outcomes, and how he or she feels about what happened. One of the key findings was that while all—the process, outcomes, and affective features—were equally important in defining negative conflicts, the positivity of conflict was largely determined by the outcomes.

More specifically, the behavior of the conflict parties and (not) reaching a solution were the two most frequently mentioned features of conflict determining whether the experience was positive or negative. These aspects might indeed be the most important ones for adults as they are likely to influence what kind of impact the conflict has. Nevertheless, it might also be that these aspects are simply the most easily perceived. Much deeper reflection is required for describing how the conflict affected the individual and the relationship (e.g., whether something was learnt from it or what the relationship gained or lost).

While in narratives about positive conflicts, adults tended to describe the positive behavior of both parties, in negative conflicts, their focus was more on the undesirable behavior of the other party. Previous studies have shown that people view their own conflict behavior more positively than that of the other party (Hinneken et al., 2020; Sillars et al., 2000). It might also be that in negative conflicts, adults are more likely to feel like victims, which makes them overly critical of the other party, and see the situation as harmful and unjustified (Baumeister et al., 1990). In this study, adults did mention more affective components (e.g., disappointment and confusion) in their narratives about negative conflict.

Overall, adults named more features when explaining why the conflict was negative. This might reflect that adults more easily attach a negative meaning to conflict, as has been

previously found (Feiring et al., 2018; Longaretti & Wilson, 2006). It might also be that the experience becomes negative only after more than one undesirable feature is present or that adults simply remember negative conflicts in greater detail.

This study gave a preliminary overview of how adults make sense of their conflict experiences. The study is mainly limited by a small sample that involved more women than men. It is yet to be examined how factors, such as sex, age, education, and culture affect the interpretation of interpersonal conflicts or how other types of conflicts could be interpreted. The current findings help to understand adults' conflict resolution process better because the way adults interpret their conflict experience is likely to shape their approaches to its management. The findings are useful to conflict mediators who support adults in the appraisal and interpretation of conflicts. We argue that more attention needs to be paid to the cognitive meaning making process in effective conflict resolution.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest in connection to the submitted article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in the research are available upon request. The data can be obtained by emailing: anni.tamm@ut.ee. The materials used in the research are available upon request. The materials can be obtained by emailing: anni.tamm@ut.ee.

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