

## Study on Alexithymia and Conflict Resolution Styles in Workplace

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### ABSTRACT

Conflicts in a workplace are quite common to happen and individuals respond differently to conflict situations. Personality traits of an individual can affect their conflict resolution styles and one such trait is alexithymia, which is characterized by the difficulty to identify, understand and express emotions. The present paper is aimed at understanding the relationship between alexithymia and different conflict resolution styles in workplace. Conflict resolution styles was measured through conflict resolution styles inventory (Kurdek, 1994) and alexithymia was measured through Perth alexithymia questionnaire (Preece et al., 2023). The data was collected from 130 working males and 100 working females with the help of Google forms. The data was analyzed using Jamovi. Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to test correlation and Mann Whitney U test was used to assess comparison. The finding showed a positive relationship between alexithymia and conflict engagement, self protection and acceptance dimensions of conflict resolution styles inventory. The study also found a significant difference between males and females in the level of alexithymia with males having higher mean indicating comparatively higher alexithymia. However, no significant difference was found between males and females among the different dimensions of conflict resolution styles. The results of the study can be applied in a workplace to understand and predict the behaviour of employees. It can also be applied in organization to improve their productivity by understanding how managers and subordinates resolve conflict.

**Keywords:** *Alexithymia, Conflict Resolution Styles, Workplace*

Conflicts are quite common and very inevitable to take place in a workplace as different people with different opinions work together. As individuals collaborate on tasks, differences in opinions, values, and problem-solving approaches can lead to disagreements, which, if not managed properly, may escalate into interpersonal tensions or hinder productivity. Different people resolve conflict in different ways. Conflict resolution styles are different styles or ways in which an individual respond to conflicts. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), one of the popular models of conflict management, identifies five conflict resolution styles: competing, avoiding, collaborating, accommodating, and compromising. The TKI positions conflict resolution styles along a

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spectrum of cooperativeness and assertiveness (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974b). The competing style views conflict as a war where one party wins and the other loses, focusing more on asserting one's way than addressing the issue itself. The avoiding style involves ignoring the conflict entirely, as though it doesn't exist. In the collaborating style, individuals cooperate to find solutions that satisfy everyone involved. The accommodating style entails prioritizing harmony by setting aside one's own concerns. Finally, the compromising style seeks to reach a middle ground, balancing each party's concerns to achieve a mutually acceptable resolution. Studies show that different personality traits align with different conflict resolution styles (Tehrani and Yamini, 2020). Alexithymia can be one such trait.

Alexithymia is derived from two Greek words “alexis” (no words) and “thymos” (emotions). Alexithymia is a psychological construct characterized by an individual's difficulty in identifying emotions and expressing them using appropriate language, lack of fantasy, extroverted thinking, and lack of ability to reveal one's internal attitudes, feelings, and desires (Nemiah and Sifneos, 1970; Bagby and Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Bagby, 2021). People with high levels of alexithymia have difficulty focusing attention on their emotional states (externally oriented thinking (EOT)), and difficulty accurately appraising what those states are (difficulties identifying emotions (DIF) and difficulties describing feelings (DDF)) (Preece et al., 2017; Sifneos, 1973). In both clinical and nonclinical populations, alexithymia is viewed as a personality trait, with varying degrees in different populations (Taylor and Bagby, 1988). Several studies suggest that alexithymia is associated with impairment in executive functioning and conflict processing is one of the important processes of executive function (Smith and Jonides, 1999). Alexithymia is associated with interhemispheric deficits affecting an individual's emotional regulation and communication (Oliveira & Pissarra, 2014). Alexithymia is also associated with failure in emotional processing causing deficits in emotional awareness (Frawley & Smith, 2001b). Alexithymia is also theorized to reduce emotional recognition and empathy decreasing social cognitive abilities (Di Tella et al., 2024).

Studies suggest that having difficulty recognizing and verbalizing emotions significantly predicted counterproductive work behaviors towards the organization (Ucok, 2023). Studies also suggest that a dominating conflict resolution style can increase task conflict and obliging style decreases task conflict and task conflict decreases team creativity (To et al., 2021). Understanding how an individual with different levels of the alexithymic trait would behave in a situation of conflict is crucial for us to predict their behaviour in the future and to foster better interpersonal and organizational dynamics. Through this, we can understand how alexithymic individuals resolve conflict and how gender differences affect these aspects. It can help in understanding their preferred conflict resolution style so as to decrease task conflict and increase productivity by fostering more adaptive conflict resolution styles.

### ***Scope of the study***

This study aims to explore the relationship between alexithymia and conflict resolution styles in workplace settings, focusing on how difficulty identifying and expressing emotions impacts individuals' approaches to managing conflicts. The study will analyze differences in conflict resolution styles among working individuals with different levels of alexithymia, with a sample of male and female employees from different workplace settings. The study examines whether individuals with higher levels of alexithymia are more likely to adopt specific resolution styles and how these tendencies influence productivity. The study seeks to provide insights into how emotional awareness influences workplace interactions.

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### *Rationale*

From different literature reviews it is evident that there are many studies conducted on alexithymia and conflict resolution style individuals but a connection between them is less explored. Understanding how an individual with the alexithymic trait would behave in a situation of conflict is crucial for us to predict their behaviour in the future. It can help in organizational setting by understanding how employees behave in different situations and to even predicting how different managers and subordinates resolve conflict thus decreasing task conflict and increase productivity by fostering more adaptive conflict resolution styles.

### *Current study*

Current study is aimed to find a relationship between alexithymia and different conflict resolution styles among both male and female in a workplace. Relationship between these two variables and gender differences will be analyzed in the study. Sample is collected from both male and female individuals who are working in an organization through questionnaires for both alexithymia and conflict resolution styles.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### *Research Objective*

- To investigate the relationship between alexithymia and different conflict resolution styles in the workplace.

### *Hypothesis*

- **H1:** There is a positive relationship between alexithymia and conflict engagement.
- **H2:** There is a negative relationship between alexithymia and positive problem solving.
- **H3:** There is a negative relationship between alexithymia and self protection.
- **H4:** There is a positive relationship between alexithymia and acceptance.
- **H5:** There is a significant difference among males and females in alexithymia.
- **H6:** There is a significant difference among males and females in conflict resolution styles.

### *Sampling*

The sample was selected with the help of convenience sampling. The sample consists of 230 working individuals which includes 130 males and 100 females. The individuals are of 24-55 years of age and are working in an organization. The sample consisted of individuals from different organizations, including both public and private organizations. The sample also includes individuals who have different working hours and hold different managerial position in the organization.

### *Inclusion Criteria*

- The participants are working individuals aged from 24 to 55 years.

### *Exclusion Criteria*

- The participants who are of age less than 24 years and more than 55 years, who are not employed and who are self employed.

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### *Materials*

- **Socio-demographic Data Sheet:** Using the Socio-demographic Data Sheet developed by the researcher details like age, gender, organization, working hours, managerial position and related data was collected.
- **The Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire-Short form (PAQ-S):** The Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire-Short form (Preece et al., 2023) is a 6-item self-report measure of alexithymia for use with adults and adolescents. It is a short form of the 24-item PAQ (Preece et al., 2018). Scores for each item can range from 1 to 7 on the 7-point Likert Scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of alexithymia.
- **Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI):** The Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994) is a 16-item measure derived from previously explicated definitions of conflict styles. Items assess four conflict strategies: positive problem solving, conflict engagement, conflict withdrawal, (self protection), and compliance (acceptance). Items are rated on a 1 to 5 Likert-style scale. Scores on each scale range from 4-20, with higher scores indicating more conclusive endorsement of a given conflict strategy (German, 2013).

### *Data Collection*

The study was conducted with the help of distributing the questionnaires through Google forms which was given to the sample based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria through convenience sampling. The Google forms consisted of three parts, first is the socio-demographic data sheet, second is the Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire-Short form and third part is Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory. Participants were assured that the information and identities will remain confidential and the data will only be used for research purpose. The data collected is protected and maintained with the first investigator.

### *Variables*

1. **Alexithymia:** Alexithymia is operationally defined as the sum of total scores in the 6-item self-report measure of alexithymia named Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire developed by Preece et al. (2023).
2. **Conflict Resolutions Styles:** Conflict Resolution Styles is operationally defined as the assessment through the 16 item scale named Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory which measures four conflict strategies: 24 positive problem solving, conflict engagement, conflict withdrawal (self protection) and compliance (acceptance), with higher scores indicating more conclusive endorsement on a given conflict strategy and is developed by Kurdek (1994).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

- **H1:** There is a positive relationship between alexithymia and conflict engagement.
- **H2:** There is a negative relationship between alexithymia and positive problem solving.
- **H3:** There is a negative relationship between alexithymia and self protection.
- **H4:** There is a positive relationship between alexithymia and acceptance.

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**Table 1 Spearman's correlation analysis between alexithymia and conflict resolution styles**

	Alexithymia
Conflict engagement	0.271***
Positive problem solving	-0.061
Self protection	0.245***
Acceptance	0.336***

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

The results showed Spearman's rho to be 0.271 between alexithymia and conflict engagement indicating a positive relationship. Spearman's rho was found to be -0.061 between alexithymia and positive problem solving indicating a negative relationship. The results showed Spearman's rho to be 0.245 indicating a positive relationship. Spearman's rho was found to be 0.336 between alexithymia and acceptance indicating a positive relationship.

From table 1, H1, H2, and H4 are accepted and H3 is rejected.

The findings showed a positive relationship between alexithymia and three dimensions of conflict resolution styles inventory which are conflict engagement, self-protection and acceptance. The study also found a negative relationship between alexithymia and positive problem-solving dimension. The results also suggested that there exists a significant difference between in levels of alexithymia among males and females with males having higher mean indicating comparatively higher alexithymia. However, no significant difference was found between males and females among the different dimensions of conflict resolution styles.

The findings show that the hypothesis is accepted which states that alexithymia is positively related to conflict engagement subscale of conflict resolution styles which can imply that as an individual has high levels of difficulty in identifying and expressing their emotions, they engage in conflicts more with behaviors like exploding, losing control, physical and verbal abuse etc.

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that the second hypothesis is also accepted which states that alexithymia is negatively related to positive problem-solving subscale of conflict resolution styles inventory implying that when individuals have difficulty with expressing and identifying emotions their capacity to positively solve a problem decreases and are less likely to finding solutions constructively, focus at the problem etc.

The findings, however, showed that alexithymia and self-protection subscale of conflict resolution styles inventory are positively related, rejecting the third hypothesis. This implies that as the difficulty to express and identify emotions increases, individuals can engage in behaviors where they tune out the other parties, avoid and withdraw from the conflict situations.

The results showed that the fourth hypothesis is also accepted which states that alexithymia and acceptance subscale of conflict resolution styles inventory is positively related. This suggests that as the subject's difficulty in identifying emotions and expressing them increases, they are more likely to give in to conflict situations leading to accepting to the other parties and sacrificing their needs.

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These findings indicate that alexithymia have been positively related to more negative conflict resolution styles which are conflict engagement, self protection and acceptance. Individuals with difficulty in expressing and identifying emotions would have difficulty in employing positive conflict resolution strategies which can lead to problematic conflicts and disagreements.

These results can be explained with the help of theoretical framework mentioned above which stated that alexithymia is associated with interhemispheric deficits affecting an individual's emotional regulation and communication and it is also associated with decrease in emotional awareness. Alexithymia has theorized to reduce emotional recognition and empathy decreasing social cognitive abilities (Oliveira & Pissarra, 2014; Frawley & Smith, 2001b; Di Tella et al., 2024). It states that alexithymia can reduce social cognitive abilities and positive problem solving is a much needed social ability. The findings are consistent with the study conducted by Zhang et al. (2011) suggested that subjects with high alexithymia scores have selective impairment in conflict processing and they found that alexithymia has been described as both an impaired capacity for differentiating and communicating one's emotions and as a tendency to engage in externally oriented thinking.

The findings are also consistent with the studies by Parker et al. (2001) and Rahim et al. (2002) which suggested that alexithymia is inversely related to emotional intelligence and five dimensions of emotional intelligence positively correlated with positive conflict management strategies. These findings imply that higher levels of alexithymia are associated with the use of more negative conflict resolution styles.

- **H5:** There is a significant difference among males and females in alexithymia.
- **H6:** There is a significant difference among males and females in conflict resolution styles.

**Table 2 Mann Whitney U test to analyze the difference between males and females in alexithymia and conflict resolution styles**

	Group	N	Mean	S.D	Mean difference	U	p	F	p
Alexithymia	Female	100	18.9	7.64	-3.00	4954	0.002	0.0520	0.820
	Male	130	21.9	7.23					
Conflict engagement	Female	100	7.80	2.55	3.74e-5	5925	0.247	0.138	0.711
	Male	130	7.39	2.36					
Positive problem solving	Female	100	13.46	2.69	-2.51e-5	6132	0.458	0.682	0.410
	Male	130	13.86	2.51					
Self protection	Female	100	9.64	2.95	5.32e-6	6047	0.363	1.115	0.292
	Male	130	9.26	2.71					
Acceptance	Female	100	10.19	3.14	-2.37e-5	6225	0.580	2.847	0.093
	Male	130	10.28	2.42					

The results indicated that there is a significant difference between males and females in alexithymia and based on the results, it can be understood that males have higher mean indicating comparatively higher alexithymia than females ( $M = 21.9$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ). The results also indicated that there is no significant difference between males and females in conflict resolution styles. From table 2, H5 is accepted and H6 is rejected.

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The findings showed that the fifth hypothesis is also accepted which states that there is a significance difference between females and males in alexithymia, with males having higher mean suggesting higher alexithymia. It is consistent with the results of the study conducted by Levant et al. (2009) which found that men are comparatively more alexithymic than women in both clinical and non-clinical samples.

The results, however, showed no significant difference between females and males in different dimensions of conflict resolution styles inventory. This result contradicts with a previous study conducted by Holt and DeVore (2005) found that there is a significant difference among males and females in conflict resolution styles with females showing a more compromising style and males exhibiting a more forcing style.

The study can be applied in workplace settings to understand how individuals with alexithymic trait would behave in conflict situations and how to deal with it. Organizations can implement emotional intelligence training programs to improve interpersonal communication and conflict management skills. It can support mental health and employee well being in organizations. This can help foster positive and inclusive work environment in organizations and may enhance collaboration in workplace.

## CONCLUSION

### *Key Findings*

- The study showed a positive relationship between alexithymia and conflict engagement, self protection and acceptance dimensions of conflict resolution styles inventory.
- The study suggested a negative relationship between alexithymia and positive problem solving dimension of conflict resolution styles inventory.
- The study also suggested significance difference among males and females in alexithymia with males having comparatively high alexithymia.
- The findings showed no significance difference among males and females in conflict resolution styles.

### *Implications*

Organizations can make use of this study to understand how individuals with alexithymic trait would respond in conflict situations and in developing appropriate interventions. Intervention programs can be implemented in organizations, like emotional intelligence training, to improve interpersonal communication and conflict management skills. It can support mental health and employee well being in organizations. This can help foster positive and inclusive work environment in organizations and can be helpful to increase collaboration in workplace in turn increasing productivity.

### *Limitations*

The study has potential limitations. For a more actual representation of the population, sample size could've been larger with similar sample size for both males and females. Most of the sample collected for the study represents Indian culture and does not cover other regions, thus can include cultural biases. Extraneous variables like workplace environment, organizational culture, and external stressors (e.g., job demands, leadership style) have not been studied, which may influence the results.

**Recommendation for future research**

Future research can be conducted to understand whether comparing different jobs would affect the results, for example, between public and private or across fields such as health, education and defense etc. Expanding the study among different cultures would also add to the scope of the study, and may also reduce the cultural biases. Exploring age differences and conducting comparative analysis across each group is a valuable area for further research.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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