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Conflict Management Strategies: The Role of Personality and Specific Social Relation Beliefs in Serbia and Italy[1, 2]

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This study explores the relationships among conflict management strategies, personality traits, and beliefs about social relations in Italy and Serbia. These two European countries are geographically close, but have different histories, traditions and religions, and they differ along the individualistic-collectivistic dimension.

Goals: The study aims to explore and compare the way in which basic personality dimensions predict specific conflict management strategies, as well as the way in

1 Other data collected on the same sample were presented at several previous conferences; in this paper, the unpublished results from this research are presented.

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which the Competitive Jungle worldview and the beliefs about conflicts mediate their relationship in different cultures.

Method: The sample comprised 764 young people, aged 18-30 (*M*=21.54, *SD*=2.80). The measures included the Dutch Test of Conflict Handling, Mini IPIP-6, Delta personality inventories, Competitive Jungle Worldview and Conflict Beliefs scales. Path analyses were applied with seven personality traits as predictors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Honesty, and Disintegration), two social relation beliefs as mediators, and three conflict management strategies (Cooperative, Defensive, and Competitive) as criterion variables.

Results: The results indicate that the common predictors are Openness and Agreeableness for the Cooperative strategies, Agreeableness and Disintegration for the Defensive strategies, and Extraversion for the Competitive strategies. Neuroticism and Conscientiousness are not implicated in conflict situations, while Honesty and Disintegration have a different impact on this form of behaviour in these two cultures. The results have confirmed different pathways of personality traits through the beliefs about the world as a competitive jungle and the beliefs about conflicts as threats or challenges.

Conclusion: Basic personality traits, as universal dispositions for behaviour, have similar effects on conflict management strategies in both countries, while differences are observed in the mediating role of beliefs, which are shaped by the cultural differences existing between Serbia and Italy.

Keywords: conflict management strategies, Six-Factor Personality Model, disintegration, competitive jungle beliefs, beliefs about conflicts

Interpersonal conflict is a state of disagreement and an opposition of interests, goals, and values between two or more individuals, usually followed by negative emotional reactions (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Wall & Callister, 1995). While interpersonal conflict can be seen as threatening and dangerous, it is important to realize that conflict is a natural and inevitable part of human interaction. Some of the authors even consider that human existence without conflicts is a psychological utopia (e.g. Deutsch, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Due to the lack of motivation and skills for dealing with conflicts constructively, interpersonal conflicts are one of the most prominent sources of daily distress (Bolger et al., 1989). Thus, given their possible negative or even violent consequences, it is important to deepen our understanding of the factors that may contribute to effective management strategies in conflict situations, and, therefore, have different implications for interpersonal relations (French et al., 2018; Julien et al., 2003; Komarraju et al., 2012; Lepore, 1992).

Previous studies have confirmed that conflict management strategies are related to personality traits (e.g. Ahmed et al., 2010; Ann & Yang, 2012; Antonioni, 1998; Canaan Messarra et al., 2016; Erdenk & Altuntaş, 2017;

Espinoza et al., 2023; Gokoglan & Ozen Bekar, 2021; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Moberg, 2001; Park & Antonioni, 2007; Wood & Bell, 2008) or attitudes (e.g. Hastings et al., 2019; Laca et al., 2006; McCreary et al., 2005). However, empirical findings on the relationship between personality traits and conflict management strategies remain inconsistent (see Tehrani & Yamini, 2020, for an overview). Therefore, in this study, we examine the prediction of conflict management strategies based on basic personality traits. Moreover, we aim at taking a step further by exploring the mediating role of the specific beliefs in this relationship. Previous studies have shown that beliefs about conflict (i.e., whether it is perceived as a negative or positive aspect of interpersonal interactions) are associated with behaviour in conflict situations (Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Petrović, 2019). Thus, we seek to explore the role of such beliefs in greater depth.

Furthermore, various authors have pointed out that the preference for conflict management strategies varies across cultures (e.g. Cai & Fink, 2002; Croucher et al., 2012; Doucet et al., 2009; Kim-Jo et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2010; Onishi & Bliss, 2006; Purohit, & Simmers, 2006; Poloski Vokic & Sontor, 2009; Wang et al., 2005). However, a limited number of studies have investigated the interconnection between various psychological factors and conflict management strategies in different cultures (e.g. Gunkel et al., 2016; Kaushal, & Kwantes, 2006). Therefore, we explore the mediation role of beliefs in the relationships between personality traits and conflict management strategies between two cultures – the Serbian and Italian.

Conflict Management Strategies

The present study is based on the Dual Concern Model, since it is theoretically and heuristically valuable for conflict management strategies as the most prominent model of motivational orientation towards conflicts (Blake et al., 1962; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Rahim, 1983; Rahim, 2011; Pruitt, 1981; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The model describes five conflict management strategies, namely: (1) *Forcing* (strong one-sided self-concern), which refers to the efforts of pushing through one's own goals at the expense of other's interests; (2) Y*ielding* (strong one-sided other-concern), which implies conceding to the opponent's goals at the cost of one's own; (3) *Problem-solving* (strong dual concern), which refers to the redefinition of initially incompatible goals, and exploring the possibilities to satisfy both one's own and the other's basic interests; (4) *Compromising* (moderate dual concern), as the mutual "give and take" until a middle course has been found, where each side partially gets what it wants, and (5) *Avoiding* (weak dual concern), which represents suppressing or trivializing interests, and evading further interaction. Some authors (e.g. Cai & Fink, 2002) suggest

that a three-strategies model may represent conflict management preferences more accurately; accommodating and avoiding would form one strategy, compromising and problem-solving the second one, and forcing would remain a separate strategy.

Personality Traits

The HEXACO six-dimensional model of personality structure (Ashton & Lee, 2008) describes behaviours in various situations. These six comprehensive traits include Honesty-Humility, Emotionality (Neuroticism), Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. The model has high replicability across different languages, which indicates its intercultural stability (Lee & Ashton, 2008). Therefore, we chose the Big Five dimensions extended by Honesty-Humility, which is particularly important for interpersonal behaviour. Additionally, the disposition for disintegration (Knezevic et al., 2017) was included in the study. Disintegration is postulated to be a basic personality trait, but different from those contained in the five– or six-factor models. Based on the meta-analysis study (Knezevic et al., 2016), this disposition refers to the difficulties for integrative functioning, both at the clinical and the sub-clinical level, which makes it relevant for understanding interpersonal behaviour.

Personality traits shape behaviour in various social situations, including conflict management strategies in the interpersonal context. Studies have shown that Agreeableness is a significant predictor of collaboration (Wood & Bell, 2008) and compromising (Moberg, 2001; Tehrani, & Yamini, 2020). People who have higher scores on Agreeableness are motivated to maintain more pleasant and peaceful relationships with other people (Graziano & Tobin 2018). In addition, Agreeableness and Extraversion have both been confirmed as the predictors of accommodating and competing. High Agreeableness and low Extraversion predict preference for accommodation (Ayub et al., 2017; Tehrani, & Yamini, 2020; Wood & Bell, 2008; Antonioni, 1998; Park & Antonioni, 2007). On the other hand, low Agreeableness and high Extraversion predict a preference for competing (Tehrani, & Yamini, 2020). Furthermore, the avoidant strategy is predicted by high Neuroticism scores (Tehrani, & Yamini, 2020). The Honesty-Humility disposition negatively correlates with psychopathy, measures of egoism, amorality, and Machiavellianism (de Vries & van Kampen, 2010). Hence, it is expected that it will affect the conflict management strategies by decreasing the competitive approach or increasing the tendency for collaboration. Disintegration, as a disposition that impairs integrative functioning, is reflected in the lack of control and impulsive behaviour. Empirical evidence has confirmed the correlations between mistrust and suspiciousness with paranoid tendencies

(Kujacic et al., 2015). There is no empirical evidence concerning the relation with conflict management styles, but it can be assumed that it may be associated with avoidant strategies. Therefore, we expected that our data would confirm, but also extend, the results of previous studies on the role of personality traits in predicting conflict management strategies.

Social Relation Beliefs

Different beliefs may also contribute to the prediction of conflict management strategies (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Galtung, 1996; Kriesberg, 2007; Rahim, 2011.). We selected some beliefs which could play a significant role in social situations and were neglected in previous studies. The competitive jungle worldview assumes human interactions as a struggle for survival, thus emphasizing dominance, competition, and mistrust. We assumed that the individuals who hold strong "competitive jungle" beliefs might be more inclined to use competitive and avoiding strategies, either in order to assert power and impose domination or to withdraw from conflicts.

Further, personal or cultural beliefs about the nature of conflict – whether it is deemed destructive, inevitable, or beneficial – influence the choice of strategies (Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Petrovic, 2019). Individuals who hold positive beliefs about conflicts consider them as a natural part of human interactions and a potential for growth, learning, and positive change. Such positive beliefs may foster efforts to resolve conflicts by finding mutually satisfying solutions. The perception of conflicts as undesirable, destructive, and harmful might predict withdrawal or fight. Thus, we expect that the individuals who consider conflict as an acceptable experience would be more oriented towards collaborative strategies, whereas the individuals who have negative beliefs about conflicts would be more oriented towards defensive and competing strategies.

The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore the way in which different personality dimensions predict specific conflict management strategies, given the inconsistent results of previous studies (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Considering that personality traits affect behaviour both directly and indirectly through their influence on attitudes and beliefs, we aim at exploring whether and in which way specific beliefs, such as the competitive jungle worldview and beliefs about conflicts, mediate the relationship between personality dimensions and conflict management strategies. By examining beliefs as an intermediate variable, we aim at enhancing understanding of the mechanisms through which personality traits influence behaviour.

Since culture includes knowledge, values, and norms that constitute the learned systems of meanings in a particular society which are shared among the members of the cultural group and transmitted from one generation to the next (Ting-Toomey, 1999), it also shapes the way in which individuals perceive and interpret the world and the way in which they form, maintain, and navigate relationships with others. Therefore, we assume that culture differences would also influence the relationships between personality traits and conflict management strategies, as well as the mediation effects of beliefs. Hence, in this study, we compare youth from two European cultures that are geographically close, but have different histories, traditions, and religions, and that differ on the dimension of the individualistic-collectivistic culture according to the Hofstede studies (Cucchi, 2010; Hofstede, 2011; Milosevic, 2019; The Culture Factor Group, 2023).

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study included 764 young people from Italy (*N*=476; 61% females) and Serbia (*N*=288; 69% females). The participants' age varied from 18 to 30 (*M*=21.54, *SD*=2.80). The recruited participants were students attending different courses at the respective Italian and Serbian universities. Data were collected through Google Forms. Students were asked to send the link to the questionnaire to their friends using the "snowball method". In return, they earned extra course credit. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous and informed consent forms were collected. The research was approved by the Ethical Research Committee at the authors' Departments from both universities.

Measures

The Dutch Test of Conflict Handling – DUTCH (Janssen & van de Vliert, 1996) was translated into Serbian and Italian using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970). This 20-item instrument measures five conflict management strategies: yielding, problem-solving, compromising, avoiding, and forcing. As our data supported the three-factor solution, i.e., the Cooperative, Competitive, and Defensive conflict management strategies, with acceptable internal consistencies (α=.71-.89, see Table 3 in the Appendix for the ESEM factor structure)[4], we calculated the mean scores on the 5-point

4 The results of the analyses are provided in Tables 1 and 3 in the Appendix.

scale for each of the three factors, with higher scores indicating a more prominent conflict handling style.

The Mini IPIP-6 (Sibley et al., 2011; for the Serbian adaptation see Medjedovic & Bulut, 2017, and, for the Italian, see ADD REF) is a 24-item self-report questionnaire that measures six comprehensive personality traits, Conscientiousness (C), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), Neuroticism, (N), and Honesty-Humility (H), based on a hybrid model: the scales for the measurement of the Five Factor structure were extended with the Honesty-Humility trait. Each scale consists of four items. This inventory is based on the International Personality Item Pool2 (I PIP: Goldberg, 1990, 1999; Goldberg et al., 2006). The EFA confirmed a six-factor solution in both samples, as expected. Reliability analysis for the IPIP-6 showed acceptable internal consistencies across scales (α=.69-.81). A mean score for each of the six personality traits was computed, with higher scores indicating the more prominent dispositions.

The DELTA inventory (developed in Serbian by Knezevic et al., 2017; for the Italian adaptation, see ADD REF) consists of 20 items intended to operationalize the Disintegration trait, which depicts various psychotic-like experiences associated with the indicators of psychological dysfunctions. In this study, the internal reliability of the inventory was acceptable (α=.88 for each sample). Higher values indicate a higher disposition for disintegration.

The *"Competitive jungle" beliefs* (Duckitt et al., 2002; for the Serbian adaptation, see Knežević & Lazarević, 2019; for the Italian adaptation, see Dallago, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2012) were measured by a shorter scale of seven items. This scale was reduced after conducting reliability analysis. The remaining four items had lower, but acceptable internal consistencies (α_{Srb}=.76 and α_{It}=.72). Higher values indicate the belief that the social worldview as a "competitive jungle" is characterized by a ruthless struggle for resources and power.

Beliefs about conflicts were measured by seven items reflecting the characteristics of conflicts and the people involved in them. This scale was designed for the purposes of the study in the Serbian language, and then translated into Italian. After reliability analysis, the scale was reduced. The remaining four items had acceptable internal consistencies (α_S = .69 and α_I = .80) and formed a one-factor solution according to the EFA. Higher values indicate more positive beliefs about conflicts.

Responses for all the included measures were provided on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Descriptives are presented in Table 1 in the Appendix.

Analytical Strategy

Since the data were collected from two samples in different cultures, before performing the analyses, the cultural equivalence of the conflict management strategies measures was explored through conducting the Multigroup Exploratory Structural Equation Modelling (ESEM)[5]. This is the type of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) which is the most appropriate for personality/attitudinal measures (Marsh et al., 2010). Further stages of the analysis were based on the findings obtained in this step. Namely, we assumed that if minimal cross-cultural factor structure invariance (metric) of the conflict management strategies were obtained in this step, further structural analyses (their relationships with beliefs and personality) should be conducted using a multigroup analytic strategy. Metric (weak factorial) invariance would further allow for different intercepts between the groups, while scalar invariance would assume the intercepts to be equal across the samples. Strictly speaking, the comparison of the latent variable means across the groups would make sense only in the case of scalar invariance. However, previous empirical studies have shown mostly metric invariance, even for well-defined and reliable measured constructs such as personality traits (Knezevic et al., 2022). Therefore, if metric invariance were achieved (equal loadings across the groups, but differential item functioning, i.e., different intercepts), we would consider the factorial structure of conflict management strategies identical across the groups and proceed with the multigroup path analysis in investigating their relationships with personality and beliefs. Obtaining configural invariance (only the number of factors is identical, but item loadings and intercepts are different across the groups) would imply that the psychological meaning of the items capturing conflict management strategies is different across the groups, and therefore there would be no ground for group comparison based on such measures. Therefore, if metric invariance were not achieved, the assumed structural interrelations would be tested in each sample separately.

Hu and Bentler (1999) presented several goodness-of-fit (GoF) indices that evaluate misspecification in both the structural model (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual, SRMR) and the measurement model (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, RMSEA, and Comparative Fit Index, CFI). They suggested that CFI should be greater than 0.95 (values from 0.90 to 0.95 might be acceptable; Marsh et al., 2010), RMSEA should be less than 0.06, and SRMR should be less than 0.08.

The ESEM and SEM analyses in our study were performed in the Mplus version 7 software. Statistical analyses, which included descriptive statistics and correlation analyses, were conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics software 22.

5 A detailed exploration of the analyses is provided in the Appendix.

Results

Factor Structure and Cultural Measurement Invariance of Conflict Management Strategies

Parallel analysis and SCREE plot criteria performed in each of the samples separately suggested three factors that should be retained. The ESEM analysis showed that only the model of configural invariance of the three-factor structure of conflict management styles (Table 1) had a partial empirical support. It means that neither loadings nor intercepts of the variables are the same across the samples. The three-factor solution (ESEM with GEOMIN rotated factors, using MLR (maximum likelihood estimation procedure) robust to non-normality of observations) yielded Cooperative (Compromising and Problem-solving), Defensive (Yielding and Avoiding), and Competitive (Forcing) factors of conflict management strategies (see Table 3 in the Appendix for the details on factor structure).

Table 1
The Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analysis ESEM Model Fit

	χ^2	Df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	*p*
One-factor model	2572.69	378	.500	.497	.123	.147			
Scalar invariance	998.43	334	.849	.828	.072	.069	1579.26	44	<.001
Metric invariance	816.66	317	.886	.864	.064	.062	181.77	17	<.001
Configural invariance	687.14	266	.904	.863	.064	.038	129.52	51	<.001

Note. CFI – Comparative Fit Index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA – Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR – Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; $\Delta\chi^2$– the difference between the χ^2 statistics; Δdf – differences in the degrees of freedom; *p* – the probability that the observed difference has been randomly obtained if the model is invariant across the groups.

The structure of the factors for each of the samples is provided in the Appendix. Considering that only configural invariance was obtained, further analyses were conducted in each sample separately.

Additionally, the intercorrelation analysis of factors also showed relevant differences in two samples (Table 2, for full correlational matrix see Table 2 in the Appendix). In the Italian sample, a moderate positive correlation between the Cooperative and Competitive strategies was found, in contrast to a low negative correlation between those strategies in the Serbian sample. Additionally, although non-significant, the correlation between the Defensive and Competitive strategies was of the opposite sign in the two groups.

Table 2

Intercorrelations between the Factors of Conflict Management Strategies in the Italian and Serbian Sample

	1	2	3
1. Cooperative strategy	—	0.20	-0.23
2. Defensive strategy	0.12	—	-0.14
3. Competitive strategy	0.38**	0.08	—

Note. Above the diagonal: Serbian sample, below the diagonal: Italian sample
*p<.01; **p<.001.

Path Analyses

Path analyses, with seven personality traits as predictors, two social relation beliefs as mediators, and three conflict management strategies as criterion variables, in the Serbian sample are shown in Figure 1. The GoFs of the model were excellent: $X^2_{(df)} = 16.36_{(12)}$; CFI = .979; TLI =.955; SRMR = .038; $RMSEA_{[90\%\text{-}CI]} = .035_{[.000, .074]}$.

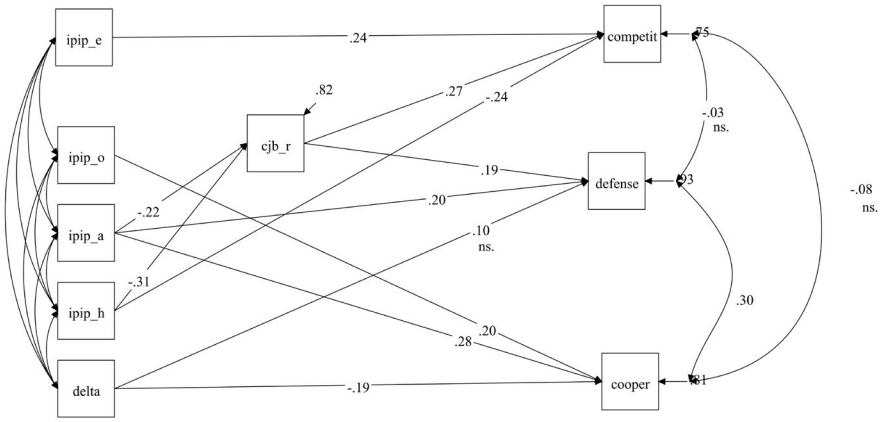

Figure 1 Path analyses in the Serbian sample

Note: ipip_e – Extraversion, ipip_o – Openness, ipip_a – Agreeableness, ipip_h –Honesty-Humility, delta – Disintegration, cjb_r – Competitive jungle beliefs. All statistically significant paths were significant at .01 level.

Path analyses confirmed the direct positive effects of both Openness and Agreeableness on *Cooperativeness***,** while Disintegration had a direct negative effect on this approach to conflicts. There were no significant indirect effects of the traits via the Competitive jungle beliefs.

The direct effect of Agreeableness on *Defensiveness* was positive, but this trait had a negative indirect effect through the Competitive jungle worldview

(see Figure 1). In other words, agreeable people tended to avoid conflicts (β = .20), but this effect would be weakened by their tendency not to adhere to the competitive jungle worldview (β = –.22). Since this worldview also had positive relations with avoidance (β = .19), the total effect of Agreeableness on Defensiveness (β = .16, *p*=.007) was slightly lower than the direct one. Interestingly, Honesty had a similar indirect effect on Defensiveness via the Competitive jungle worldview, but, unlike Agreeableness, did not have a direct effect on Defensiveness. Nevertheless, it produced a small, but negative total impact on Defensiveness (β = – .06, *p*=.005), implying that there is a tendency of honest people – unlike agreeable – not to avoid conflicts (thus representing another nice example of subtle differential functioning of agreeable and honest people). Finally, Disintegration had a positive direct effect on Defensiveness, although that effect did not reach significance.

Extraversion had a direct positive effect on *Competitiveness.* Honesty had both direct (β = –.24, p<.001) and indirect (β = –.08, p<.001) negative effects on Competitiveness – the latter through suppressing the positive effect of Competitive jungle beliefs (β = .27) due to its negative impact on these beliefs (β = –.31), thus amounting to a strong negative total effect (β = –.32, p<.001). The negative effect of Agreeableness on Competitiveness was entirely indirect (β = –.06, p<.004) through decreasing Competitive jungle beliefs.

There were no significant indirect effects of personality traits through Competitive jungle beliefs for any conflict management style in the Serbian sample.

The path analyses in the Italian sample are shown in Figure 2. The GoFs of the model were adequate: $X^2_{(df)} = 33.27_{(17)}$; CFI = .965; TLI =.928; SRMR = .039; $RMSEA_{[90\%\text{-}CI]} = .045_{[.021, .067]}$.

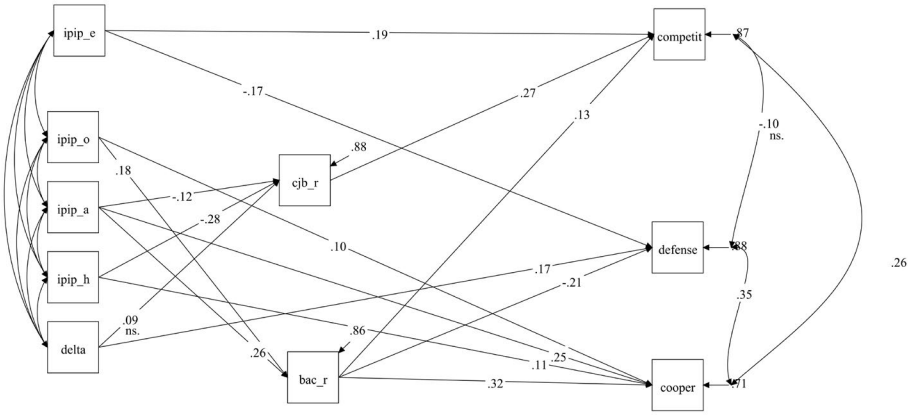

Figure 2. *Path analyses in the Italian sample*

Note: ipip_e – Extraversion, ipip_o – Openness, ipip_a – Agreeableness, ipip_h – Honesty-Humility, delta – Disintegration, cjb_r – Competitive jungle beliefs, bac_r – Beliefs about conflicts. All statistically significant paths were significant at .01, except the path ipip_o – cooper, significant at .031 level.

In the Italian sample, there were many similarities in the investigated relationships, but also some notable differences. Direct positive effects of both Openness and Agreeableness on *Cooperativeness* were found in this sample as well, but Honesty also contributed to this approach to conflicts (see Figure 2). Interestingly, although recorded in the Serbian sample, no effect of low Disintegration on Cooperativeness was found in the Italian sample. Additionally, beyond the direct effects of Openness (β = .10) and Agreeableness (β = .25) on Cooperativeness, these traits had an indirect effect on Cooperativeness via positive beliefs about conflicts (β = .06, p<.001 and β = .08, p<.001, respectively), amounting to the following total effects of both traits on Cooperativeness: β = .16, p<.001 and β = .33, p<.001, respectively. People who are primarily agreeable and open to experience are additionally cooperative in conflict situations because they believe that conflicts represent a chance to find positive solutions.

Extraversion had a negative direct effect, and Disintegration had a positive direct effect on *Defensiveness.* The direct positive effect of Agreeableness was not present in the Italian sample, unlike the Serbian sample, but that trait had a negative indirect effect (β = −.06, p<.001) through positive beliefs about conflicts (β = .26) that decreased Defensiveness (β = −.21). The similar structure of the indirect effect on Defensiveness was found for Openness, amounting to the total negative effect (β = −.04, p<.005). Agreeable and open people in the Italian sample would not be prone to avoid conflicts due to perceiving a conflict as a positive and challenging experience.

Extraversion had a direct effect on *Competitiveness* as well, while, unlike the Serbian sample, Honesty did not have a direct effect on this conflict management style. However, Honesty did have negative indirect effects on Competitiveness (β = −.08, p<.001), through decreasing Competitive jungle beliefs (β = −.28), which was found to have a positive impact on Competitiveness (β = .27). There was also an indirect effect of Agreeableness and Openness on Competitiveness through the beliefs about conflicts. It means that the people who are agreeable and open to experience would compete with others due to perceiving conflicts as a positive experience. Therefore, agreeable and open people tend not only to avoid conflict, but they actually push through their own goals in conflicting situations. Interestingly, the overall effect of Agreeableness on Competitiveness was absent (β=.002, p=.932) because the positive effect via beliefs about conflicts (β=.035, p=.006) was cancelled out by the negative effect through the decrease of the competitive jungle worldview which reduced Competitiveness (β = −.033, p=.021).

Neuroticism and Conscientiousness did not predict conflict management styles and the beliefs about conflict did not have any mediation effect, either in the Serbian or Italian sample.

Discussion

The three-factor structure of conflict management strategies, which assumes competitive, defensive, and cooperative strategies, was confirmed. However, this structure did not satisfy cross-sample invariance beyond the configural level, reflecting the fact that the psychological meaning of the items capturing conflict management strategies differed across the samples. This fact seems to be underlined by a different structure of correlations between these strategies on the one hand, and personality and social beliefs/worldviews on the other, obtained in these two samples. It seems that beliefs/worldviews play a more important role in mediating the effects of personality on conflict management strategies in the Italian than in the Serbian sample.

Cooperative strategies were explained by *Agreeableness* and *Openness* in both samples. Agreeableness was confirmed as a predictor of the cooperative approach to conflict management in other studies as well. Agreeable individuals appear to be the most flexible, trying to find a middle course to resolve impasses, bring all concerns out in the open, and negotiate with others to find a compromise or constructive solutions (Forrester & Tashchian, 2013; Nelson, 2014). The studies of Antonioni (1998) and Barbuto et al. (2010) found that both Agreeableness and Openness were directly related to the use of the collaborative conflict style. Openness could lead to readiness to explore different perspectives and others' positions, analyse different perspectives, and integrate own ideas with others' points of view to find win-win solutions, which is essential for the cooperative approach to conflicts (Forrester & Tashchian, 2013). A previous meta-analytic study (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020) also pointed to positive associations between Agreeableness and Openness to experience and two aspects of Cooperativeness, i.e., compromising and integrating styles.

Additionally, but only among the Italians, the mediation analysis indicated that *Openness* and *Agreeableness* also had an indirect positive effect on Cooperativeness through beliefs about conflicts. This implies that those who are more open to experiences are also prone to having more positive beliefs about conflicts, and thus are more likely to cooperate. Furthermore, more agreeable individuals are also more prone to having positive beliefs about conflicts, which, in turn, makes them more prone to managing the conflicts assertively.

Unlike the meta-analytic study of Tehrani and Yamini (2020), or Mober's study (2001) which showed that the integrating style positively correlated with Conscientiousness and negatively with Neuroticism, we did not find support for these relationships. Finally, our study did not confirm the contribution of *Extraversion* to Cooperative strategies in any of our samples, which had been found in the aforementioned meta-analytic study.

In our study, we also included two other basic (widely confirmed) traits, *Honesty-Humility* and *Disintegration*. The first trait was found to contribute to the cooperative strategy in the Italian sample, while the second was shown to negatively contribute to this strategy in the Serbian sample.

Defensive strategies were predicted by *Agreeableness* in the Serbian sample. This relationship reveals something that might be described as a potentially maladaptive aspect of high Agreeableness, i.e., avoidance of open confrontation, putting others' interests in the first place, or willingness to accommodate by going along with the opinion of others, which could lead them to defensiveness (Moberg, 2001; Forrester & Tashchian, 2013). In the meta-analytic study of Tehrani and Yamini (2020), the results indicated that Agreeableness was positively related to avoiding and yielding behaviour in conflict situations.

Interestingly, this direct effect was not found in the Italian sample; only the indirect, but negative effect of Agreeableness on Defensiveness was shown through beliefs about conflicts. It seems that the inclination of agreeable people towards defensiveness can be reversed by channelling it through positive beliefs about conflicts. *Extraversion* had a negative direct effect on defensiveness only in the Italian sample, which is in line with Antonioni's (1998) and Moberg's (2001) studies that showed that avoiding was negatively related to Extraversion.

Furthermore, we obtained the positive direct effect of Disintegration in both samples, but it was significant only among the Italian participants, meaning that the ones who are less integrated are more likely to use defensive strategies. This could be understood as self-protective coping against the possible risk for disintegrative tendencies in potentially stressful situations like conflicts.

Honesty had an indirect effect on Defensiveness via Competitive jungle beliefs only in the Serbian sample. Therefore, honest people who do not see the social world as a competitive jungle would not try to yield or avoid conflicts. It seems that different personality traits in two cultures have effects on Defensiveness. The link between these two traits and conflict strategies has not been studied before, so this is an additional contribution of our study to the understanding of the influence of personality traits on behaviour in conflict.

The direct positive effect of *Extraversion* on ***Competitive strategy*** in both samples was shown in our study. These findings are supported by other studies (Moberg, 2001; Forrester & Tashchian, 2013; Tehrani, & Yamini, 2020). Individuals high on Extraversion are active, enjoy social interactions, and tend to dominate and use their energy and social skills to fight for their goals and interests. The direct negative effect of *Honesty-*

Humility was confirmed only in the Serbian sample. It seems obvious that the persons with a lower level of Honesty would be prone to use competitive strategies and care less about others' needs. Additionally, the results indicate indirect negative effects of *Honesty-Humility* and *Agreeableness* through the Competitive jungle beliefs in both samples, which implies that dishonest and disagreeable individuals who perceive the world as a competitive place would rather compete with others and would be less concern about others' interests. The negative relationship between Agreeableness and the dominating style was confirmed in a previous meta-analytic study (Tehrani, & Yamini, 2020), but we confirmed rather an indirect than a direct effect of that trait. There was also a positive indirect effect of Agreeableness and Openness through the beliefs about conflicts, observed only in the Italian sample. That means that people who are agreeable and open to experience and observe conflict as a positive experience would rather compete with others.

It seems that the worldview as a competitive jungle contributes to the prediction of competitive strategies in both cultures, but, for the Serbian youth, this belief predicts defensiveness as well. Positive beliefs about conflicts have a profound and systematic impact on conflict strategies, but only among the Italians: they primarily choose cooperative strategies, as well as, to a lesser extent, the competitive ones, while reducing the defensive strategy. To conclude, cooperative and competitive strategies are associated with positive beliefs about conflict situations, considering them as a "normal" and challenging experience. Interestingly, the beliefs towards conflicts did not affect conflict behaviour in the Serbian sample. Among a lot of differences in tradition, religion, history, socio-political context, etc., there is some evidence that those two cultures differ on the dimension of individualism-collectivism. The dichotomy is one of the most prominent dimensions along which cultures have been categorized (Hofstede, 2001; Kagitcibasi & Berry, 1989; Triandis, 1995). Individualistic culture stresses personal achievement and autonomy, independence, and competitiveness in conflicts (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). On the other hand, collectivistic culture is characterized by an emphasis on the importance of relationships, preserving social harmony, commonalities, focusing on maintaining relationships by conforming to others' interests, avoiding confrontation, or neglecting personal needs (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Triandis, 1995). According to Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions (2001), individualism and collectivism are conceived as the bipolar ends of the continuum along which cultures may be located. A decade ago, Italy stood out as an individualistic country (76 points), while Serbia was considered a collectivistic society (25 points)[6]. New data show that Italy does not have a

6 See https://www.hofstede-insights.com/fi/product/compare-countries/.

strong preference for either end of the scale (53 points), while Serbia, with a score of 42, is still considered a collectivistic society, with a tendency of moving towards the individualistic pole (The Culture Factor Group, 2023). Therefore, differences between the individualistic and collectivistic cultures reflect the level of importance placed on interpersonal relations, which could also influence the preference of conflict management strategies, which is supported by empirical evidence. The Asians, who represent a collectivistic culture, showed a stronger preference for collaborating, compromising, accommodating and avoiding than the Australians, who belong to the individualistic culture (Fletcher et al., 1998). The results of another study showed that the Japanese, as a collectivistic culture, were concerned with maintaining a positive relationship with the other party and preferred to use avoidance tactics in the conflict, while the Americans were primarily concerned with achieving the predominantly used assertive tactics (Ohbuchi, et al., 2000). This is consistent with the results of the US-Mexico comparison (Gomez, et al., 2018) and the study that confirmed that people from individualistic societies showed a preference towards confrontational procedures, while those from the collectivist cultures preferred harmony-enhancing procedures in resolving disputes (Gire, 1997).

Based on those studies, we could speculate that the broader socio-political context of the Serbian society could be considered as conflictual and transitional, leaning towards an individualistic culture, which could contribute to some confusion about conflicts. There is a strong traditional tendency to preserve relations and avoid conflicts, while, at the same time, people are facing conflicts at all levels of the society without the developed skills to cope with them constructively.

Conclusion

The results confirmed some similarities, as well as differences, in the pathways of the ways in which personality traits, directly and indirectly, and mediated by particular beliefs, contribute to the prediction of those strategies. We found Openness and Agreeableness to be relevant for the Cooperative strategies, Agreeableness and Disintegration for the Defensive strategies, and, finally, Extraversion, low Honesty, and low Agreeableness for the Competitive strategies. Besides similarities, there were some culturally specific relations concerning the effect of some personality traits and the mediating role of beliefs. The key differences between these cultures are reflected in the Defensive style. We suppose that different contributions of personality traits and beliefs to the prediction of some conflict management strategies between these two cultures could be partly explained by the influence of broader social

contexts that have an impact on the quality of social relations. The importance of social relations in a collectivistic culture could lead to higher tendencies to avoid interpersonal conflicts or yield to the interests of other people. Serbia is a more collectivistic and more patriarchal-oriented culture than Italy, where social pressure and the importance of preserving relationships at the cost of renouncing personal interests are higher.

Previous studies that explored the relationship between personality dimensions and conflict management strategies were based mostly on the Big Five model. The contribution of this study is reliance on the Six-Factor model, which includes Honesty-Humility as an important predictor of behaviour in conflicts, while the novelty of the study is the inclusion of the Disintegration trait, which recent studies suggested as a significant seventh dimension of the individual differences important for the prediction of a range of clinically, but also non-clinically relevant behaviours. It is precisely these dispositions that have a different impact on conflict behaviour styles in these two cultures.

The study has taken into account the role of some social beliefs, specifically those that reflect the beliefs towards the world and the beliefs towards the conflicts themselves, as important, culturally sensitive predictors of behaviour in conflicts that also have a specific mediating role between personality traits and those behaviours.

There are some limitations of this study, as it is based on an online sample that is not representative. However, the results highlight some directions for further research, which should be conducted on a representative sample. Also, the sample included young people, dominantly students, with a higher level of education, which might have played a significant role in forming certain beliefs and conflict management strategies. Young people are also more influenced by the effects of globalization that minimize cultural differences, so it would be interesting to explore those differences among older people in Serbia and Italy. Additionally, the differences between the two cultures could be explained by various other important factors, such as history, religion, political influences, etc. Future studies should examine the contribution of other dispositions (e.g. emotional control, cognitive flexibility, self-esteem, assertiveness, etc.) shaping the patterns of interpersonal behaviour which interplay in specific conflicting situations, which would contribute to broader understanding of this phenomenon. By examining different factors that play an important role in mediating the relationship between personality traits and behaviour, researchers can uncover the underlying mechanisms that shape interpersonal conflicts, leading to better understanding and creating more effective interventions for prosocial behaviour.

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DATUM PRIJEMA RADA: 2024/10/31 DATUM PRIHVATANJA RADA: 2025/05/21

Strategije upravljanja konfliktima: Uloga ličnosti i specifičnih uverenja o socijalnim odnosima u Srbiji i Italiji

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Istraživanje se bavi odnosom između strategija upravljanja konfliktima, osobina ličnosti i specifičnih verovanja o socijalnim odnosima u Italiji i Srbiji, kao dvema

evropskim zemljama koje su geografski blizu, ali imaju različitu istoriju, tradiciju, religije i razlikuju se na dimenziji individualizam–kolektivizam.

Cilj: Istraživanje ispituje kako osnovne dimenzije ličnosti predviđaju specifične strategije upravljanja konfliktima i kakva je medijaciona uloga uverenja o svetu kao „kompetitivnoj džungli" i uverenja o samim konfliktima, kao i da uporedi ove puteve u različitim kulturama.

Metod: Uzorak čini 764 mladih, uzrasta 18–30 godina (*M*=21,54; *SD*=2,80). Primenjeni instrumenti su: holandski test upravljanja sukobima, mini IPIP-6, delta inventor ličnosti, skala uverenja o svetu kao „kompetitivnoj džungli" i skala uverenja o konfliktima. Analize putanje primenjene su sa sedam osobina ličnosti kao prediktora (neuroticizam, ekstraverzija, otvorenost, saradljivost, savesnost, poštenje i dezintegracija), dva uverenja u socijalnim relacijama kao medijatori i tri strategije upravljanja konfliktima (kooperativna, defanzivna i kompetitivna) kao kriterijumske varijable.

Rezultati: Rezultati pokazuju da su zajednički prediktori bili otvorenost i saradljivost za kooperativne strategije, saradljivost i dezintegracija za defanzivne i ekstraverzija za kompetitivne strategije. Neuroticizam i savesnost nisu predviđali konfliktne situacije, dok poštenje i dezintegracija imaju različite uticaje u dve kulture. Rezultati su potvrdili razlike u putevima uticaja osobina ličnosti preko uverenja o svetu kao kompetitivnoj džungli i uverenja o konfliktima kao pretnji ili kao izazovima.

Zaključci: Crte ličnosti, kao univerzalne dispozicija za ponašanje, imaju slične efekte na strategije upravljanja konfliktima u obe zemlje, dok se razlike uočavaju u medijatorskoj ulozi uverenja koja oblikuju kulturne razile između Srbije i Italije.

Ključne reči: strategije upravljanja konfliktima, šestofaktorski model ličnosti, dezintegracija, uverenja o svetu kao kompetitivnoj džungli, uverenja o konfliktima

Appendix

Table 1

Statistical measures and factor structure of the administered instruments

	INSTRUMENTS	M	SD	KMO	Alpha	M	SD	KMO	Alpha
		ITALY				Serbia			
DUTCH	Defensive	2.33	0.58	.811	.71	2.63	0.62	.839	.72
	Cooperative	3.82	0.78	.970	.89	4.06	0.71	.966	.87
	Competitive	3.31	0.76	.825	.72	3.31	0.79	.849	.74
The Mini IPIP-6	Conscientiousness	3.27	0.86	.841	.70	3.54	0.94	.911	.78
	Extraversion	3.20	0.93	.863	.78	3.08	0.96	.896	.80
	Openness	3.89	0.84	.842	.76	4.09	0.79	.836	.75
	Agreeableness	4.14	0.82	.922	.81	4.02	0.85	.902	.81
	Neuroticism	3.39	0.84	.694	.69	3.16	0.95	.839	.76
	Honesty-humility	3.13	0.89	.736	.69	3.28	1.00	.869	.78
DELTA – Disintegration		2.74	0.68	.951	.88	2.71	0.71	.951	.88
Competitive jungle beliefs		11.73	3.53	.836	.72	11.91	3.88	.871	.76
Beliefs about conflicts		16.45	3.35	.880	.80	16.07	3.15	.774	.69

Note. M – mean, SD – standard deviation, KMO – The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy, Alpha – Cronbach Alpha, EFA – Exploratory Factor Analysis

Table 2

Correlational analysis for all variables in the study

	1 Coop	2 Def	3 Comp	4 C	5 E	6 O	7 A	8 N	9 H	10 D	11 CJB	12 BAC
1 Coop												
Ital		.179**	.250**	.186**	.083	.285**	.411**	-.035	.147**	.019	-.043	.434**
Serb		.288**	-.082	.181**	.083	.274**	.336**	-.125*	.188**	-.213**	-.071	.147*
2 Def												
Ital			-.155**	.022	-.209**	-.084	-.064	-.044	.000	.238**	.011	-.224**
Serb			-.032	-.057	-.123*	.000	.142*	.023	.036	.125*	.164**	-.263**
3 Comp												
Ital				-.013	.217**	.006	-.001	.033	-.162**	-.053	.287**	.179**
Serb				.058	.270**	.000	-.118*	.013	-.366**	-.039	.367**	.040
4 C												
Ital					-.021	.073	.104*	-.218**	.086	-.322**	-.133**	.049
Serb					.080	.048	.140*	-.265**	.209**	-.486**	-.075	.038
5 E												
Ital						.033	.194**	-.113*	-.140**	-.289**	.037	.036
Serb						.143*	.123*	-.200**	-.111	-.289**	.065	-.010
6 O												
Ital							.369**	.011	.095*	-.083	-.085	.281**
Serb							.245**	.030	.161**	-.075	-.068	.195**
7 A												
Ital								.204**	.159**	.050	-.161**	.329**
Serb								.038	.216**	-.055	-.289**	.120*

	1 Coop	2 Def	3 Comp	4 C	5 E	6 O	7 A	8 N	9 H	10 D	11 CJB	12 BAC
8 N												
Ital									-.126**	.527**	.087	.124**
Serb									-.206**	.658**	.167**	.050
9 H												
Ital										-.096*	-.310**	.006
Serb										-.257**	-.364**	.044
10 D												
Ital											.109*	-.015
Serb											.160**	-.042
11 CJB												
Ital												.151**
Serb												-.133*

Note. 1 – Cooperative strategies; 2 – Defensive strategies; 3 – Competitive strategies; 4 – Conscientiousness; 5 – Extraversion; 6 – Openness; 7 – Agreeableness; 8 – Neuroticism; 9 – Honesty-Humility; 10 – Disintegration; 11 – Competitive jungle beliefs; 12 – Beliefs about conflicts; Ital – Italian sample; Serb – Serbian sample; *p<.05; **p<.001

Table 3

Multigroup ESEM of the Three-Factor Structure of Conflict Management Styles (Standardized Solution with GEOMIN Rotated Factors) – Configural invariance

	Italian sample			Serbian sample		
	Cooperativeness	Defensiveness	Competitiveness	Cooperativeness	Defensiveness	Competitiveness
H_1_Y	0.01	**0.57**	-0.10	-0.01	0.49	-0.31
H_2_C	**0.53**	0.03	-0.17	**0.69**	0.13	-0.10
H_3_F	0.00	-0.13	**0.54**	0.04	-0.26	**0.56**
H_4_PS	0.70	-0.07	-0.03	**0.71**	0.00	0.11
H_5_A	0.27	**0.36**	-0.09	0.15	**0.49**	0.01
H_6_Y	0.15	**0.58**	0.02	0.26	**0.43**	-0.13
H_7_C	**0.68**	0.01	0.01	**0.60**	0.12	0.07
H_8_F	0.16	0.12	**0.75**	-0.01	-0.08	**0.75**
H_9_PS	0.73	-0.11	0.15	**0.63**	-0.10	0.27
H_10_A	-0.09	**0.58**	0.11	0.03	**0.57**	0.01
H_11_Y	0.19	**0.58**	-0.04	0.23	**0.58**	-0.18
H_12_C	**0.42**	0.27	0.01	-0.22	**0.63**	0.09
H_13_F	0.28	-0.01	**0.73**	0.11	-0.03	**0.64**
H_14_PS	0.77	-0.02	0.02	**0.75**	0.00	0.13
H_15_A	**0.45**	0.15	-0.04	**0.47**	**0.30**	0.15
H_16_Y	**0.64**	0.12	-0.11	0.56	0.28	-0.12
H_17_C	**0.73**	0.03	-0.14	**0.75**	0.21	0.01
H_18_F	-0.07	0.24	**0.69**	**-0.50**	0.03	**0.71**
H_19_PS	0.75	-0.10	0.05	**0.69**	0.04	0.07
H_20_A	0.17	**0.46**	0.08	-0.26	**0.65**	0.00

Note. Loadings above .30 are bolded. Items C – Compromising, PS – Problem-solving, Y – Yielding, A – Avoiding, and F – Forcing