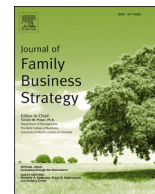




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# The impact of managers' personality on task and relationship conflict: The moderating role of family and non-family business status

Maria Bernarda Guerrero Calle<sup>a,\*</sup>, Katalien Bollen<sup>a</sup>, Dolores Sucozhañay<sup>b</sup>, Martin Euwema<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Professional Learning, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

<sup>b</sup> Department of Space and Population, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, University of Cuenca, Cuenca, Ecuador

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## ABSTRACT

When it comes to organizational conflict in (small) family businesses, managers' personality has received little attention. We investigated the relationship between managers' personality traits (Big Five) and their perceptions of task conflict and relationship conflict in two types of firms (family vs. non-family business). We collected data from 103 managers in small firms (56 family firms and 47 non-family firms) in Ecuador. Our findings show that family firms have less relationship conflict compared to non-family firms. Managers' personality seems to play a key role in perceiving conflicts. Particularly, managers' openness and extraversion are related to less perceived conflict. Introverted managers in non-family businesses perceive more relationship conflict than those in family businesses. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Conflict within groups can manifest in various forms, with task and relationship conflict being the most widely discussed in the literature (De Wit et al., 2012; Elgoibar et al., 2017; Kozusznik et al., 2020). Generally, both types of conflict tend to have negative implications for team processes and outcomes. Although the impact of these conflicts is well recognized, there is still inadequate understanding regarding one of the known antecedents of conflict, i.e., the involved parties' personalities. To address this limitation, researchers have investigated which personality traits are linked to task and relationship conflicts, showing inconsistent relations with openness, conscientiousness and extraversion (Ayub et al., 2017; Bono et al., 2002; De Jong et al., 2013). Although managers play a crucial role in fostering engagement, improving performance and enhancing profitability within firms (Baumruk, 2006; De Jong et al., 2013), research is scarce when it comes to managers' personality traits in Latin America (Laajaj et al., 2019), especially in the context of family and non-family businesses.

Latin American countries share regional and cultural attributes, as well as similar economic, political, legal, and socio-demographic characteristics (Aguinis et al., 2020). The size (approximately 600 million people; Cortés & Botero, 2016) and relevance to economic markets (Basco, 2018) highlight the importance of conducting research in Latin

America. Firms in this region face different challenges, such as economic volatility and inequality, informal economies (Aguinis et al., 2020) and weak legal frameworks (Vassolo et al., 2011). Notably, micro and small firms constitute the majority (98 %) of all firms in the region, with medium sized (1.5 %) and large firms (0.5 %) being far less prevalent (Dini & Stumpo, 2019). Most of Latin American firms (approximately 85 %; Berrone et al., 2022; Vazquez, 2017) are controlled by families, employing around 70 % of the workforce (Basco, 2018), and generating over 60 % of the Gross National Product (GNP) (Yearbook, 2015). Despite this economic importance, research is still lacking when it comes to organizational conflict and management in small family businesses in Latin America (Aguinis et al., 2020; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2020).

This paper addresses three research gaps. First, the existing studies on personality and intragroup conflicts, overlook mostly the distinction between task and relationship conflict. Moreover, existing knowledge is based on large firms, thus neglecting the unique characteristics of small firms (e.g., managerial roles, independence, task diversity, daily survival strategies, interpersonal relationships, and informality; De Oliveira et al., 2015; Fuller-Love, 2006; Spence, 2016), which can give rise to different types of conflicts. In family firms, family dynamics present a unique and complex business context, as social relationships shape both family and firm behaviors (Bettinelli et al., 2022) and thus also affect conflict perceptions (Alvarado-Alvarez et al., 2020). Second, previous

\* Correspondence to: Van den Heuvelinstituut (VHI), Faculty of Psychology and Education, KU Leuven, Dekenstraat 2, Box 3725 – Room 02.02, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

E-mail address: [mariabernarda.guerrero calle@kuleuven.be](mailto:mariabernarda.guerrero calle@kuleuven.be) (M.B. Guerrero Calle).

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studies have often relied on findings from developed countries, which may not translate entirely to other regions (Laajaj et al., 2019). In this sense, Latin America is a unique environment to test existing theories (Aguinis et al., 2020; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2020). Third, our understanding is limited on how owner-managers in family firms may differ from managers in non-family firms. In many small family firms in Latin America, family members often work in the business, while one family member or its founder acts as manager (Del Carmen Briano-Turrent & Poletti-Hughes, 2017). In this article, we further refer to owner-manager in a family business and manager in a non-family business. Research suggests that, compared to non-family businesses, family firms provide a distinct cultural and structural context for managers' organizational behavior, which can include workplace conflicts (Peng et al., 2018; Vardaman & Gondo, 2014).

This study investigates the relationship between managers' personality traits and perceived task and relationship conflict in small firms. The distinction between task and relationship conflict is important due to the implications for the individual, group, and organization and subsequent behavior (De Wit et al., 2012). We contribute to existing literature with the unique context of small firms in Latin America by applying the Big Five Model (BFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and conflict theory (Jehn, 1995), thus answering calls for more studies combining different types of conflict (Bettinelli et al., 2022; Kubíček & Machek, 2020). Further, we explore how the type of small firm (family vs. non-family) affects the relation between managers' personality and perceived conflicts in small firms.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Fig. 1 presents our study's research model, which we will elaborate in the following paragraphs. The perception of task and relationship conflict is firstly related to managers' personality. Secondly, this relationship might be moderated by the type of firm: family or non-family firm.

### 2.1. Personality traits

Larsen and Buss (2009) define personality as "the set of psychological traits and mechanisms within the individual that are organized and relatively enduring and that influences his or her interactions with, and adaptations to, the intrapsychic, physical, and social environments" (p. 4). Managers' personality affects their conflict behaviors (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020), as well as firm performance (De Jong et al., 2013), thus making it a crucial element for business and success. The Big Five Model

is one of the most well-known and used typologies of personality worldwide (Cervone & Pervin, 2017). It includes five personality traits: Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (OCEAN).

### 2.2. Task conflict in (non) family firms

Task conflict refers to "disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions" (Jehn, 1995, p. 258.) According to a systematic review by De Wit et al. (2012), task conflict has mostly negative implications for team processes and outcomes. However, it can be beneficial under specific conditions, especially within a cooperative climate for dialogue and particularly in executive teams (De Wit et al., 2012). Limited findings on task conflict in family businesses further elaborate that an open atmosphere (Ensley, 2006; Ensley et al., 2002) and positive interdependence can lead to improved task performance and financial performance (Hoelscher, 2014; Kanadli et al., 2020; Paskewitz & Beck, 2017).

### 2.3. Relationship conflict in (non) family firms

Relationship conflict refers to "interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members" (Jehn, 1995, p. 258), and has generally negative effects on teams and organizations (De Wit et al., 2012; Kozusznik et al., 2020). Loaded with negative emotions, such conflicts can impact interpersonal relations, the quality of decision-making and general performance (Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007; Kellermanns & Eddleston, 2007). In family businesses, relationship conflict negatively affects product development (Chirico & Salvato, 2016), employee satisfaction (Nosé et al., 2017; Paskewitz & Beck, 2017), and financial performance (Rousseau et al., 2018).

### 2.4. Personality traits, task conflict and relationship conflict

In the following paragraphs we develop our expectations about the relationships between managers' personality traits in terms of the Big Five, and perceived task conflict and relationship conflict in the organization.

#### 2.4.1. Openness and task conflict

Openness is associated with a wide range of characteristics including "fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas and values" (Costa Jr, 1996,

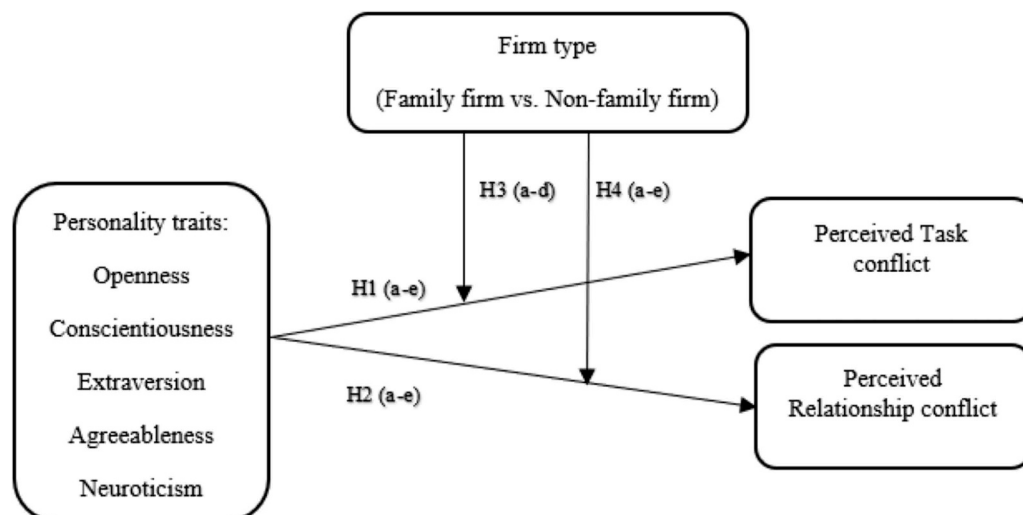


Fig. 1. Research model.

p.228) and can thus be a predictor of divergent thinking and creativity (Walker & Jackson, 2014). Individuals high in openness are more receptive to others' ideas and may engage in creative solutions and may thus approach and intervene when perceiving task conflict (De Jong et al., 2013). Because of their curiosity, highly open individuals may be able to share their ideas and concerns with others, and explore different ideas and interests. As managers, they may address potential task conflicts in an early stage and alleviate them by endorsing a problem solving approach (Tjosvold et al., 2014). Therefore, perceiving less task conflict.

#### 2.4.2. Conscientiousness and task conflict

Traits such as "competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline and deliberation" (Costa Jr, 1996, p.228) characterize conscientiousness, which was found to be a predictor of task performance (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007). Highly conscientious individuals set high goals and standards and are motivated to achieve them (Costa & McCrae, 1992). While their elevated targets may give rise to task conflict, highly conscientious managers are careful in their goal pursuits while also monitoring for conflicts. Leader conscientiousness is thus negatively related to task conflict and positively related to problem solving strategies (Barbuto Jr et al., 2010; De Jong et al., 2013).

#### 2.4.3. Extraversion and task conflict

Extraversion encompasses "warmth, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking and positive emotions" (Costa Jr, 1996, p. 228). While extraverted individuals tend to perform well in their jobs by making changes and taking initiative (Wilmot et al., 2019), studies so far have not found significant associations between extraversion and task conflict (Ayub et al., 2017; Bono et al., 2002; De Jong et al., 2013). However, assertiveness, a characteristic associated with extraversion, may lead managers to be more forceful in communicating their opinions (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). They may therefore address task conflict at an early stage, and thus we do not expect a significant relationship between extraversion and task conflict.

#### 2.4.4. Agreeableness and task conflict

Agreeableness is characterized by "trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty and tender-mindedness" (Costa Jr, 1996, p. 228) and it is closely linked to prosocial motivation and helping others (Graziano et al., 2007; Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007; Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). High agreeableness may translate to more cooperation in team work (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001) and predict task performance (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007). Previous research shows mixed findings between agreeableness and task conflict (Ayub et al., 2017; De Jong et al., 2013). However, as highly agreeable people tend to be more cooperative at work, they may reach settlements easier. Therefore, we expect a negative relationship between agreeableness and task conflict.

#### 2.4.5. Neuroticism and task conflict

Neuroticism includes characteristics such as "anxiety, angry-hostility, depression, impulsiveness and vulnerability" (Costa Jr, 1996, p. 228). Highly neurotic people have a tendency towards self-blame and rumination (Gunther et al., 1999). Overthinking the amount of work and tasks could lead these managers to more frequent experiences of task conflict. Neurotic individuals tend to experience anxiety, which creates intrusive thoughts that disrupt attention mechanisms (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992) and decreases task performance (Robinson et al., 2013). Neuroticism was positively related to perceived task conflict in the study by Bono et al. (2002), however not significantly related in studies by Ayub et al. (2017) and De Jong et al. (2013). We follow here the previous arguments and the outcomes of Bono et al. (2002), hence we expect a positive relationship between neuroticism and perceived task conflict.

To summarize, we thus hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Managers' personality relates to perceived task conflict

in the organization. Specifically, *openness* (H1a) and *conscientiousness* relate negatively to task conflict (H1b); *extraversion* is unrelated to task conflict (H1c); *agreeableness* relates negatively to task conflict (H1d); and *neuroticism* relates positively to task conflict (H1e).

#### 2.4.6. Openness and relationship conflict

Openness is a predictor of active-empathic listening, which is a cornerstone of conflict prevention and constructive conflict behavior and management (Sims, 2017; Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Because of this skill, highly open managers may intervene in conflicts and contribute to the emotional support of involved parties, thus decreasing their perceptions of relationship conflict. Openness has also been linked to altruism (Oda et al., 2014), and hence to taking care of others (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010), which may also help alleviate perceived relationship conflict. De Jong et al. (2013) revealed indeed that openness relates negatively to relationship conflict. Hence, because of their aim to take care of others this will lead them to help their employees and decrease the perception of relationship conflict. We expect a negative relationship between openness and relationship conflict.

#### 2.4.7. Conscientiousness and relationship conflict

Highly conscientious individuals are able to control their emotions when they experience negative events (Colbert et al., 2004) and engage less in aggressive behavior (Yang & Diefendorff, 2009). Consequently, in a relationship conflict, highly conscientious managers are less likely to express negative emotions and lash out at others. Moreover, they are more likely to intervene, as conscientiousness is positively related to cooperative behaviors towards the wellbeing of both parties (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). However, in prior studies, high conscientiousness has been linked to perceptions of more (Bono et al., 2002) and less (Ayub et al., 2017; De Jong et al., 2013) relationship conflict. In conflict studies, conscientiousness is positively related to cooperative behaviors for the wellbeing of both parties (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020), indicating that highly conscientious managers are more likely to approach and intervene in a relationship conflict. For the previous reasons we expect conscientiousness to relate negatively to relationship conflict.

#### 2.4.8. Extraversion and relationship conflict

Extraversion is associated with verbal and nonverbal communication, attention to others, and rewarding interactions (Wilmot et al., 2019). It is also positively related to problem solving and compromising conflict styles (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020), which involves considering others' concerns. In line with this, prior studies found a negative relationship between extraversion and relationship conflict (Ayub et al., 2017; De Jong et al., 2013). Consequently, highly extraverted people are more receptive to others and may engage in social interactions, decreasing the perception of relationship conflict.

#### 2.4.9. Agreeableness and relationship conflict

Agreeableness refers to a person's ability to put others' interests before their own, and being helpful, empathetic and polite (Branje et al., 2005). It is related to problem solving and compromising conflict styles (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020) and to less perceived relationship conflict (Ayub et al., 2017; Bono et al., 2002). Moreover, agreeable leaders generate confidence in their employees (Bono & Judge, 2004) and a willingness to get along with others (Barrick et al., 2013). This could lead them to provide more emotional support to their employees which could decrease the perception of relationship conflict. We expect a negative relationship between agreeableness and relationship conflict.

#### 2.4.10. Neuroticism and relationship conflict

As neuroticism is characterized by a lack of control over negative emotions and being worried and insecure, particularly in disruptive events (Pease & Lewis, 2015), studies found a positive association between neuroticism and relationship conflict (Ayub et al., 2017; De Jong et al., 2013).

In summary, we expect the following in terms of personality traits and relationship conflict:

**Hypothesis 2.** Managers' personality relates to perceived relationship conflict in the organization. Specifically, *openness* (H2a); *conscientiousness* (H2b); *extraversion* (H2c); and *agreeableness* (H2d) relate negatively to relationship conflict; and *neuroticism* relates positively to relationship conflict (H2e).

### 2.5. Firm type, manager's personality and perceived organizational conflicts

In general, a work environment that emphasized the cohesion of individuals, the well-being of employees, a low power distance between managers and employees, and a shared sense of responsibility for the collective benefit of all firm members tends to increase the involvement of managers. In the context of family firms, which are characterized by highly motivated individuals, a low power distance, strong sense of collectivism, among other characteristics, are likely to promote participation of managers in conflict and conflict management. Consequently, family firms represent a context that could diminish perceptions of conflict by owner-managers to a greater extent compared to managers in non-family firms. In this section, we explore and argue that the family firm context diminishes owner-managers' perceptions of conflicts to a greater extent compared to managers in non-family firms.

#### 2.5.1. Firm type, openness and task conflict

Openness is negatively related to task conflict. In family firms this relationship will be stronger as ownership is closely connected to management, thus activating an increased collectivistic orientation in owner-managers (Neubaum et al., 2017), while also stimulating employees' motivation to provide their best work performance, and increasing cooperation.

#### 2.5.2. Firm type, conscientiousness and task conflict

Conscientiousness is negatively associated with task conflict. In family firms, this association will be stronger as owner-managers tend to have strong control over their work schedules (Kwan et al., 2012), especially if they need to take care of their family responsibilities in order to balance their family and firm (Behson, 2002). In this case, control can be seen as a characteristic of highly conscientious individuals, allowing owner-managers to plan and reduce the potential for task conflict within the firm.

#### 2.5.3. Firm type, extraversion and task conflict

As we don't expect a relationship between extraversion and task conflict, exploring moderation is not relevant.

#### 2.5.4. Firm type, agreeableness and task conflict

Agreeableness is negatively related to task conflict. As family firms endorse close relationships (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2019), they may motivate highly agreeable managers to be more active and cooperative towards their employees and thus more likely to help them with tasks. This, in turn, can inspire employees to address conflicts and engage in problem solving behaviors more so than in non-family firms. Consequently, this will lead to lower perceptions of task conflict by owners-managers in family firms compared to managers in non-family firms.

#### 2.5.5. Firm type, neuroticism and task conflict

Neuroticism is positively related to task conflict. Owner-managers tend to strongly identify with their firms (Neubaum et al., 2017) and strive for success (Hernandez, 2012). Employees also have a high sense of attachment and involvement in family firms. Criticism against the firm may be perceived as a personal attack, creating perceptions of task conflict among owner-managers.

To summarize, we expect the following regarding the moderating role of firm type:

**Hypothesis 3.** The relationship between managers' personality and perceived task conflict is moderated by firm type. Specifically, in family firms, compared to non-family firms, *openness* (H3a) and *conscientiousness* relate more negatively to task conflict (H3b); *agreeableness* (H3c) relates more negatively to task conflict and *neuroticism* relates more positively to task conflict (H3d).

#### 2.5.6. Firm type, openness and relationship conflict

As employees in family firms are involved in decision-making processes, it can lead to greater benefits for the firm (Butts et al., 2009). This can also inspire employees to address relationship conflicts and engage in problem solving behaviors, thereby preventing conflicts and decreasing owners-managers' perceptions of them.

#### 2.5.7. Firm type, conscientiousness and relationship conflict

Conscientiousness is negatively related to relationship conflict. In family firms, owner-managers tend to experience lower power distance (Neubaum et al., 2017; Sharma & Manikutty, 2005), which promotes egalitarian processes and discourages inequalities through equal treatment of all members. This activates a greater sense of ownership in owner-managers, resulting in more equal treatment of employees, addressing relationship issues, and decreasing the escalation of relationship conflict.

#### 2.5.8. Firm type, extraversion and relationship conflict

Extraversion is negatively related to relationship conflict. Family firms provide a context where power is more personal than institutional (Marques et al., 2014; Neubaum et al., 2017), more so than in non-family firms. Owner-managers in family firms share information and build trust with their employees (Neubaum et al., 2017), allowing them to feel comfortable expressing their opinions about task and personal issues, thereby decreasing relationship conflict. Thus, owner-managers will perceive less relationship conflict than managers in non-family firms.

#### 2.5.9. Firm type, agreeableness, and relationship conflict

Agreeableness is negatively related to relationship conflict. Owner-managers' high motivation (Neubaum et al., 2017), can activate an increased appreciation and recognition of employees' work, thus stimulating employees to openly discuss and address issues, thereby decreasing or even preventing relationship conflict. Therefore, owners-managers in family firms will perceive less relationship conflict compared to managers in non-family firms.

#### 2.5.10. Firm type, neuroticism and relationship conflict

As close relationships are very important in family firms (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2019), employees may talk more frequently about relationship problems. However, highly neurotic managers tend to be more sensitive to negative cues from others, which may trigger perceptions of more relationship conflict by owners-managers in family firms compared to managers in non-family firms.

Summarizing the moderating role of family business and non-family business in the relationship between personality and relationship conflict, we expect:

**Hypothesis 4.** The relationship between managers' personality and perceived relationship conflict is moderated by firm type. Specifically, in family firms, compared to non-family firms, *openness* (H4a); *conscientiousness* (H4b); *extraversion* (H4c), and *agreeableness* (H4d) relates more negatively to relationship conflict; and *neuroticism* relates more positively to relationship conflict (H4e).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data collection and sample

Our data were collected in Cuenca, a city in Ecuador, in 2016–2017. Ecuador is a relevant country to study family firms for two reasons. First, Ecuador has the second highest density of firms in Latin America with 381 firms per 10,000 inhabitants (compared to 458 in Mexico, 350 in Colombia, and 319 in Peru; Tobar Pesántez, 2014). Second, 75 % of all firms in Ecuador are family firms (Tapia, et al., 2019) and contribute 93 % of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Family Firm Institute, 2017). In general, Latin American family firms contribute more than 60 % of the GDP (Sanguino et al., 2016). Further, we selected the city of Cuenca for two reasons. First, Cuenca has the highest density of firms in the country, with 538 firms per 10,000 inhabitants (INEC, 2019; Tobar Pesántez, 2014). Second, it is the third most populated city in the country (INEC, 2019), with a relatively high employment rate (66.6 %; INEC, 2019), and a significant number of small (20.44 %) and micro businesses (73.80 %) (Superintendencia de Compañías, 2016).

In 2016, we received a list of all small businesses in Cuenca ( $n = 557$ ) from the Superintendencia de Compañías (SC).<sup>1</sup> After screening the list and removing double entries, 549 small firms remained. As a prerequisite to the study, the businesses needed to be active, resulting in 453 eligible firms. Between October and November 2016, 57 students from the University of Cuenca followed a three-hour workshop on survey methodology. They delivered an invitation letter to all 453 firms between December 2016 and February 2017, informing them about the purpose of our study. When firms indicated interest in participation, the students distributed hard copy surveys onsite, and collected them afterward. All surveys were filled out with paper and pencil. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and respondents signed an informed consent form.

In total, 105 managers participated in the study. After removing incomplete answers, 103 completed surveys remained: 56 owner-managers worked in family firms (42 men and 14 women) and 47 managers in non-family firms (38 men and 9 women). In family businesses, the managers' mean age was 43.39 years ( $SD = 9.57$ ) with an average tenure of 9.29 years ( $SD = 8.59$ ) in the firm. 46.4 % of owner-managers held a university degree. In non-family businesses, the managers' mean age was 43.04 years ( $SD = 11.99$ ) with an average tenure of 5.41 years ( $SD = 5.39$ ) in the firm. 55.4 % of them held a university degree. Family and non-family firms had a comparable number of employees, between 9 and 46 employees ( $M = 20.68$ ,  $SD = 20.68$ ), and between 9 and 49 employees ( $M = 23.00$ ,  $SD = 23.00$ ), respectively. Except for the number of years worked in the firm, no significant differences were found between the two types of firms.

#### 3.2. Measures

To measure perceptions of task and relationship conflict, and managers' personality, we translated the items from validated instruments (see below) from English to Spanish, following the adaptation mode of translation (Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 2004). English professors from the language department of the University of Cuenca conducted the translations. This way, we ensured that "culturally idiosyncratic expressions of the construct are included" (Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 2004, p. 123), as these native speakers are familiar with Ecuadorian culture. The researchers reviewed the final translations of the items to warrant that they accurately reflect the full content of the original items and scales.

<sup>1</sup> (Superintendencia de compañía, valores y seguros-SC) controls the activities, dissolution, and liquidation of large, medium, small and micro companies in Ecuador.

#### 3.2.1. Firm type

We distinguished between family and non-family firms. A firm was categorized as a family firm when it met the following two criteria: (1) a minimum of 50 % of the shares are held by the owner or family members, and (2) at least one family member participates in the (daily) management of the firm (Claver Cortés et al., 2007). If these criteria were not met it was considered a non-family firm. In the survey, managers were asked to indicate whether they worked in a family business (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0), and if they were also the owner (coded as 1) in addition to being the manager (coded as 0). Later, we called each firm to verify whether the firm qualifies as a family firm or not. We asked the managers how their firm aligned with the following statement: A family firm is a firm where minimum 50 % of the shares are owned by the family and the business is managed effectively by one family and/or its members. These steps led us to classify 56 firms as family firms and 47 as non-family firms, with 56 owner-managers and 47 managers.

#### 3.2.2. Task conflict and relationship conflict

To measure perceptions of task and relationship conflict at organizational level, we used the validated intragroup conflict scale (Jehn et al., 2008). We opted for this measure, as these small firms typically have a simple structure, working as one team, usually without much formalization in roles (De Oliveira et al., 2015; Fuller-Love, 2006). Thus, it is suitable to measure conflicts using this scale originally developed for teams. To match the specific context, we slightly adapted the wording of the items, replacing "my team" with "my organization". Both task and relationship conflict were measured with 3 items (6 items in total). On a five-point Likert scale, managers were asked to rate to what extent they perceived issues related to task and relationship conflict in their organization (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always). Examples include: "We often disagree about work things" (task conflict;  $\alpha = .79$ ) and "In the organization people fight over personal matters" (relationship conflict;  $\alpha = .82$ ).

#### 3.2.3. Managers' personality

To measure personality, we used a short version of the Big Five personality scale (Mowen, 2000). Each personality trait (OCEAN) was measured using three items (15 items in total). Managers were asked to indicate on a seven-point Likert scale to what extent each item is characteristic of them (1 = completely uncharacteristic to 7 = completely characteristic). Examples include "highly creative" (Openness;  $\alpha = .85$ ); "organized" (Conscientiousness;  $\alpha = .76$ ); "quiet with people" (Extraversion, reversed item;  $\alpha = .78$ ); "sympathetic" (Agreeableness;  $\alpha = .76$ ); and "emotions go way up and down" (Neuroticism;  $\alpha = .69$ ).

#### 3.3. Assessment of construct validity and reliability

To assess the validity and reliability of the measures, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). For the intragroup conflict scale, the initial CFA model with 4 items for both task and relationship conflict did not fit well, as indicated by chi-square of 35.88 ( $df = 18$ ,  $p < .005$ ) and fitness indices (TLI=0.919; CFI=0.948; RMSEA=0.098; SRMR=0.072). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) for the model was .09, which is above the .08 threshold level, indicating a lack of good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). For this reason, another CFA with 3 items for task conflict and 3 items for relationship conflict was conducted. The items "we fight about work matters" (task conflict) and "we disagree about non-work (social or personality things)" (relationship conflict) were removed. The revised model with 3 items for each conflict demonstrated a good fit with a chi-square of 5.61 ( $df = 6$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and satisfactory fitness indices (TLI=1; CFI=1; RMSEA=0.00; SRMR=0.026) (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

For the Big Five personality scale, the CFA produced satisfactory fit indices with a chi-square of 101.04 ( $df = 77$ ,  $p < .05$ ), TLI= 0.953; CFI= 0.966; RMSEA= 0.055; SRMR= 0.075 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In summary, all of these measures indicated adequate fit according to

recommended guidelines (Hair et al., 2010). All these analyses were carried out using R plus version 3.6.

Other criteria were used to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs (See Appendix A). The reliability of both models was demonstrated by construct reliability (CR) exceeding the threshold level of 0.7 for all constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity was supported for all models by average variance extracted (AVE), values above the suggested cut-off level of 0.5 for all constructs (Hair et al., 2010) except for conscientiousness. If the AVE is less than 0.5, but the construct reliability is higher than 0.6, the construct validity is still adequate (Shrestha, 2021). Discriminant validity was established by indicating the maximum shared variance (MSV) as well as the average shared squared variance (ASV), were both lower than the AVE for both constructs used (Hair et al., 2010).

3.4. Analysis

We conducted several analyses to achieve the two objectives of the present study. To achieve the first objective of the study, we calculated descriptive statistics including correlations among the research variables. Subsequently, we conducted multiple regression analyses to test Hypotheses 1(a-e) and 2(a-e). We controlled for age, gender, level of education, and firm size (number of employees) (Boling et al., 2016). However, given that only gender was correlated with agreeableness and firm size was correlated with conscientiousness and task conflict, we followed Becker, (2005) suggestion and excluded age and level of education as control variables in the regression analysis. To achieve the second objective of the study, we conducted multiple regression analyses to test Hypotheses 3(a-d), and 4(a-e). We kept gender and firm size as control variables. We used SPSS version 25 to run the analyses.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics for the investigated variables

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations between all study variables. In terms of our control variables, we found a negative correlation between managers' age and level of education ( $r = -.23$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, managers' gender was negatively related to agreeableness ( $r = -.25$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Firm size showed a positive correlation with task conflict ( $r = .24$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and a negative correlation with conscientiousness ( $r = -.24$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Further, participants are majority male (77.7 %), and 22.3 % female. This gender imbalance was rather consistent for both types of firms; in family firms 25 % of the managers are women and 75 % men, and in non-family firms 19,1 % of the managers are women, while 80,9 % of them are men. For our research variables, we found a positive correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict ( $r = .53$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Firm type was negatively

Table 1  
Descriptive statistics and correlations among research variables (N = 103).

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Age	43.23	10.69	-											
2 Gender	.77	.41	.11	-										
3 Level of education	4.76	1.07	-.23*	-.01	-									
4 Firm size	21.74	10.40	.00	.04	.21*	-								
5 Firm type	.54	.50	.01	-.07	-.09	-.11	-							
6 Openness	5.37	1.20	.09	-.14	-.10	-.17	.13	-						
7 Conscientiousness	5.46	1.12	.03	-.11	-.16	-.24*	.12	.68**	-					
8 Extraversion	4.61	1.45	-.01	.03	.06	.01	-.01	-.12	-.09	-				
9 Agreeableness	5.61	1.06	-.06	-.25*	-.18	-.23*	.13	.62**	.57**	-.07	-			
10 Neuroticism	3.63	1.30	-.01	.06	-.07	.03	-.06	-.06	-.10	-.41**	.02	-		
11 Task conflict	2.61	.88	-.07	.15	.01	.24*	-.16	-.39**	-.36**	-.11	-.26**	.21*	-	
12 Relationship conflict	2.05	.92	.00	.07	-.13	.10	-.29**	-.36**	-.25**	-.29*	-.33**	.23*	.53**	-

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05.

Note: Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; Level of education: 1 = none, 2 = primary school, 3 = secondary school, 4 = technical undergraduate, 5 = undergraduate degree, 6 postgraduate; Firm type: 1 = Family firms, 0 = Non-family firms.

correlated with relationship conflict ( $r = -.29$ ;  $p < .001$ ), indicating less relationship conflict in family firms ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) compared to non-family firms, ( $M = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). For task conflict, family firms showed slightly (non-significant) lower levels ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) compared to non-family firms ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ).

4.2. Relationship between personality traits and conflict type

As personality traits are simultaneously present, in our next step, all five traits were entered simultaneously (Ayub et al., 2017). The results for H1 (personality and task conflict) are presented in Table 2; and the results for H2 (personality and relationship conflict) are presented in Table 3. In Step 1 (Model 1), the control variables were not significant in either case. In Step 2 (Model 2), the regression analysis revealed significant negative relationships between openness and both task ( $\beta = -.39$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and relationship conflict ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ), thus supporting H1a and H2a. However, no significant relationships were found between conscientiousness and task ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = 0.674$ ) or relationship conflict ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = 0.633$ ), failing to confirm H1b and

Table 2  
Regression analysis for the relation between personality traits and task conflict (N = 103).

Variables	Task conflict			
	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$	Model 3 $\beta$	Model 4 $\beta$
<i>Control variables</i>				
Gender	.15	.09	.09	.07
Firm size	.24*	.18	.17	.19
<i>Independent variable</i>				
Openness		-.39*	-.38*	-.51
Conscientiousness		.05	.05	.31
Extraversion		-.11	-.10	-.23
Agreeableness		.01	.01	.04
Neuroticism		.14	.14	.26
<i>Moderator</i>				
Type of firm			-.08	.87
<i>Interaction</i>				
Type of firm × Openness				.71
Type of firm × Conscientiousness				-1.09
Type of firm × Extraversion				.32
Type of firm × Agreeableness				-.62
Type of firm × Neuroticism				-.34
F statistic	4.25	3.94*	.91	1.68
R2 Change		.16	.01	.06
Adjusted R2	.06	.18	.18	.21
R2	.08	.24	.25	.31

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05, ° p < .10.

Note: Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female. Firm type: 1 = Family firms, 0 = Non-family firms.

**Table 3**  
Regression analysis for the relation between personality traits and relationship conflict (N = 103).

Variables	Relationship conflict			
	Model 1 $\beta$	Model 2 $\beta$	Model 3 $\beta$	Model 4 $\beta$
<i>Control variables</i>				
Gender	.06	-.02	-.03	-.07
Firm size	.10	.01	.01	.02
<i>Independent variable</i>				
Openness		-.30*	-.28*	-.36
Conscientiousness		.06	.06	-.11
Extraversion		-.29*	-.30*	-.56*
Agreeableness		-.21°	-.19°	-.03
Neuroticism		.10	.09	.05
<i>Moderator</i>				
Type of firm			-.23*	-1.06
<i>Interaction</i>				
Type of firm × Openness				.41
Type of firm × Conscientiousness				.71
Type of firm × Extraversion				.86*
Type of firm × Agreeableness				-1.19°
Type of firm × Neuroticism				.16
F statistic	.76	6.75	7.39	2.17
R2 Change		.25*	.05*	.07*
Adjusted R2	-.01	.21	.26	.31
R2	.01	.27	.32	.39

\*\* p < .01, \* p < .05, ° p < .10.

Note: Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female. Firm type: 1 = Family firms, 0 = Non-family firms.

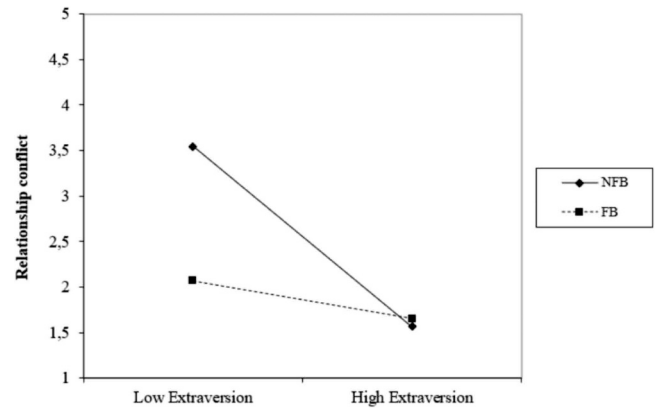
H2b. Extraversion was not significantly associated with task conflict ( $\beta = -.11, p = 0.295$ ), but showed a negative relationship with relationship conflict ( $\beta = -.29, p = 0.004$ ), confirming H1c and H2c. Agreeableness did not exhibit a relationship with task conflict ( $\beta = .01, p = 0.996$ ) and only showed marginal support for an association with relationship conflict ( $\beta = -.21, p = 0.088$ ), therefore not fully supporting H1d but suggesting partial support for H2d. Finally, neuroticism was not significantly related to task conflict ( $\beta = .14, p = 0.169$ ), nor to relationship conflict ( $\beta = .10, p = 0.284$ ), failing to confirm H1e and H2e.

**4.3. Firm type, managers personality traits, task conflict and relationship conflict**

We assessed the moderating effects following the three step method by Baron and Kenny (1986). We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to test H3 and H4. The results for the moderating effects of firm type between personality traits and task conflict are presented in Model 4 of Table 2, showing that no moderating effects were found. Hence H3a, H3b, H3c and H3d were not supported. H4a, H4b, H4c, H4d and H4e proposed that for family businesses, the positive relationship between personality and relationship conflict is increased (Model 4 of Table 3). We found that the type of firm had a moderating effect on the association between extraversion and relationship conflict ( $\beta = .86, p = .010$ ). As Fig. 2 shows, introvert managers perceived considerably more relationship conflict compared to extravert managers in both types of firms. This finding, however, contradicts our expectations, as extraversion in non-family firms had a stronger impact on relationship conflict than in family firms. Therefore, H4a, H4b, H4d, H4e and H4c were not confirmed.

**5. Discussion**

In this paper, we investigated the association between managers' personality and their perceptions of task and relationship conflict in small firms. The results reveal that Big Five personality traits together explain 20 % of the variance in task conflict, and 27 % of the variance in relationship conflict. Particularly, openness emerges as the strongest



**Fig. 2.** The moderation effect of firm type on the relation between extraversion and perceived relationship conflict.

predictor for both conflict types. We also explored how firm type moderates the relationship between personality and conflict types. Results show no support for the idea (Hypotheses 3 and 4) stronger relationships exist between personality of the manager and perceived conflict in family firms compared to non-family firms.

**5.1. Theoretical contributions**

Our study's first contribution is that openness appears as the most influential personality trait in relation to perceived task and relationship conflict. Ayub et al. (2017) found that for employees, agreeableness is the most important trait, while extraversion and neuroticism are related to more perceived conflicts in their teams. This distinction may be due to differences in study subjects and organizational roles (managers vs. employees). Managers' openness is essential when identifying tensions at an early stage and addressing them before they escalate into conflicts. This requires showing interest in employees' behaviors, concerns, and challenges to create a better understanding of the situation. We also focused on perceptions of conflicts on the organizational level, while prior studies have primarily focused on team conflicts involving the focal person, which could explain differences in our findings. While a manager need not be personally involved in these conflicts, it is essential to be interested and open to noticing signs of tensions at an early stage, to prevent growing into conflict.

We also found a negative relationship between extraversion and relationship conflict, consistent with previous findings (Ayub et al., 2017; De Jong et al., 2013). Extravert individuals are more likely to assert themselves in groups and often take an active leadership role. When a potential conflict arises, they will not refrain from addressing it or approaching the employees involved, which may prevent conflict escalation. Extravert individuals tend to possess higher coping abilities when dealing with difficult situations, such as conflicts (Penley & Tomaka, 2007).

The second contribution is the moderating effect of type of organization when it comes to introversion of managers and perception of relationship conflict. In non-family firms, introverted managers perceive considerably more relationship conflict. An explanation here might be that in small family firms, informal relations are often dominant and strong, so more introverted owner-managers might be more in contact with employees, and sensitive to early signals of tension (Miller et al., 2013). While in non-family business, an introverted manager might be less connected, and thereby perceive more conflict in the firm.

Our study's third important contribution is related to conflict theory in the context of small firms. We find that owner-managers in family firms perceive less relationship conflict than managers in non-family firms. Despite the potential for conflicts due to multiple interdependencies in family businesses, a work environment that

promotes open communication and trust may decrease conflict prevalence (Hoelscher, 2014; Kanadli et al., 2020). This also holds true for participative decision-making in small family firms (Eddleston et al., 2008). Further, our study finds that owner-managers perceive less relationship conflict than task conflict (Eddleston et al., 2008; Hoelscher, 2014; Paskewitz & Beck, 2017). Task and relationship conflicts have primarily been studied at the team level, but this study highlights that they can also be investigated at the organizational level in small businesses due to their simple, team-based structures. In line with previous studies (De Wit et al., 2012), we find a higher prevalence of task conflict compared to relationship conflict. There is also a rather strong positive relationship between the conflict types, indicating that task conflict might escalate into relationship conflict.

The lower prevalence of relationship conflict in family firms may indicate a climate of prevention and constructive conflict management (Alvarado-Alvarez et al., 2021; 2020). Alvarado-Alvarez et al. (2021) argue that informal spaces and moments in family firms, such as lunch, dinner, or other social events, are often used to address potential conflict issues and prevent their escalation. Additionally, this lower prevalence might be indicative of the family's climate, cohesion and adaptability, which may hinder the development of relationship conflict (Nosé et al., 2017). This study indicates that there seems to be a spill-over effect from family to firm relations, decreasing relationship conflict within the firm. Alternatively, owner-managers may also have a higher tolerance for conflict to avoid harming family relationships (Pieper et al., 2013), which could contribute to their lowered perception of conflict. When it comes to interpersonal relations, our findings indicate that family businesses may be better places to work than non-family businesses.

Finally, we found that female managers score higher on agreeableness than male managers, which aligns with prior research (Weisberg et al., 2011). Our sample also reveals a significant imbalance with more male than female managers in both types of firms. This observation aligns with the overall underrepresentation of women in management positions in Latin America, where only 9.2 % hold executive positions and 4.2 % serve as CEO (Flabbi et al., 2016).

## 5.2. Practical implications

*Good news.* We notice that conflicts, particularly relationship conflict, seem less prevalent in small family businesses than in non-family businesses. This contradicts the general perception that family businesses are rife with conflicts (Caputo et al., 2019; Frank et al., 2011; Lee & Rogoff, 1996) and thus promotes their quality of work. At least when it comes to conflict climates, the family businesses in our sample seem like favorable places to work.

*Recognition and response to conflict.* This study focuses on the perception of conflict in organizations, which is vital for managers and owner-managers. If they do not focus on their organizations' climates and potential conflicts, issues are most likely to escalate and develop into destructive processes. This can be accomplished through education and training programs emphasizing constructive conflict management, mediation, and peacemaking (Zhang et al., 2020).

*Differentiating task conflict and relationship conflict.* It is key for managers in small businesses to be able to differentiate these two, by focusing on task conflict and preventing relationship conflict (Kozuszniak et al., 2020). Thus, training and education programs that enhance managers' ability to discern these two types of conflict should be essential. As small businesses are characterized by high interdependence, managers must remain vigilant to avoid potential negative spirals due to conflicts.

*Promoting managers' self-awareness and openness.* Our results indicate that open-minded managers tend to perceive less task and relationship conflicts. We thus encourage recruiters to select candidates accordingly, as highly open individuals tend to engage in (early) problem solving behaviors (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020), which may prevent conflicts and/or help de-escalate them. Further, managers displaying neurotic

characteristics should receive support and training to enhance their conflict resolution styles. The BFM can be used as a tool to help design the selection criteria and training programs for managers (Ellinger et al., 2009).

## 5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Several limitations of the present research should be noted. First, this study relied only on managers' self-reported data. This may render the study susceptible to common method bias. Although we followed the suggestions by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to mitigate this (e.g., by ensuring participants' anonymity as well as including control variables and using validated scales), including employee responses could reduce common method variance due to social desirability bias (Fisher & Katz, 2000).

Second, our study did not distinguish between different generations in family businesses and their respective managerial positions. Future research should take this into account by investigating the extent to which generational ownership influences perceptions of conflict in family firms by controlling for specific managerial positions and generation of ownership. This would contribute to a better understanding of family firms' heterogeneity (Boellis et al., 2016; Chua et al., 2012).

Third, we employed a short, validated scale of the Big Five personality traits (Mowen, 2000), given the limited time managers have to fill out surveys (Manshor et al., 2003). This may not cover all the nuances of personality relevant for managers in relation to conflicts and conflict management. Future research could employ more detailed and multifaceted measures or include additional work and management related measures, such as the HEXACO Personality Inventory (HEXACO - PI-R; Lee & Ashton, 2018).

Fourth, we assume that owner-managers are more likely to identify with their firms (Berrone et al., 2012), having strong social ties, and an emotional attachment to perceived conflicts. However, these assumptions were not measured in this study. Future research should measure these factors and explore how they account for differences between family and non-family firms by using a validated socio emotional wealth (SEW) scale (Berrone et al., 2012; Debicki et al., 2016).

Fifth, our study focuses on small family and non-family firms in Ecuador. Latin American culture is characterized as moderately hierarchical, strongly relationship-based, and highly collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001; Wated & Sanchez, 2015). These contexts impact implicit leadership perceptions, and therefore may affect the generalizability of our research findings into other cultural and business contexts.

Sixth, we did not measure family ownership when assessing family versus non-family firms, but rather asked participants to indicate whether family ownership was 50 % or greater, without specifying the exact percentage. Future research should consider incorporating detailed measures, such as the percentage of family ownership, family involvement, and governance mechanisms (Taras et al., 2017) to distinguish between family and non-family firms.

Finally, throughout the survey validation phase, managers expressed concerns and skepticism regarding the negative implications associated with the term "conflict". Particularly in Latin America, this term is linked to sensitive and intense scenarios (see Imbusch et al., 2011; Veltmeyer et al., 2016). To counteract potential biases, the word "conflict" was replaced with "problem" in our surveys. This linguistic adaptation might have contributed to the removal of one item in the task and relationship conflict scales. Future research should address these linguistic nuances.

## 6. Conclusions

Conflicts seem to be detrimental to family business continuity. To support family businesses, this study examined managers' personality traits and the perceptions of task conflict and relationship conflict in small firms in Ecuador, and whether these associations can be explained by firm type. Our results imply that managers' personality traits affect

their perceptions of task and relationship conflicts. We also found that managers' openness related negatively to both types of conflict, and that extraversion related negatively to relationship conflict. Finally, introverted managers in non-family businesses perceived more relationship conflict than those in family businesses.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Dolores Sucozhanay:** Investigation, Supervision. **Martin Euwema:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Maria Bernarda Guerrero Calle:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology,

Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Katalien Bollen:** Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of interest

None.

#### Data availability

The data that have been used are confidential.

#### Appendix A. Scale items

Construct	Items	Factor loading a	AVE b	CR c
<b>Task conflict</b>	We have task related disagreements	.76	.51	.76
	We often disagree about work things	.70		
	How much does this organization have to work through disagreements about varying opinions?	.67		
<b>Relationship conflict</b>	We fight about non work things	.62	.51	.76
	Sometimes, people fight over personal matters	.73		
	How much fighting about personal issues is there in your organization?	.87		
<b>Openness</b>	Imaginative	.75	.61	.82
	Good in finding new solutions	.78		
	Highly creative	.79		
<b>Conscientiousness</b>	Orderly, neat	.65	.44	.71
	Organized	.65		
	Accurate, precise	.68		
<b>Extraversion</b>	Shy	.79	.60	.81
	Bashful when with people	.95		
	Quiet with people	.51		
<b>Agreeableness</b>	Kind to others	.82	.54	.78
	Tender-hearted	.82		
	Sympathetic	.52		
<b>Neuroticism</b>	More moody than others	.54	.45	.71
	Emotions go way up and down	.74		
	More testy than others	.70		

Note:

a Standardized regression weights obtained by R.

b Average variance extracted.

c Construct reliability.

#### Appendix B

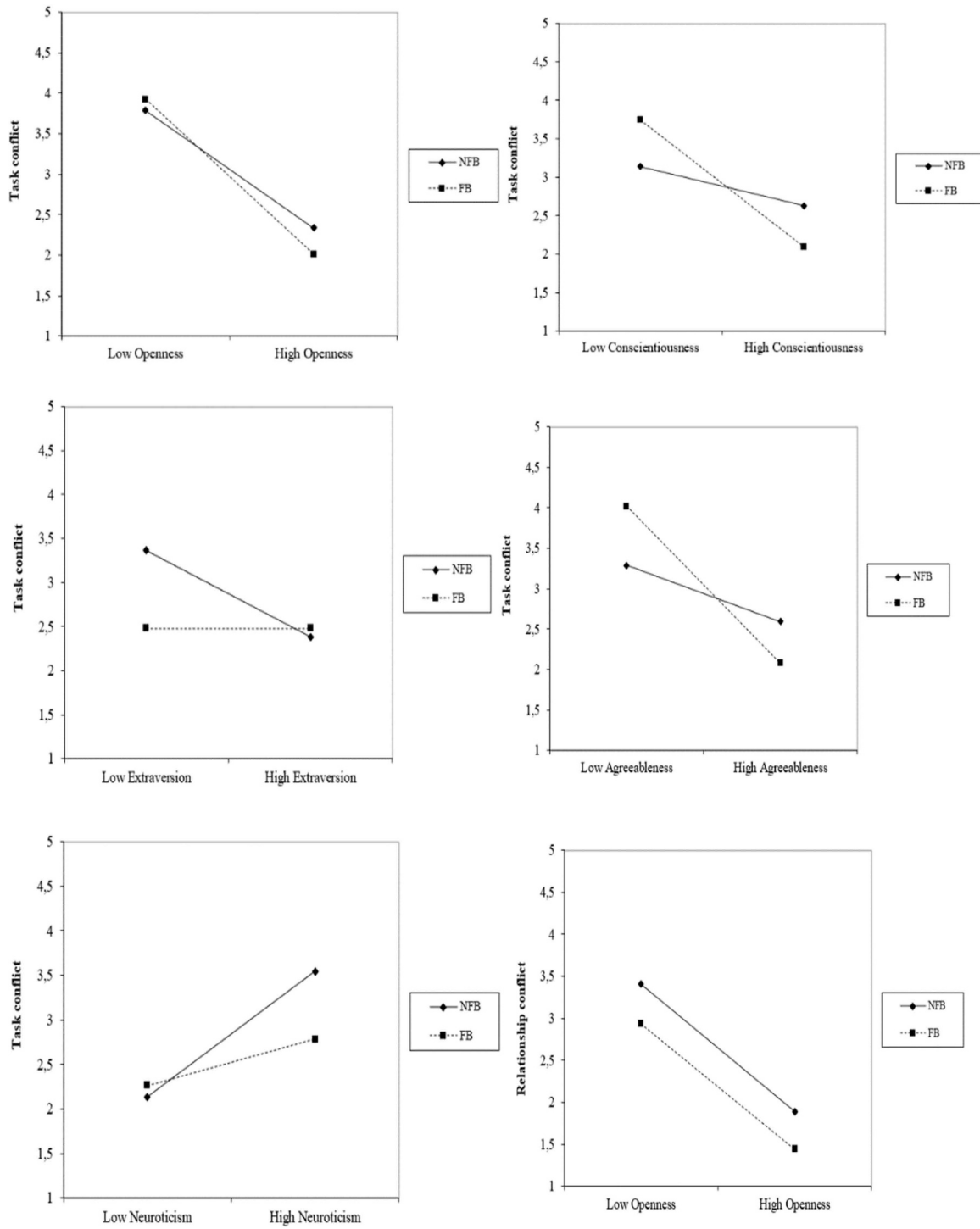


Fig. 3. The moderating effect of firm type on the relations between Big five personality traits, task conflict and relationship conflict.

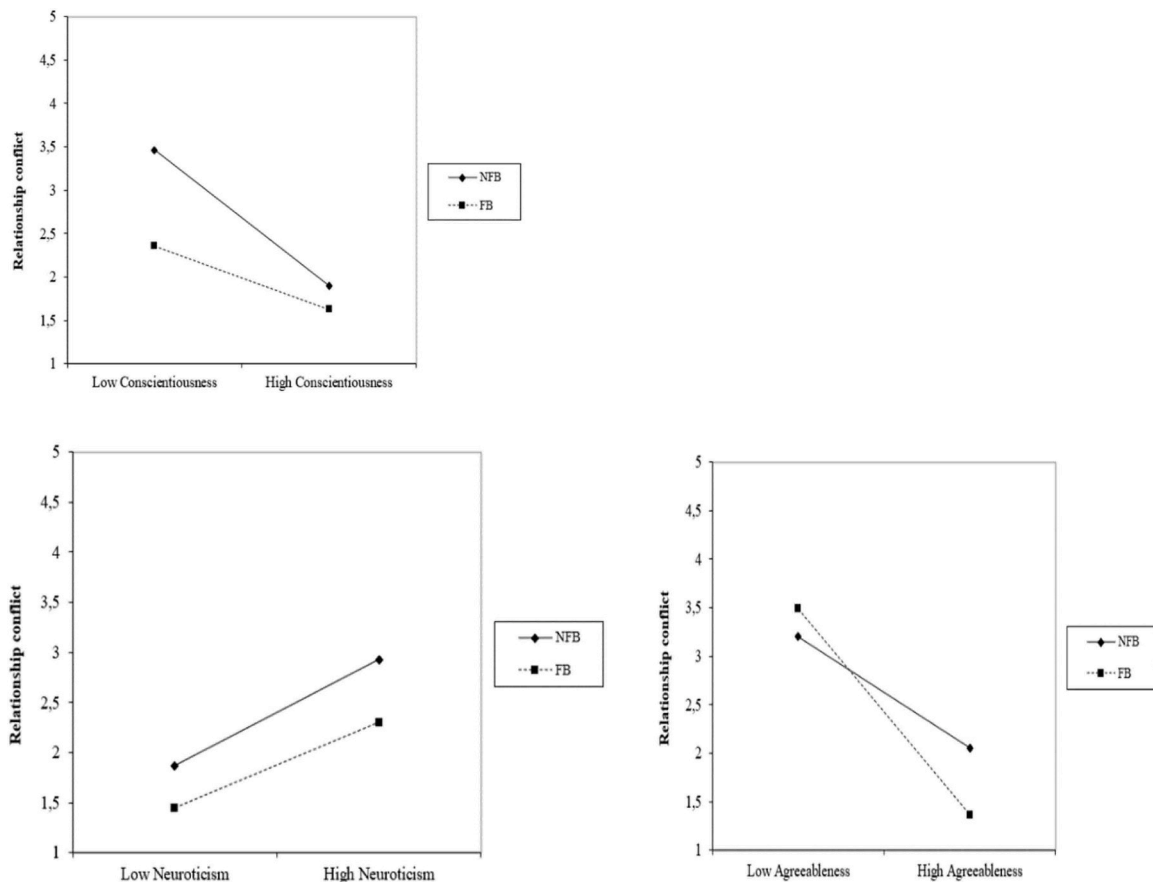


Fig. 3. (continued).

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