Moderating role of employee engagement on conflict–politics relationship

Poonam Mishra
Department of Management, CMR, Bangalore, India, and
Amitabh Deo Kodwani
*Department of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource,
Indian Institute of Management Indore, Indore, India*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between relationship conflict and the perception of organization politics (POP) and the moderating role of employee engagement. The study hypothesizes that the conflict results in the presence of POP only for those employees who are relatively less engaged with the organization. The paper further explores the mediating role of perceived politics between the relationship conflict and job-related outcome variables including openness to diversity, turnover intent and perception of justice. In sum, the authors contend that employee engagement will act as a moderator between relationship conflict and POP, and POP further will act as a mediator between relationship conflict and its job-related outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – A descriptive study was carried on to conduct this research. Data were collected at two different points of time from the employees of two public sector undertakings ($n = 206$). About 80 questionnaires were not returned by the respondents, reducing the sample size to be 126. Of these, 115 were usable, resulting in a 55.83 percent response rate. SEM was employed to test the hypotheses with the help of Smart PLS 3.0. A two-step process was followed to test the hypothesized model. Testing the significance of proposed relationships in the structural model was followed by the evaluation of the measurement model.

Findings – The results of the study highlighted a positive association between the relationship conflict and POP. A moderating effect of employee engagement on relationship conflict and perceived organizational politics (POP) was observed. Further, POP was found to have a positive relationship with the intention to leave and a negative relationship with openness to diversity and perception of justice was observed. POP mediated the relationship between relationship conflict with the intention to leave and the perception of justice.

Research limitations/implications – The very first limitation of the present study is its cross-sectional design. Since the data were gathered from the same respondents, the causal relationships between variables are subject to biases (Bobko and Stone-Romero, 1998). Further, the data were gathered with the help of self-report questionnaires, and the findings of this study might have been influenced by the social desirability response bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Hence, future work should focus on using a combination of sources for data collection. This study also proposes a possible role of emotional intelligence in employee engagement and their POP, which can be tested in future studies.

Practical implications – The study suggests that relationship conflict leads to POP, which eventually results in adverse job-related outcomes. In order to control the negative effects of politics perception, organizations should undertake conflict prevention and conflict management techniques. To further reduce the level of POP, organizations shall take steps to better engage their employees because even when the level of relationship conflict is high, people perceive less politics if they are highly engaged with the organization.

Originality/value – The study is an original work carried out to understand the relationship between relationship conflict and the POP, and the moderating role of employee engagement.

Keywords Turnover intention, Employee engagement, Relationship conflict, Organizational politics

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Organizational politics (OP) is one most important workplace phenomenon that directly or indirectly affects the behavior and attitudes of the employees and is a widely discussed topic at the workplace (Atta and Khan, 2016; Gandz and Murray, 1980). It includes actions that are

inconsistent with accepted organizational norms that are designed to promote self-interest, and are taken without regard, even at the expense of organizational goals or other's well-being (Valle and Witt, 2001). Since the 1990s, the topic has been the focus of research (Vigoda-Gadot and Talmud, 2010). However, the authors have relatively more focused on studying antecedents and consequences of perceived organizational politics (POP) rather than actual OP (Cho and Yang, 2018). While these studies have examined a large number of multi-level antecedents of POP, the conflict which can also be a strong determinant is left out (Ferris *et al.*, 2002). The rationale behind the conflict–politics relationship is that people play political games to maximize their self-interest. While maximizing their self-interest, they threaten the self-interest of others, which results in conflict (Karatepe, 2013). Therefore, conflict is presumed as an essential condition for the emergence of perception of OP (Drorry and Romm, 1990). However, empirically testing the relationship between the two was the focus of very few studies (Haq, 2011). Therefore, this paper focuses on studying the conflict–politics relationship.

What was further missing in the extant literature is the empirical validation of why this relationship exists. Instead of testing the theoretically possible interaction effects, it was assumed that conflict would result in the existence of perception of organizational politics (POP) in every situation. However, we contend that conflict results in the presence of POP for only those employees, who are relatively less engaged with the organization.

Employee engagement has been a topic of research since 1990 when Kahn (1990) published a seminal research on personal engagement. Ever since, the authors have given different perspectives to study this topic. Bailey *et al.* (2017), in their meta-analytical study, provided a synthesis on employee engagement. They have grouped employee engagement definitions under six heads that is, personal role engagement, job engagement, multidimensional engagement, behavioural engagement, engagement as management practice and self-engagement. Out of these six heads, work engagement is the most dominant stream of research. The stream defines engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Vigor reflects one's energy level, readiness to put effort into work and perseverance in difficult situations. Dedication is one's involvement in the work, eventually resulting in inspiration, pride and challenge. Absorption refers to the one's high level of concentration in work (Bailey *et al.*, 2017). Although research on engagement is largely based on the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, the model fails to address issues of workforce diversity and politics at the workplace (Schaufeli, 2014). Therefore, by combining the JD-R model with the diversity theory of homo-social reproduction and political theory of interdependence, we argue that those who belong to in-group get a relatively larger share in organizational resources; consequently, they are relatively more engaged than members of the out-group (Mishra *et al.*, 2016). In reciprocity of the resources, they perceive their organization to be less political (Alfes *et al.*, 2013). Since people's response to any stressor is based on whether they take it as a challenge or hindrance, engaged employees take conflict (stressor) as a challenge, and thus they do not perceive politics in the organizational environment (Kane-Frieder *et al.*, 2013). As highly engaged employees are more persistent in difficult situations and they are ready to take the challenge while being highly involved in their work, even in the phase of the conflict, they may not perceive politics in organization.

Till now, employee engagement has been studied as an outcome of POP. However, on the basis of the above arguments, we propose employee engagement moderating the conflict–politics relationship. This study further proposes that perceived politics will act as a mediator between the conflict- and job-related outcome variables (intention to turnover and perception of justice). The interactions among the constructs proposed in the study have never been examined previously by a single study. Further, previous research has tested the relationships on one to one basis. However, in this paper we have provided a

partial least square structural equations modeling-based model, which allows for a simultaneous test of all the specified relationships.

Therefore, the objective of the current study is to examine the moderating potential of employee engagement on the conflict–POP relationship. The moderation will affect such that, as a result of the existence of a conflict, those who are relatively less engaged with the organization will perceive the organizational environment to be more political. Further, we also examined the mediating role of POP in the relationship of relationship conflict with the intention to turnover and perception of justice.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The JD-R model states that in an organization, the individual's job carries some demands and resources (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Demands refer to the physical and physiological (emotional) efforts that employee has to make in order to perform his/her job. In contrast, job resources refer to the physical, psychological and organizational features of the job that helps the employee in fulfilling the job demands. The model postulates that employees have a higher level of job/personal resources are likely to be engaged (Bozionelos and Singh, 2017). Although the JD-R model is the most widely used model in engagement studies, it operates in a linear equation thereby failing to address irrationality issues like power, politics, workforce diversity and emotions (Bailey *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, in addition to the JD-R model, we use the political theory of interdependence (Pfeffer, 1981), diversity theory of homo-social reproduction (Kanter, 1977) and affective events theory (AET) to explain how conflict results in POP, which then results in unfavorable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Further, the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) is taken as a base to explain how engagement moderates the conflict–politics relationship. The theory of interdependence assumes that the power of an individual is based on the dependence of others on him. The more the other persons are dependent on him, the higher will be his power (Poon, 2003). People are dependent on the one who has control over the distribution of scarce resources. Therefore, the one who has discretion over resources has power. In addition to this, the theory of homo-social reproduction posits that people in organizations get divided into two groups, namely, in-group and out-group. In-group consists of people who are relatively homogeneous to the one who is in power. Thereby, they get a larger share in scarce organizational resources, whereas members of an out-group are kept at a distance and get a relatively lesser share in these resources (Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk Zhou and Gilmore, 1996; Ferris *et al.*, 2002). On receiving fewer job resources and high job demand, out-group gets disengaged and feels conflict against the resource distributor and resource receivers (Ferris *et al.*, 1993). The AET states that organizational environment develops certain emotions, which eventually results in job-related outcomes (Weiss and Beal, 2005). The positive environment creates positive emotions and favorable outcomes. Conversely, a negative environment creates negative emotions and unfavorable outcomes (Wegge *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, we assume conflict as a crucial environmental factor which develops negative emotions like a lack of trust and support, resulting in POP, which then results in unfavorable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Although JD-R predicts a linear relationship between engagement and politics, this paper has proposed a quadratic relationship between the two. The rationale behind a quadratic relationship lies in the transactional theory of stress, which concludes that people's response to a stressor depends on whether they take it as a challenge or hindrance (Jain and Ansari, 2018). People with a high level of emotional intelligence do not develop negative emotions and remain engaged in the adverse environment also because they know how to deal with such situations (Pradhan *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, engaged employees take conflict as a challenge rather than a hindrance (Mehrzi and Singh, 2016). Since they know how to deal

with it, they consider conflict as a natural part of organizational functioning. As a result, they do not perceive politics even in the phase of the conflict. From these theoretical frameworks, hypotheses for this study are developed in the following section.

Organizational politics (OP)

OP is a universal phenomenon which often interferes with organizational decision making (Ferris *et al.*, 2000). Though the management claims making rational decisions, the participants firmly believe that OP mostly influences such decisions (Stokes *et al.*, 2013). While OP plays a significant role in organizational decision making, it was not the focus of research (Vigoda, 2000). In the last three decades, OP has received the considerable attention of researchers for both conceptual and empirical work (Jain and Ansari, 2018).

The authors have followed two approaches to study OP. The first and the old approach (objective approach) studied actual OP. The second and the contemporary approach (which is known as a subjective approach) studied OP regarding people's perception of it (Cho and Yang, 2018). The latter approach is considered to be the most important aspect of studying OP because a behavior may be perceived as political by some and, at the same time, it may be perceived as non-political by others. Thus, to make OP studies more practical and reliable, it is necessary to study it from the point of people's perception, even if it is a misperception of reality (Jain and Ansari, 2018). The authors, following a subjective approach, believed Lewin's (1936) argument that "people respond to their perception of reality, not to reality itself." Similarly, OP should also be studied regarding what individuals contemplate of it rather than what OP actually is. Therefore, in this paper, OP is studied from people's perception regarding it.

Previous research on politics is mostly based on studying its antecedents and consequences proposed by Ferris *et al.* (1989). OP antecedents are categorized at three different levels; organizational level, work-environment level and individual level. Organizational level includes the organization's conditions such as centralization, formalization, hierarchical level and span of control. At work-environment level includes conditions related to the job and the social network at the workplace, such as autonomy, skill variety, feedback and advancement opportunities, whereas the individual level includes employees' dispositional and non-dispositional attributes, such as age, gender, machiavellianism and self-monitoring. The outcomes are classified as psychological consequences, employees' attitude, and real behavior. Psychological outcomes include employee stress and exhaustion, whereas attitudinal outcomes include trust, dissatisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. Behavioral outcomes include tardiness, absenteeism, work neglect and job turnover.

Further, the relationship between POP and the outcome variables was found moderated by perceived control and understanding. It is also argued in the extant literature that POP will result in less unfavorable outcomes if people have control over processes and they understand political games well. The multi-level antecedents and the consequences proposed in the comprehensive model were tested extensively in subsequent research (Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk Zhou and Gilmore, 1996; Ferris, Frink, Galang, Zhou, Kacmar and Howard, 1996; Ferris *et al.*, 1993; Ferris and Judge, 1991; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Vigoda, 2000). Later, Ferris *et al.* (2002) proposed a revised version of the model in which some new elements were added, and a few existing ones were eliminated. At the organizational level, organization size was added, and the span of control was removed. While no element was removed at the work-environment level, career development opportunities, accountability, person organization-fit and involvement were added. Positive and negative affectivity were added as individual-level antecedents. Among consequences, justice, trust, organizational cynicism, job performance and political behavior were added to the actual consequences. The majority of studies where the model was tested concluded that POP is detrimental to organizational effectiveness.

However, in recent years, studies have also started focusing on the positive side of POP. In such studies, rather than considering positive and negative politics as opposite ends of the same continuum, the two are considered as separate dimensions.

Relationship conflict. Research on conflict classifies it at the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. While intrapersonal conflict is equated with role conflict, interpersonal conflict is further classified as task and relationship conflict (Baillien *et al.*, 2015). Although, earlier, these two were studied as the same construct, later studies have distinguished between task conflict and relationship conflict (Yang and Moseholder, 2004). A discontent related to the content of the task is considered as a task conflict, whereas a disagreement of interpersonal nature is referred to as relationship conflict (De Dreu and van Vianen, 2001). The authors have summated that both relationship and task conflict have a different effect on people and job-related outcomes. Previous research studies have shown an inverted "U"-shaped relationship between interpersonal conflict and organizational effectiveness. Later, it was concluded that only task conflict has an inverted "U"-shaped relationship with organizational effectiveness. Relationship conflict is detrimental for the organizational effectiveness in all aspects (De Dreu, 2008). Therefore, organizations must try to maintain a nominal level of task conflict while removing relationship conflicts. However, this aim cannot be easily achieved because the two types are interdependent (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). The interdependence is such that task a conflict will convert into a relationship conflict for only those who score low on an emotional intelligence scale (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002). Since relationship conflict negatively affects organizational effectiveness, the current study focuses only on the relationship aspect of interpersonal conflict.

Relationship conflict and OP
According to the AET, organizational environment and events are determinants of affective responses and these responses directly affect employees' job-related attitude and behavior (Weiss and Beal, 2005). In line with the AET, POP has been determined to be positively related to negative emotions (Rutherford and Kolodinsky, 2008). Since relationship conflict creates a negative organizational environment, which develops negative emotions. Negative emotions, such as a lack of supervisor support and trust, ultimately results in higher POP. Hence, conflict is believed to be an essential condition for the presence of political perception/behavior regardless of its awareness by the parties (Drory and Romm, 1990). Though various researchers have proposed an association between OP and conflict (Ferris *et al.*, 1989), the direct relationship between the two was least tested (Mishra *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we predict that the relationship conflict is positively related to POP:

H1. The relationship conflict will positively influence the POP.

Employee engagement and perception of politics
Employee engagement has been a topic of research for more than two decades. Work engagement is most established and dominant stream of research (Kane-Frieder *et al.*, 2013), which is defined as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74). In line with the widely used theory, JD-R, of occupational role stress and AET, it is argued that the members of in-group remain engaged to the organization on the grounds of getting a relatively higher share in organizational resources (Bailey *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, since members of an out-group do not get a justifiable share in organizational resources, they may get disengaged (Singh, 2018). In the environment of inequitable treatment, employees develop negative emotions and perceive their organizational

environment to be political (Karatepe, 2013). Therefore, a negative relationship between employee engagement and POP is hypothesized:

H2. Employee engagement will negatively influence the POP.

Moderating effect of employee engagement on the association between relationship conflict and POP

Although conflict is proposed to be associated with POP (Haq, 2011), the extant literature shows that moderators can reduce the strength of this relationship (Ferris *et al.*, 2002). We conceptualize that during the conflict, engaged employees perceive lesser politics as compared to disengaged employees. The rationale behind this conceptualization lies in the transactional theory. The theory posits that reaction of a person in a stressful environment will not always be negative. Instead, the reaction depends on whether the employee perceives the critical situation as a challenge or threat. The one who is emotionally intelligent knows how to deal with a difficult situation. Thus, such employees believes critical situation as a challenge (Jain and Ansari, 2018; Pradhan, 2016). Since they know how to cope up in such a critical environment of conflict, they remain engaged with the organization and do not feel politics around.

On the other hand, the one who scores low on the emotional intelligence scale takes conflict as a hindrance or threat. Since such people cannot handle conflict in the workplace, they tend to get disengaged and feel politics in an organizational environment. Therefore, we hypothesize the moderating role of employee engagement on the conflict–politics relationship:

H3. The association between relationship conflict and POP will be moderated by employee engagement such that, in the presence of relationship conflict, highly engaged employees will perceive relatively fewer politics in comparison to less engaged employees.

POP and job-related outcomes

Most of the researchers viewed OP as a workplace activity which generally results in adverse outcomes. As mentioned above, Ferris *et al.* (1989) divided the potential outcomes of POP into psychological outcomes, employees' attitude and actual behavior. They projected a negative association between OP and various favorable outcomes including job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. They projected a positive association with some of the unfavorable outcomes including stress, anxiety, and turnover intent. Some of these relationships were later tested empirically. To extend further, the existing study measures the relationship of OP with some of its consequents (openness to diversity, intention to turnover and perception of justice).

Openness to diversity and perception of politics

Diversified workforce creates a learning organization (Bhadury *et al.*, 2001). However, it has some negative consequences also such as conflicts, distrust and OP. Diversity in general means any attribute that allows a human being to differentiate himself from others (Ferner *et al.*, 2004). People in organizations can diversify on three dimensions, namely, visible dissimilarity, work value dissimilarity and informational dissimilarity (Hobman *et al.*, 2004). Visible dissimilarity includes dissimilarity factors that are visible like gender and age. Work value dissimilarity includes differences in work standards. Informational dissimilarity includes professional characteristics like profession, experience and tenure, etc. Diversity can be studied either as actual diversity or perception of diversity (Bendick *et al.*, 2008). Actual diversity is the level to which people are different from each other, whereas the

perception of diversity is a subjective construct which measures the level to which employees' perceive themselves to be different from others (Harrison *et al.*, 2000). Although both the constructs are highly correlated; however, the effect of perceived diversity is higher on job outcomes than the effect of actual diversity (Bendick *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, this paper considers employees' perception of diversity and not actual diversity. Although diversity brings a list of problems, if the employees' are open to diversity, it can lead to higher performance. Openness to diversity is the degree to which people are willing to work with dissimilar people (Fujimoto *et al.*, 2004). When employees are open to diversity, managing diversity becomes easier. According to Kanter's (1977) homo-social reproduction theory, people in organizations are divided into two groups, namely, in-group and out-group. Those who are relatively homogeneous to decision makers or dominant coalition were termed as "insiders" or member of "in-group," while those who are having a different perspective from the decision maker are termed as out-group. As per Dansereau *et al.*'s (1975) differential assignment approach, the diversified people are deliberately assigned roles and tasks that are either least important or where the likelihood of success is low (Ferris *et al.*, 2002). They are then rated as low performers and evaluated accordingly. On the grounds of low-performance evaluation, they are kept away from promotion and career opportunities (lost opportunities effect). As a result, those who belong to an out-group consider themselves as "lack of workgroup fit" (Kirchmeyer, 1995). Being treated unfairly and inequitably, people may perceive the decision makers as political or their organization to be political (Ferris *et al.*, 2002). Since they perceive their dissimilarity to be the reason for unfair treatment they become close to diversity. Considering the AET, we argue that, since the out-group has a negative experience of working with the diversified workforce, they develop a negative emotion (POP) against it. The negative emotion then results in a negative attitude toward diversity and people become close to diversity. Therefore, a negative effect of POP is hypothesized on openness to diversity:

H4. The POP will negatively influence openness to diversity.

OP and turnover intent
Employee turnover can be studied as actual turnover and intention to turnover. Actual turnover occurs when an employee quits the organization, whereas intentions to turnover are the thoughts an employee have for quitting their job (Harhara *et al.*, 2016). Since intention to leave is the only direct precursor of actual employee turnover, it becomes an essential field of study. To provide an insight into the topic, Hobfoll (1989) propounded the conservation of resources (COR) theory. The theory posits that people are motivated to obtain, retain and accumulate resources because individuals with higher resources have lesser chances of losing resources. Those who have a high level of resources, feel a P-O fit and do not intend to leave the organization (Wheeler *et al.*, 2012).

On the other hand, the theory also suggests three situations that lead to intention to leave (Jin *et al.*, 2016). The first situation is when the employee anticipates a potential loss to existing resources. The second situation is when the employee has lost the resources. Moreover, the third is when they are not able to get appropriate share while the distribution of resources. Considering the AET and COR theories, we propose that the political environment is perceived as a threat to resources which leads to a negative emotion called a P-O misfit (Ferris *et al.*, 2002). On perceiving him/her to be not fit in the organization, the employee intends to depart (Cho and Lewis, 2011). Previous research has also provided unanimous support for politics and intention to leave the relationship (Harris *et al.*, 2005; Vigoda, 2000). Based on the discussion and existing literature, it is predicted that POP will negatively affect employees' intention to leave:

H5. The POP will negatively influence employees' turnover intention.

OP and perception of justice

Organizational justice is referred to as the perception of fairness at the workplace that can be measured in three dimensions, which are; distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice (Byrne, 2015). Distributive justice measures fairness in the distribution of resources. Procedural justice talks about fairness in policies and procedures designed to distribute resources. Interactional justice includes the treatment employees receive during the implementation of policies and procedures. Since procedures establish outcome and a sense of control, the authors have suggested that while considering OP; procedural justice is most relevant (Andrews and Kacmar, 2001). Therefore, among the three dimensions of perception of justice, only procedural justice is undertaken for this study.

According to the relational model of authority, people perceive their organization to be fair when they trust their supervisors or the organization (Tyler and Lind, 1992). Considering the AET, we argue that when people perceive their organizational environment to be political, they feel that decision making in the organization is not rational. As a result, they lose trust and faith in their supervisors. In the form of affective reaction, they perceive their supervisors or the organization to be unjust and unfair. Therefore, a negative relationship between POP and POJ is hypothesized:

H6. The perception of OP will negatively influence the perception of justice.

POP as a mediator between relationship conflict and job-related outcomes

Previous research shows sufficient evidence for mediation of POP on antecedent and consequence relationship (Ferris, Frink, Galang, Zhou, Kacmar and Howard, 1996; Vigoda, 2000). However, the mediation role of POP on the conflict–outcome relationship was least tested (Haq, 2011). Previous studies have highlighted that conflict induces OP (Drory and Romm, 1990), which ultimately results in dysfunctional organizational outcomes (such as intention to leave organization and job stress). On eliminating the link of OP from this chain of relationship, the interpersonal conflict will no longer result in such outcomes (Ferris *et al.*, 2002; Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk Zhou and Gilmore, 1996; Ferris, Frink, Galang, Zhou, Kacmar and Howard, 1996; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992). Therefore, it is hypothesized that POP will mediate the conflict–outcome relationship:

H7. The POP will mediate the relationship between relationship conflict and openness to diversity.

H8. The POP will mediate the relationship between relationship conflict and intention to turnover.

H9. The POP will mediate the relationship between relationship conflict and perception of organizational justice.

3. Proposed research model and hypotheses

The model presents relationship or POP with relationship conflict as its antecedent and three of its consequences (openness to diversity, turnover intent and perception of justice). It further proposes the moderating effect of employee engagement on the conflict–politics relationship. Mediation role of POP is also proposed on the conflict—job outcomes relationship (Figure 1).

Methodology

A descriptive study was carried on to conduct this research. Data were collected from middle-level managerial employees working in various departments of two public
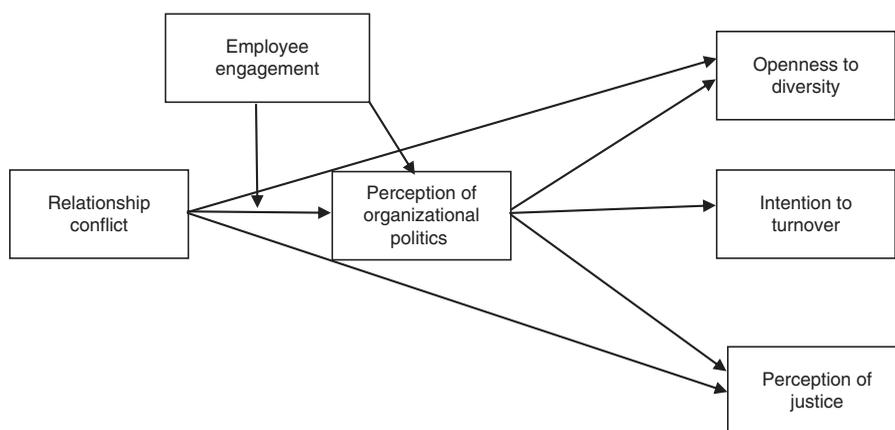
Figure 1.
Hypothesized model

sector undertakings of the petroleum industry in India. The questionnaire was distributed to 206 respondents while they were attending a training program in a premier management institution of India. Data were collected at two different period of time. A temporal gap of 12 days was maintained between the dependent and independent variable. None of the content of research was discussed with the respondents. Two drop boxes were kept in the room. In order to keep the confidentiality of responses, respondents' names were not asked in the questionnaire. About 80 questionnaires were not returned by the respondents, reducing the sample size to be 120. Of these, 115 were usable, resulting in a 55.83 percent response rate. The respondents included 104 male and 11 female employees. The average age was 39 years, ranging from 22 to 59 years. Around 106 were married, 8 were unmarried and 1 was separated. Concerning their educational qualifications, 69 were graduates, 41 were postgraduates, 1 was doctorate and 4 had some other qualifications.

Measures

- POP: a nine-item, five-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) was adopted from Kacmar and Carlson's (1997) POP scale. The scale measured POP on three dimensions, namely, general political behavior, go along and get ahead and pay and promotion policies.

- Relationship conflict: relationship conflict was measured with the help of a five-item, five-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) adapted from a relationship conflict scale developed by Jehn (1995).

- Openness to diversity: openness to diversity was assessed using a six-item, five-point Likert (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) openness to diversity scale developed by Hobman *et al.* (2004)

- Perception of procedural justice: perception of procedural justice was measured using a three-item, five-point Likert (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) procedural justice scale developed by Parker *et al.* (1997).

- Intention to turnover: the turnover intent was measured using a two-item, five-point Likert (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) scale developed by Cropanzano *et al.* (1993).

- Employee engagement: employee engagement was measured with the 12-item, five-point Likert (5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree) scale developed by Shuck *et al.* (2016). The scale included three dimensions, namely, cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement. Each dimension was measured using four items.

4. Data analysis and results

SEM was employed to test the hypotheses with the help of Smart PLS 3.0. A two-step process was followed to test the hypothesized model. Testing the significance of proposed relationships in the structural model was followed by the evaluation of the measurement model.

Evaluation of measurement model
The validity of the measurement model was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis. The instrument was tested for convergent and discriminant validity. In order to ensure convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability was computed. At first, items having a loading of below 0.5 on their respective constructs were eliminated from the model. As a result, one item of perception of justice was eliminated from the final analysis. Bootstrapping was then conducted on 1,000 sub-samples at one-tailed. All remaining loadings were significant ($p < 0.05$). AVE was either very close to or more than the threshold value of 0.5 (Table I). The α values of all constructs ranged from 0.797 to 0.967, and value of composite reliability were in the range from 0.844 to 0.937. All the values of Cronbach's α and composite reliability were found higher than the conventional recommended cut-off value of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2009). Thus, the convergent validity of all the first-order constructs, second-order constructs and the instrument as a whole was confirmed.

Discriminant validity was gauged using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Since the square root of AVE of all the constructs was higher than their inter-construct correlations, discriminant validity was ensured (refer Table I). Cross-loadings of measured variables were also tested to reconfirm discriminant validity. The entire range of measured variables loaded higher on their respective constructs rather than on any other construct; discriminant validity was reconfirmed.

Evaluation of structural model
The relationships among constructs as hypothesized in the model are presented in Figure 2. In order to test the hypothesized relationships, the model was first tested without considering proposed mediation and moderation effects. Thus, the moderating variable,

	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α	EE	ITO	OPD	POJ	POP	RSC
								Fornell–Larcker criterion Correlations			
EE	4.240	0.489	0.554	0.937	0.926	*0.744*					
ITO	2.100	0.985	0.733	0.844	0.967	−0.448*	*0.856*				
OPD	3.772	0.511	0.531	0.871	0.823	0.268*	−0.218*	*0.729*			
POJ	3.595	0.599	0.499	0.849	0.797	0.325*	−0.277*	0.249*	*0.707*		
POP	3.064	0.630	0.409	0.859	0.815	−0.243*	0.312*	−0.291*	−0.304*	*0.639*	
RSC	3.099	0.765	0.631	0.895	0.853	−0.154*	0.230*	−0.215*	0.005	0.540*	*0.795*

Table I.
Results of measurement model evaluation

Notes: EE, employee engagement; ITO, Intention to turnover; OPD, Openness to diversity; POJ, perception of justice; POP, perception of organizational politics; RSC, relationship conflict. The square root of the average variance extracted is highlighted in italics. *p*-values are calculated with bootstrapping method. *Significant at the $p = 0.05$ level
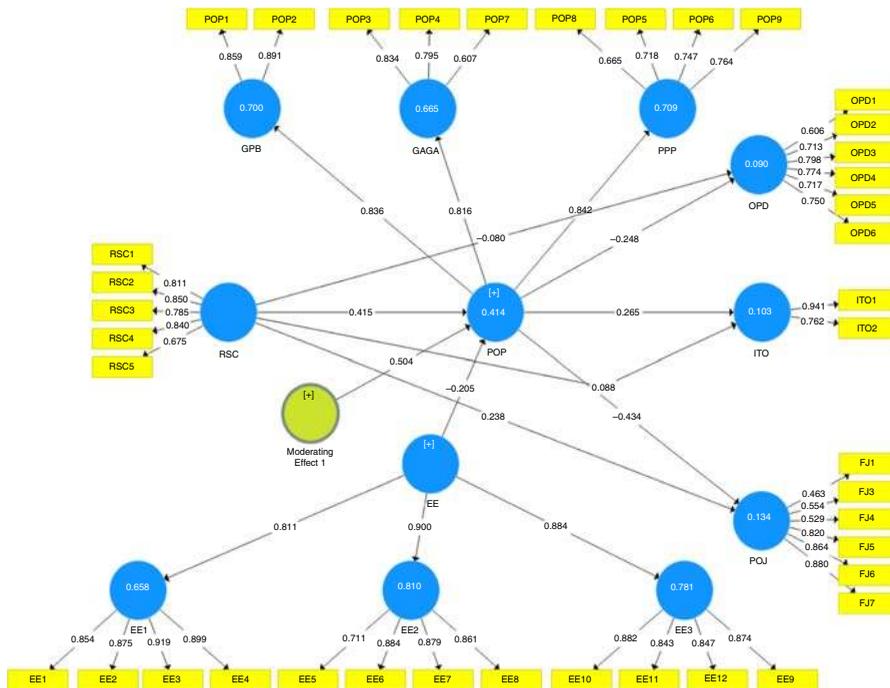
Figure 2.
Measurement and
structural model

direct relationships between relationship conflict and OPD, ITO and POJ were eliminated from the model. Results of this analysis are presented in Table II. The exogenous constructs were first tested for collinearity. The VIF values of RSC and EE were found to be less than the threshold value of 5.

To test the significance of relationships (two-tailed distribution), bootstrap was conducted on 5,000 sub-samples at a 0.05 level of significance. Relationship conflict was positively associated with POP ($\beta = 0.517$, $p = 0.000$), whereas employee engagement was found to be negatively associated with POP ($\beta = -0.164$, $p = 0.044$). Thus, results supported $H1$ and $H2$ that relationship conflict is positively and employee engagement is negatively related to POP. Further, POP showed a negative relationship with turnover intent ($\beta = 0.310$, $R^2 = 0.096$, $P = 0.000$) and positive relationship with openness to diversity ($\beta = -0.293$, $R^2 = 0.086$, $p = 0.000$) and perception of justice ($\beta = -0.318$, $R^2 = 0.101$, $p = 0.000$). The results of the study supported $H4$–$H6$, i.e. POP is positively related to turnover intent and negatively related to openness to diversity and perception of justice.

	VIF	β[a]	R2	p-values[b]*	F^2
RSC → POP	1.024	0.517	0.320	0.000	0.384
EE → POP	1.024	−0.164		0.044	0.039
POP → OPD		−0.293	0.086	0.000	0.094
POP → ITO		0.310	0.096	0.000	0.107
POP → POJ		−0.318	0.101	0.000	0.113

Notes: VIF, Variance inflation factor; EE, employee engagement; ITO, intention to turnover; OPD, openness to diversity; POJ, perception of justice; POP, perception of organizational politics; RSC, relationship conflict. [a]Standardized β; [b]p-values are calculated with bootstrapping method. *Significant at the $p = 0.05$ level

Table II.
Results of evaluation
of structural model

The two predictors together explained 32 percent variance in level of POP. POP has explained 8.6 percent variance in openness to diversity, 9.6 percent variance in intention to turnover and 10.1 percent variance in perception of justice.

Further, F^2 was computed to check whether each exogenous construct has a significant impact on the R^2 value of the endogenous construct (in this case, POP). Relationship conflict was found to be the primary driver of POP with a large effect size ($F^2 = 0.384$). In contrast, employee engagement has a small effect on POP ($F^2 = 0.039$). POP has a small effect on R^2 of all the three consequences, that is, openness to diversity ($F^2 = 0.094$), intention to turnover ($F^2 = 0.107$) and perception of justice ($F^2 = 0.113$).

The moderating effect of employee engagement on the relationship of relationship conflict and POP was tested using a product indicator, mean-centered approach. Results (refer Table III) supported the moderating role of engagement in the relationship between relationship conflict and POP ($\beta = 0.504$, $P = 0.000$), confirming *H3*. The moderation will be such that in the presence of relationship conflict, highly engaged employees will perceive relatively fewer politics in comparison to less engaged employees.

The further mediating role of POP in the relationship between predictors and outcomes was tested. The relationship conflict was first tested with openness to diversity, intention to turnover and perception of justice after eliminating POP from the model. The direct relationship of relationship conflict with openness to diversity and intention to turnover was found to be significant, whereas the direct relationship of relationship conflict with the perception of justice was not significant. Since the direct relationship between predictor and outcome variable is not a necessary condition for the existence of mediation, we carried out mediation test for all the three outcome variables. The hypothesized indirect relationships among the constructs were then tested and were found significant. The direct relationship between relationship conflict and the three outcome constructs was then added to the model and were now found insignificant. These results indicated that POP mediated relationship of relationship conflict with intention to turnover and perception of justice. On the other hand, it does not mediate the relationship between relationship conflict and openness to diversity. Further, to test the final condition of the mediation effect, the significance of indirect effects was also tested (refer to Table IV). The results of significance of indirect path coefficients (Table IV), indirect effects of relationship conflict on intention to turnover (indirect effect = 0.110, $p = 0.008$) and perception of justice (indirect effect = 0.180, $p = 0.002$) were found to be significant. However, the indirect effect of relationship conflict on openness to diversity was insignificant (indirect effect = −0.103, $p = 0.103$).

	VIF	β[a]	R2	p-values[b]	F^2
RSC → POP	1.123	0.415	0.414	0.000*	0.262
EE → POP	1.042	−0.205		0.011*	0.069
MV → POP	1.104	0.504		0.000*	0.167
POP → OPD		−0.248	0.090	0.080	0.048
POP → ITO		0.265	0.103	0.010*	0.055
POP → POJ		−0.434	1.134	0.000*	0.154
RSC → OPD		−0.080	0.090	0.652	0.005
RSC → ITO		0.088	0.103	0.453	0.006
RSC → POJ		0.238	1.134	0.073	0.047

Notes: VIF, Variance inflation factor; EE, Employee engagement; ITO, Intention to turnover; OPD, Openness to diversity; POJ, Perception of justice; POP, Perception of organizational politics; RSC, Relationship conflict; MV, Moderating variable. [a]Standardized β; [b]p-values are computed with the help of bootstrapping method. *Significant at the $p = 0.05$ level

Table III.
Results of mediation and moderation tests

These results supported *H8* and *H9*, that is, POP mediates the relationship between relationship conflict and intention to turnover and perception of justice. *H7*, that is, POP mediating between relationship conflict and openness to diversity, was not supported.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Politics is a universal phenomenon, which is considered to be the key to success in organizations. Although research on antecedents and consequences of POP has been the focus of research since long, relationship conflict, which can be a strong antecedent, was left out (Haq, 2011). Therefore, this study undertakes conflict to be a possible antecedent of POP. The study has also examined three job-related outcomes, namely, openness to diversity, intention to turnover and perception of justice, as consequences of POP. We also contend that the conflict results in emergence of POP only for those employees who are relatively less engaged with the organization. Therefore, the study has further focused on examining the moderating potential of employee engagement on the conflict–POP relationship. At last, it was proposed that perceived politics will mediate the association between relationship conflict and job-related outcomes.

The positive and significant association between conflict and POP support the outcome of Haq's (2011) study, where the conflict–politics relationship was tested empirically for the first time. The study supports the notion that for getting resources, employees are dependent on the one who has control over the distribution of scarce organizational resources (Ferris *et al.*, 2002). Since in-group is given preference while resource distribution, out-group perceives relationship conflict on not receiving an equitable share in these resources. In line with the AET, as a result of the negative environment of conflict, out-group develops negative emotions and perceive politics in the organizational environment (Karatepe, 2013).

A negative impact of employee engagement on the POP was found. The reason for the negative relationship between engagement and politics lies in the JD-R theory which posits that employees get engaged in getting a higher level of resources (Bailey *et al.*, 2017). Since in-group receives a higher share in organizational resources, they get engaged in the organization. While working in an environment where decisions are taken in favors of them, in-group develops positive emotions and do not perceive those decisions to be influenced by OP.

It was proposed and found that in the state of relationship conflict, those who are engaged will perceive fewer politics in comparison to those who are relatively less engaged. This result supports the transactional theory which states that employee's response to a stressful environment is not always negative; rather, it depends on whether the employee takes it as a challenge or stress (Mehrzi and Singh, 2016). Although out-group gets less organizational resources, if they have high emotional intelligence score, they know how to deal with conflict and remain engaged, and, consequently, they do not perceive politics in the organization (Singh, 2010). This is because those who are emotionally intelligent do not

	Indirect effects	*p*-values[a]
RSC → POP → OPD	−0.103	0.103
RSC → POP → ITO	0.110	0.008*
RSC → POP → POJ	−0.180	0.002*

Notes: ITO, intention to turnover; OPD, openness to diversity; POJ, perception of justice; POP, perception of organizational politics; RSC, relationship conflict. [a]*p*-values are calculated using bootstrapping method on a subsample of 1,000. *Significant at the $p = 0.05$ level

Table IV.
Indirect effects

develop negative emotions even when the environment is negative. In the influence of positive emotions, they stay engaged and do not perceive OP.

All three proposed consequences were found to be significantly related to POP. According to results, middle-level employees in government organizations work in a politically charged environment. As a result, they display negative emotions like a lack of trust and justice perception.

In contrast to the previous research, POP is having a small impact on all the undertaken consequences. One possible reason for such a low degree of impact could be the nature of the organization respondents belongs. This study was conducted on employees working in the government sector, having high job security and welfare facilities. For government employees, the possibility of getting a better alternative job is low. Also, they do not prefer to lose job security and other benefits. The risk associated with neglecting work in the public sector is lesser in comparison to the private sector. Therefore, on perceiving politics, rather than physically leaving the organization, they prefer to neglect work (Vigoda, 2000). The longer service tenure of public sector employees could be a possible reason. While working with the same organization for a longer time, employees learn and understand the political environment better, and they then feel a sense of control over political processes. Since they become politically skilled, they know how to deal with it. That is why even after perceiving politics, rather than taking it as a threat; they take it as an opportunity (Ferris *et al.*, 1989; Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk Zhou and Gilmore, 1996; Ferris, Frink, Galang, Zhou, Kacmar and Howard, 1996). They, therefore, do not consider their organization as unjust and also remain open to working with diversified others.

6. Theoretical implications

The study makes various theoretical contributions. First, it has provided an adjunct to previous OP research by testing the proposed relationships simultaneously in a single study. Further, the association between relationship conflict and POP, which is not explored much in previous research, has been studied in this research. Second, employee engagement which is previously tested as either an outcome of POP or moderator in the POP–job outcome relationship is tested here as an antecedent of POP and moderator of the antecedent (conflict)–POP relationship.

Third, irrationality issues like power politics and diversity, which were not taken into account in engagement studies yet, are considered in this study by using the interdependence theory of power and politics and the homo-social reproduction theory of diversity.

7. Practical implications

The study also provides several useful managerial implications pertaining to minimization of relationship conflict and POP while elevating the level of employee engagement. First, the presence of conflict in an environment increases the level of perceived politics. With this realization, it is important that the management should take considerable steps to reduce the level of relationship conflict while maintaining a nominal level of task conflict, which is, to some extent, good for organizational effectiveness. It could be useful to find out the determinants of relationship conflict and design policies to control those determinants. Some of the prominent determinants of relationship conflict studied in previous research are role conflict, unfair treatment, workforce diversity and lack of trust in supervisor and co-workers. Further, to reduce the negative impact of POP on job-related outcomes, steps can be taken to impart political skills among employees, that is, a training program on enhancing political skills which makes employees understand and cope up with the political environment better. Since engaged employees do not react negatively to a negative environment, strategies should be designed to enhance work engagement

among employees. As emotional intelligence makes employees engaged, which cannot be taught in a training session, attention should be paid on emotional intelligence quotient while hiring people. Along with testing knowledge, aptitude, attitude and intelligence quotient, emphasis should also be given on emotional quotient of the candidate while recruiting. Also, new policies and procedures can be designed to promote job engagement among employees. For example, management can reward highly engaged employees and not reward the disengaged ones. This would give a strong message to frontline employees that any additional effort made in favor of the organization will be rewarded by management.

8. Limitations and scope for further research

The very first limitation of the present study is its cross-sectional design. Since the data were gathered from the same respondents, the causal relationships between variables are subject to biases (Bobko and Stone-Romero, 1998). Further, the data were gathered with the help of self-report questionnaires, and the findings of this study might have been influenced by the social desirability response bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Hence, future work should focus on using a combination of sources for data collection. This study also proposes a possible role of emotional intelligence in employee engagement and their POP, which can be tested in future studies.

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Corresponding author

Amitabh Deo Kodwani can be contacted at: amitabhk@iimidr.ac.in