

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Implicit Theories of Relationships in Leadership: Managing Organizational Conflict and Building Follower Bonds

Azar Ghasemi<sup>1</sup>  | Mohammad Mahdi Farahi<sup>2</sup> | Fariborz Rahimnia<sup>3</sup> | Alireza Khorakian<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior Management. Management Department, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran | <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of Management Department, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran | <sup>3</sup>Professor of Management Department, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

**Correspondence:** Azar Ghasemi ([az.ghasemi@mail.um.ac.ir](mailto:az.ghasemi@mail.um.ac.ir))

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## ABSTRACT

The implicit theory of relationships states that implicit relationships depend on individuals' perceptions and attitudes and offers two beliefs, growth and destiny. The purpose of this study is to discover the leadership's implicit theory of relationships in the organization and to investigate the effect of this theory on the conflict management style of organizational leaders. In study 1, the researchers used phenomenological research methods and semistructured interview tools. 26 leaders were interviewed, and their attitudes and implicit thoughts about their relationship with followers were discovered and structured into four types: developmental, selective, functional, and structured theories. In study 2, a quantitative method was used to examine the leadership's implicit theory of relationships of 231 leaders and the impact of their implicit theory on their conflict management style. The results showed that the leaders who had a developmental and structured implicit theory had an agreement conflict management style. Leaders with selective implicit theory had an agreement and attack conflict management style, and leaders with functional implicit theory had an agreement and avoidance conflict management style. This study could expand the multidimensional nature of LITR beyond the growth–destiny framework. Conflict management, as a critical component of the leader's role, helps to explore how implicit theories influence leaders' preferred approach to conflict resolution. Providing a new model that links implicit theories to organizational outcomes and addresses gaps contributes to the growing field of study of relational leadership.

## 1 | Introduction

Leadership dynamics are crucial determinants of both individual and organizational success. Traditional leadership studies have predominantly focused on leaders' observable behaviors and competencies, such as decision-making, communication, and problem-solving. However, an emerging area of research has emphasized leaders' implicit beliefs about relationships and how these beliefs influence their leadership practices and outcomes (Epitropaki et al. 2013; Lord et al. 2020). Among these beliefs, Implicit Theories of Relationships (ITRs)—unconscious beliefs about the nature and development of relationships—have gained prominence in understanding not

only personal relationships (Knee 1998; Franiuk et al. 2004) but also leadership behaviors in organizational contexts (Karbalaee Ali 2022).

This study investigates how leaders' implicit relational beliefs shape their capacity to manage organizational conflict and build relationships with followers. The ability to manage conflict effectively and foster trust and commitment among followers is considered a hallmark of effective leadership (Khorakian and Sharifirad 2019). Yet, there is a dearth of research that explores how leaders' implicit beliefs about relationships—whether relationships are seen as “destined” or “malleable”—impact their conflict management strategies,

emotional regulation, and the development of leader–follower bonds.

This research aims to develop and empirically validate a multidimensional framework of Leadership Implicit Theories of Relationships (LITRs), examining how leaders' underlying relational beliefs influence their conflict management styles and the quality of their relationships with followers. By integrating insights from implicit theories of relationships (ITRs), implicit leadership theories (ILTs), and relational communication research, this study seeks to extend psychological theories of relationships into organizational leadership contexts, offering a novel typology of leader relational cognition and its behavioral consequences. It challenges the binary structure of traditional ITRs by proposing a multidimensional model, extending relational psychology into organizational behavior, and offering a new perspective on how leadership is shaped by cognitive–affective schemas rather than solely by traits or strategies. Through qualitative analysis, it identifies four distinct LITR profiles—developmental, selective, functional, and structured—each defined by unique combinations of beliefs about relational growth vs. destiny, intimacy vs. formality, and person- vs. task-centeredness. Finally, a quantitative survey is used to examine how these LITR profiles predict leaders' preferred conflict management styles (agreement, avoidance, or attack), establishing the behavioral consequences of relational belief systems in organizational leadership.

## 2 | Literature Review

### 2.1 | Implicit Theories of Relationships: A Theoretical Foundation

Implicit Theories of Relationships (ITRs) refer to individuals' unconscious cognitive frameworks regarding the development and maintenance of relationships (Knee 1998; Knee and Petty 2013). Early research on ITRs distinguished two fundamental orientations: *destiny beliefs*, which assert that relationships are either “meant to be” or not, and *growth beliefs*, which emphasize that successful relationships are the result of effort, development, and perseverance over time (Franiuk et al. 2004; Knee et al. 2004).

Research indicates that destiny beliefs often correlate with disengagement during relational challenges, whereas growth beliefs are linked to more resilient and adaptive responses to conflict (Mattingly et al. 2019; Wee 2017). Importantly, ITRs are dynamic and can evolve over time, influenced by experiences, interventions, and social contexts (Don 2020; Burnette and Franiuk 2010).

In organizational psychology, related constructs such as Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) and Implicit Followership Theories (IFTs) have been explored (Epitropaki et al. 2013; Lord et al. 2020). These theories primarily focus on leaders' and followers' beliefs about traits, roles, and behaviors. However, limited attention has been given to how relational beliefs—specifically those related to the flexibility or permanence of

relationships—shape leadership practices. This study addresses this gap by focusing on relational beliefs in the leadership context.

### 2.2 | ITRs In Leadership Contexts

In the domain of leadership, research has shown that leaders' implicit beliefs about relationships influence their perceptions of followers and their own leadership behaviors (Gao and Wu 2019; Kong et al. 2017). Leaders who hold certain beliefs about “ideal” followers interpret follower behavior based on how it aligns with their expectations (Güntner et al. 2021; Karbalaee Ali 2022). Similarly, followers' beliefs about leadership shape their acceptance and trust in leadership styles (Seitz and Owens 2021).

Building on this body of work, the studies posit that leaders' relational ITRs—whether they view relationships as fragile or improvable—profoundly influence not only their perceptions but also their behaviors in conflict management and trust-building (Babarskienė and Gaiduk 2018; Teal 2018). Leaders with growth-oriented beliefs about relationships tend to approach conflict as an opportunity for growth, adapting their strategies to repair and strengthen bonds with followers (Knee et al. 2004; Don 2020).

Cultural contexts significantly shape how implicit relational beliefs manifest in leadership dynamics. For instance, collectivist cultures prioritize relational harmony, interdependence, and community ties, while individualist cultures may accept higher levels of relational volatility and prioritize independence (Carr et al. 2012; Park and John 2018). These cultural dimensions are crucial for understanding how leaders' implicit beliefs about relationships influence follower engagement, trust, and conflict management in different cultural settings (Babarskienė and Gaiduk 2018).

Leaders who view relationships as flexible and improvable are more likely to foster trust and commitment within teams, especially in collectivist cultures where relational stability is highly valued (Krause and Dufner 2020; Don 2020). Additionally, relational beliefs impact followers' perceptions of fairness, care, and value, which in turn influence key outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and team cohesion (Weigel et al. 2016; Freedman et al. 2019).

### 2.3 | Managing Organizational Conflict: A Relational Approach

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of organizational life (Dovala et al. 2018; Hania and Amjad 2016). The way leaders manage conflict—whether they adopt an avoidant, confrontational, or collaborative approach—is influenced by their underlying relational beliefs. Leaders who embrace growth-oriented beliefs about relationships are more likely to perceive conflict as an opportunity for development, rather than as a threat to their authority or the team (Knee et al. 2003; Knee et al. 2004).

Research has also shown that relational ITRs are deeply interconnected with the concept of psychological safety—the shared belief within teams that it is safe to take interpersonal risks (Seitz and Owens 2021). Leaders who endorse growth beliefs contribute to a climate of psychological safety, enabling open communication and constructive conflict resolution (Bartholomaeus and Strelan 2016; Reznik 2015). Studies support the idea that conflict resolution styles emphasizing dialogue and relational repair correlate with growth-oriented implicit theories (Dillow et al. 2008; Wu 2015).

## 2.4 | Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite extensive research on implicit theories of relationships (ITRs) within social and interpersonal psychology, their application in organizational contexts, particularly in leadership, remains significantly underdeveloped. Existing literature has largely examined ITRs in the domain of romantic, familial, or peer relationships, demonstrating how beliefs in relational growth or destiny influence satisfaction, commitment, forgiveness, and conflict resolution (Bartholomaeus and Strelan 2016; Powell et al. 2021). However, the transferability of these constructs to formal, hierarchical, and goal-oriented environments such as organizations has yet to be systematically addressed (Li et al. 2023).

One central gap lies in the limited empirical attention to how ITRs function within leadership behavior, particularly as it relates to interpersonal dynamics and conflict management. While previous studies have linked transformational and empowering leadership styles to constructive conflict resolution (Seitz and Owens 2021), they often overlook the underlying relational schemas that drive such behaviors. Leadership research has traditionally emphasized trait-based or cognitive-strategic models, yet has not fully explored the implicit relational beliefs that may mediate or moderate leaders' behavioral choices in times of conflict (Wang 2023).

Another key limitation in the literature is its narrow focus on the binary model of growth and destiny beliefs without considering how these beliefs interact with unique features of organizational relationships. Unlike personal relationships, workplace interactions often require leaders to simultaneously manage formal, task-centered roles and informal, person-centered dynamics (Teal 2018). The absence of a theoretically integrated model that accounts for these dual relational modalities limits our understanding of how leaders navigate interpersonal challenges. Furthermore, studies examining conflict resolution in organizations tend to focus on surface-level behaviors without accounting for the deep-seated cognitive frameworks, such as ITRs, that may guide relational decision-making (Thomas 1992).

To address these gaps, the present study develops a multi-dimensional framework of Leadership Implicit Theories of Relationships (LITRs) and examines its impact on organizational conflicts, thereby expanding the theoretical reach of ITRs, bridging social and organizational psychology, and introducing a novel lens for understanding leadership behavior on organizational conflicts rooted in implicit relational cognition.

## 3 | Study 1

### 3.1 | Qualitative Study Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

**RQ1:** *What is the leadership's implicit theory of relationships, and what are its dimensions?*

## 4 | Methodology (Study 1)

This qualitative study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al. 2009), a method well-suited for in-depth exploration of individual experiences. IPA allows for a nuanced understanding of how people make sense of their lived experiences (Matuga and Van Der Wal 2015). It was particularly effective in this research as it enabled us to capture leaders' interpretations of implicit relationships within the organizational context.

### 4.1 | Participants and Sampling Strategy

This qualitative phase involved 26 organizational leaders selected through purposeful sampling. The participants included supervisors and managers from diverse departments across multiple organizations, with a minimum of five years of leadership experience. The sample consisted of 75% male and 25% female participants, with an average age of 53 years. Approximately 94% were married, and most were recognized by senior management for their interpersonal and leadership effectiveness. Two recently retired leaders were also included in the sample to capture reflective insights. Participants were identified through nominations by HR departments and executive leaders, and informed consent was obtained before participation. Each participant was assigned a Roman numeral code to preserve confidentiality.

### 4.2 | Data Collection

Data were gathered using in-depth, semistructured interviews, each lasting between 90 and 150 min. Interviews focused on leaders' past experiences with team success and failure, relational dynamics with subordinates, responses to conflict, and personal beliefs about leadership relationships. The questions were designed to encourage reflection on both emotional and cognitive aspects of relationships, and follow-up prompts were used to deepen exploration of implicit beliefs.

### 4.3 | Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to explore how participants make sense of their lived experiences. The IPA approach is particularly suited to uncovering subjective meanings and latent relational schemas. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step method, which included:

1. Immersion in transcripts
2. Extraction of significant statements
3. Formulation of meanings

4. Clustering into emergent themes
5. Construction of an exhaustive description
6. Development of a thematic structure
7. Validation through participant feedback (member-checking) and expert review

Triangulation was applied by cross-referencing interview data with field notes and external expert evaluations. Credibility and dependability were enhanced by engaging multiple researchers in the coding process, conducting peer debriefing, and maintaining a clear audit trail.

#### 4.4 | Preliminary Coding and Thematic Development

Before presenting the theoretical framework, the analysis involved iterative reading and re-reading of the transcripts to identify patterns across cases. The first-level codes were developed inductively, then categorized into broader relational attitudes. Emerging categories were refined through axial coding to reveal three core dimensions of relational belief systems: (1) attitudes toward conflict and continuity, (2) attitudes toward relational purpose, and (3) attitudes toward relational depth.

These dimensions form the conceptual basis of the LITR model presented in the following section.

### 5 | Result (Study 1)

Before presenting the core categories, it is important to note that these results emerged from a rigorous and multistep interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as outlined in the

methodology section. The categories reflect deep patterns in how leaders perceive, experience, and manage relationships in organizational contexts.

In this section, we present the results obtained from qualitative analysis. As mentioned in the first part, the phenomenological method was used to obtain an implicit model of leadership relationships. The discovered model of implicit relationships of leaders that were obtained after interviewing experts and coding can be seen in the framework of Figure 1.

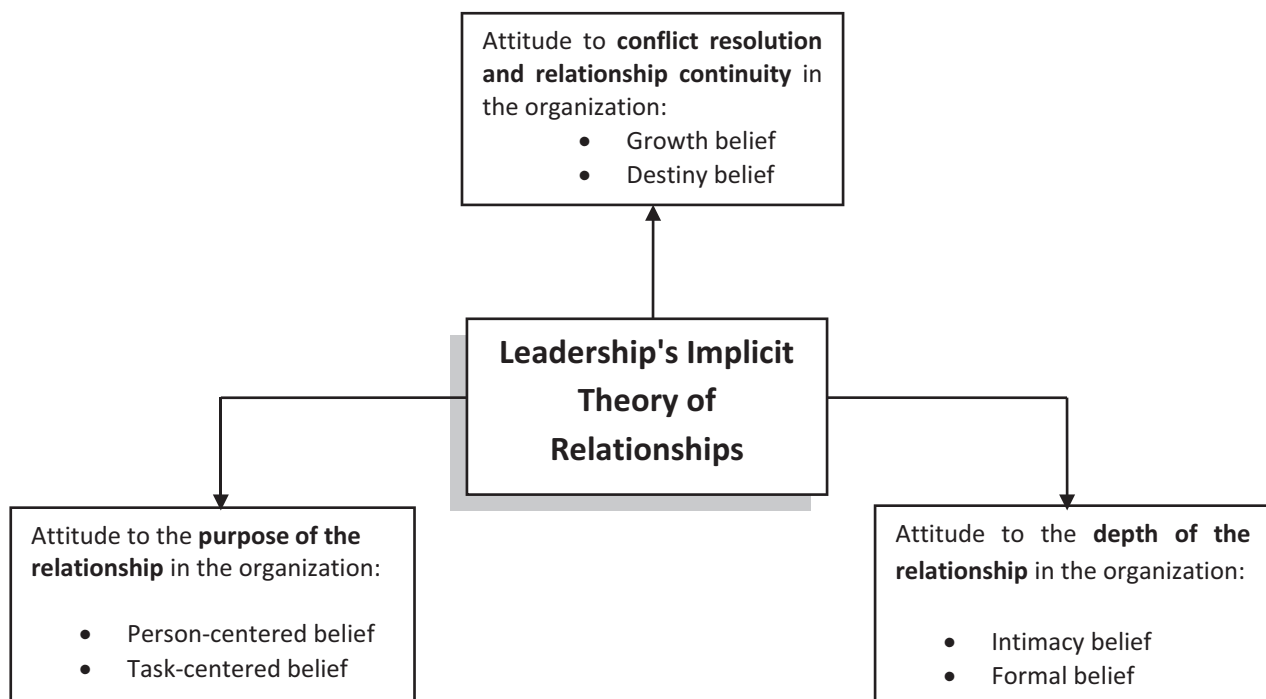
As seen in Figure 1, the results of the interview and coding identify three types of attitudes toward leaders' relationships with followers, including attitude to conflict resolution and relationship continuity, attitude to the purpose of the relationship, and attitude to the depth of the relationship. Each of these includes two beliefs, which will be explained in detail below.

#### 5.1 | RITR1: Attitudes Toward Conflict Resolution and Relationship Continuity (Growth Belief vs. Destiny Belief)

Analysis of the interview data revealed that leaders' attitudes toward conflict resolution and the continuity of relationships fall into two distinct belief systems: growth belief and destiny belief.

Leaders with a **growth belief** emphasize the capacity to connect with individuals who have diverse characteristics, actively engage in resolving conflicts, embrace challenges, and prioritize building long-term relationships. These themes emerged from responses such as:

I can relate to everyone. Our managers understand that people here come from varied backgrounds and



**FIGURE 1** | Conceptual framework of the implicit theory of relationships in organizations developed in the present study.

roles... We have both diploma holders and doctorate holders... We adapt our approach based on the team composition... It's impossible to only work with people of specific characteristics since everyone has unique personal traits.

In contrast, leaders holding a **destiny belief** focus on relating to individuals with specific predetermined characteristics, tend to withdraw from relationships in case of conflict, avoid challenges, and prefer short-term interactions. This perspective was reflected in statements like:

People here are selected based on certain traits before joining... Everyone must meet a defined set of characteristics... When conflict arises, I either replace the person or temporarily disconnect until they realize their mistakes.

## 5.2 | RITR2: Attitudes Toward the Purpose of the Relationship (Person-Oriented Belief vs. Task-Oriented Belief)

The second dimension relates to leaders' beliefs about the fundamental purpose of relationships with followers, categorized as person-oriented or task-oriented beliefs.

Leaders with **person-oriented beliefs** view people as vital to the organization and believe that nurturing personal relationships enhances organizational success. Illustrative quotes include:

People at work are very important to me, and if they are respectful, I support them even if they struggle with their tasks... Some individuals have distinct personalities, and calming them is part of leadership... Paying attention to people's opinions strengthens our relationships... Differences should never harm interpersonal connections because these relationships are paramount.

Conversely, leaders with **task-oriented beliefs** prioritize organizational goals and view relationships mainly through the lens of work performance. Supporting statements include:

Work takes precedence over personal matters; if there's conflict, it's work-related because the organizational goals are crucial... Everything we do must align with organizational objectives rather than personal interests... Our focus is on completing tasks effectively.

## 5.3 | RITR3: Attitudes Toward the Depth of the Relationship (Intimacy Belief vs. Formal Belief)

The third attitude concerns the desired depth of relationships, distinguishing between intimacy and formality.

Leaders endorsing an **intimacy belief** emphasize the value of close, informal connections as essential for lasting relationships, as illustrated by remarks such as:

When we create intimacy, people engage more fully even during breaks, whereas without intimacy, they strictly separate work and rest time... Supervisors must maintain friendly and close relations with their teams.

On the other hand, leaders with a **formal belief** stress adherence to rules and the importance of maintaining formal relationships within the organization. For example:

When employees face issues outside of their duties, I explain that everyone must abide by the same rules... Rules are equal for all, and this consistency supports stable relationships.

According to the results obtained from the qualitative part of this research, which was identified in Figures 1, 3 attitudes and 6 beliefs have been discovered. Based on our research and analysis, we concluded that these six beliefs, according to their nature, can be classified into two spectrums of leadership relationships. By placing these two spectrums at the two ends of the longitudinal and transverse axes, 4 implicit theories of leadership relations were identified. These 4 implicit theories are named according to the nature of the relationships in each section and can be seen in Figure 2.

Therefore, with the emphasis on growth and destiny in the longitudinal axis and the emphasis on the person and the task in the transverse axis, the theoretical model for leadership's implicit theories of relationships will be in Figure 3.

As shown in Figure 3, the implicit relationship theory of leaders was divided into four groups in terms of emphasis on growth and destiny and emphasis on formal and informal relations. These four styles were categorized from LITR1 to LITR4. The characteristics of each category are specified in Table 1.

According to the results, it was found that each of the leaders can be classified into the above four groups according to the type of their implicit relationship.

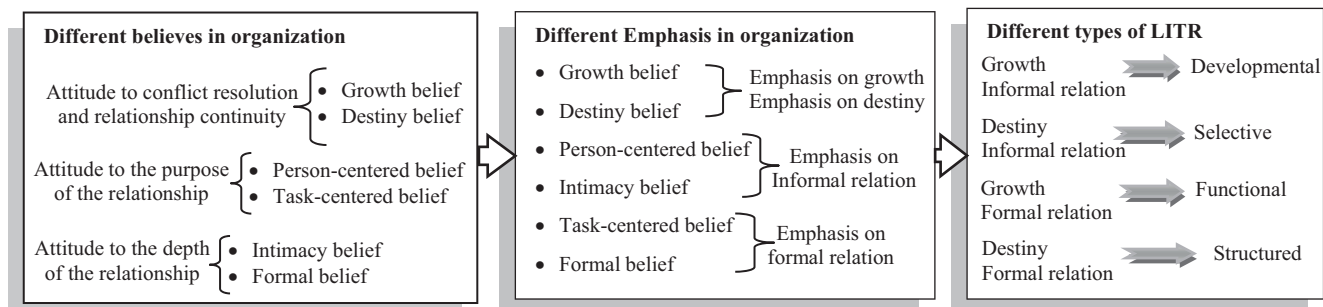
## 6 | Discussion (Study 1)

Based on the findings of this study, three primary attitudes were identified regarding leaders' implicit theories of relationships in organizations.

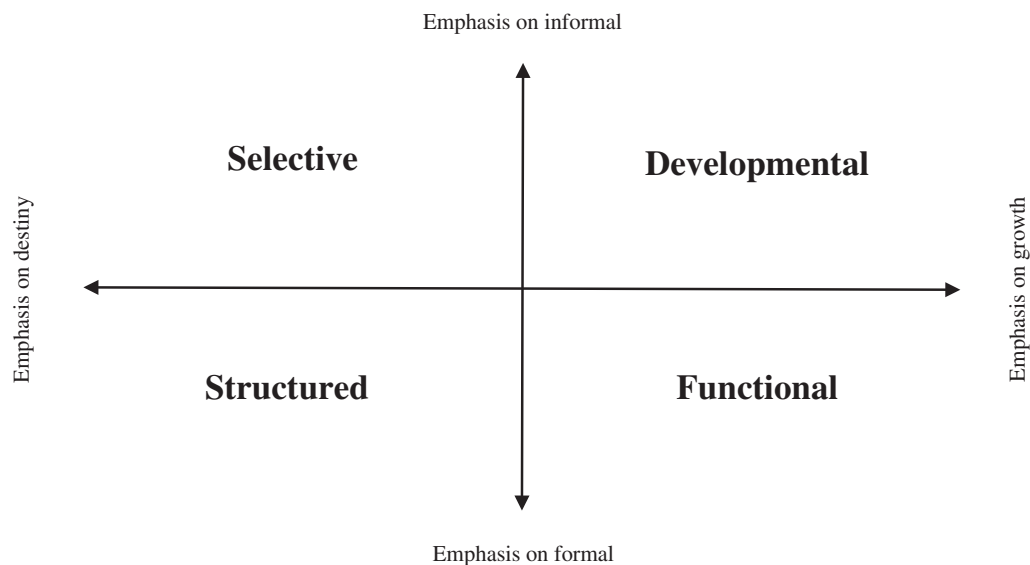
### 1. Attitude Toward Conflict Resolution and Relationship Continuity

This attitude reflects two fundamental beliefs about how conflicts are resolved and relationships maintained within organizations, which ultimately influence the development and strengthening of interpersonal ties. The first belief, referred to as the growth belief, emphasizes actively addressing conflicts, embracing challenges, and fostering long-term relationships.





**FIGURE 2** | Steps to reach the theoretical model developed in the present study.



**FIGURE 3** | LITR model: A theoretical model for leadership's implicit theory of relationship, designed for the present study.

**TABLE 1** | Different types of leadership's implicit theory of relationship.

LITR1	LITR2	LITR3	LITR4
Developmental	Selective	Functional	Structured
Growth & informal	Destiny & informal	Growth & formal	Destiny & formal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resolve conflict</li> <li>Intimacy</li> <li>Pay attention to individual needs</li> <li>Priority of individual development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>initial correct selection</li> <li>Intimacy</li> <li>Pay attention to individual needs</li> <li>Priority of individual development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resolve conflict</li> <li>formal relations attention to work</li> <li>Priority of achieving goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>initial correct selection</li> <li>formal relations attention to work</li> <li>Priority of achieving goals</li> </ul>

The second belief, called the destiny belief, focuses on selecting partners with specific desired characteristics from the out-set and tends to favor ending relationships when conflicts arise, leading to shorter term connections.

These beliefs closely parallel the growth and destiny mindsets documented in prior psychological research (e.g., Freedman et al. 2019; Knee 1998; Knee et al. 2001; Lacey 1976; Powell et al. 2021; Teal 2018; Thompson et al. 2020). Individuals with

a growth belief are open to relating to diverse others, view challenges as opportunities for development, and seek to maintain enduring relationships. Conversely, those with a destiny belief prioritize homogeneity in relationships, avoid challenges, and tend to disengage when conflicts occur.

- **Growth Belief:** Striving to resolve differences and challenges with all individuals leads to stronger and longer lasting interpersonal relationships within the organization.

- **Destiny Belief:** For organizational growth, it is necessary to form relationships with individuals possessing certain characteristics aligned with team and cultural fit, which helps to maintain relationship stability.

Given that these beliefs have been previously observed mainly in psychological contexts, their presence in organizational and leadership settings suggests that interpersonal relationships at work share qualities with family and informal social ties, including emotional closeness and friendship. Thus, leaders with growth beliefs persist through relational challenges, while those with destiny beliefs may choose to withdraw and seek more compatible partners.

## 2. Attitude Toward the Depth of the Relationship

This attitude concerns the desired closeness in organizational relationships and differentiates between two beliefs that influence leadership effectiveness. The intimacy belief emphasizes informal, close relationships as essential for lasting interpersonal bonds, while the formal belief highlights the importance of adhering to rules and maintaining formal structures to sustain relationships.

These two beliefs have not been explicitly addressed in existing psychological or organizational literature and emerge as novel constructs from this study's findings.

- **Intimacy Belief:** Lasting relationships in employee leadership are fostered through the establishment of intimacy and informal connections.
- **Formal Belief:** Enduring relationships require clear frameworks and rules to guide interactions.

Most leaders in the study preferred intimacy beliefs, though some tasks necessitated formal approaches. Notably, leaders who held growth beliefs generally aligned with intimacy beliefs, whereas those with destiny beliefs tended to endorse formal beliefs.

## 3. Attitude Toward the Purpose of the Relationship

This attitude distinguishes two beliefs regarding the fundamental purpose of relationships within the organization. The person-oriented belief holds that relationships flourish when individuals prioritize mutual growth and regard people as the central focus of interaction. The task-oriented belief, on the other hand, asserts that relationships develop effectively when grounded in the completion of organizational tasks, with the task itself as the guiding principle.

These beliefs are also novel contributions of this study, not previously delineated in psychological or leadership literature.

- **Person-Oriented Belief:** Relationships grow when individuals see one another as partners in mutual development, managing relationships by prioritizing the person.
- **Task-Oriented Belief:** Relationships thrive when centered on fulfilling tasks, with actions governed by organizational objectives rather than personal considerations.

Both beliefs were commonly found among leaders; however, the person-oriented belief was more predominant overall. Importantly, leaders with growth and intimacy beliefs tended to endorse person-oriented beliefs, while those with destiny and formal beliefs leaned toward task-oriented perspectives. Although exceptions existed, their low frequency did not alter these overarching patterns.

## 6.1 | Integration and Typology

Further analysis led to grouping these six beliefs into two broader categories: those focused on growth versus destiny, and those emphasizing informal (intimacy) versus formal relationships. These four dimensions subsequently shaped a typology of four leadership implicit theories of relationships (LITR), each with distinct characteristics that differentiate them from one another.

## 7 | Study 2

### 7.1 | Quantitative Study on LITR Typology and Conflict Management Styles

**RQ2:** *In which LITR groups are the studied leaders classified? Does LITR influence leaders' conflict management styles?*

## 8 | Methodology (Study 2)

This second study adopts a quantitative approach to examine the typology of leadership implicit theories of relationships (LITR) and their association with leaders' conflict management styles. The study builds upon the typology developed in Study 1 and tests its applicability and relevance in a broader organizational context.

### 8.1 | Participants

This quantitative study included 231 leaders from various organizations. Participants had different levels of leadership experience but had all led at least one team. The sample consisted of 67% females and 33% males, with 39.5% holding a Ph.D., 21% holding a Master's degree, and 39.5% holding a Bachelor's degree. Experience ranged from less than 10 years (39.5%) to more than 25 years (21%).

### 8.2 | Data Collection

Participants completed an online questionnaire in approximately 30 m. The survey included:

- Demographic information
- 16 two-choice LITR questions
- 15 Likert-scale items on conflict management

All questions were mandatory to ensure data completeness.

### 8.3 | Measures

LITR dimensions were derived from Study 1. The LITR framework includes Growth vs. Destiny orientation: Based on relational beliefs about persistence versus fate in relationships. Formal vs. Informal orientation: Based on interactional focus within organizational roles.

Each of the 16 LITR items presented two choices. Based on response patterns, individuals were classified into one of four LITR groups (Growth–Informal, Growth–Formal, Destiny–Informal, Destiny–Formal).

Adapted from Fonseca's (2021) 22-item scale, a 15-item questionnaire was used to assess three styles: Avoidance, Agreement, and Attack.

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha scores indicated acceptable reliability: 0.706 (Agreement), 0.698 (Attack), and 0.875 (Avoidance).

### 8.4 | Data Analysis

Hierarchical clustering was applied to group leaders based on their LITR profiles. Then, cross-tabulations were used to explore relationships between LITR types and conflict management styles.

This approach enabled us to identify how implicit relational theories inform behavioral tendencies in managing conflict, providing empirical support for the theoretical model developed in Study 1.

## 9 | Result (Study 2)

In this part, we will first analyze the clusters obtained from the first two questionnaires using K-means cluster analysis. The results of the clustering analysis are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

According to the results of Table 2, it is clear that the first 8 questions can be classified into two clusters. Each of these questions has two options, and according to the proximity of each question to value 1 or value 2, these clusters can be named. Clusters close to value 1 indicate the characteristics of growth, and clusters close to value 2 indicate the characteristics of destiny.

According to the results of Table 3, it is clear that the second 8-item questionnaire can also be classified into two clusters. Each of the questions in this section has two options, and according to the proximity of each question to value 1 or value 2, these clusters can be named. Clusters close to value 1 indicate the characteristics of formal relations, and clusters close to value 2 indicate the characteristics of informal relations.

In the next step, the output of the statistical test was extracted from the membership of each case in each cluster. For each case, two memberships have been determined according to the two dimensions of the obtained model. Table 4 shows the output of the classification of cases (leaders) in two-dimensional clusters (4 types of LITR).

**TABLE 2** | Descriptive statistics for the two focus on the LITR variable ( $N=231$ ).

Question	Cluster 1 (Growth)	Cluster 2 (Destiny)	F
Q1	1.17 (0.500)	1.67 (0.483)	3.072
Q2	1.27 (0.483)	1.67 (0.483)	7.364
Q3	1.30 (0.459)	2.00 (0.000)	48.576
Q4	1.30 (0.459)	1.67 (0.483)	12.053
Q5	1.00 (0.000)	1.73 (0.483)	104.091
Q6	1.07 (0.250)	2.00 (0.000)	291.455
Q7	1.37 (0.483)	2.00 (0.000)	35.959
Q8	1.03 (0.180)	1.84 (0.483)	34.414
Total	170	61	—

**TABLE 3** | Descriptive statistics for the two focus on the LITR variable ( $N=231$ ).

Q	Cluster 1 (Formal)	Cluster 2 (Informal)	F
Q9	1.23 (0.497)	1.74 (0.501)	2.160
Q10	1.22 (0.503)	1.62 (0.467)	8.236
Q11	1.21 (0.497)	1.67 (0.409)	36.503
Q12	1.29 (0.454)	1.77 (0.484)	1.735
Q13	1.07 (0.259)	1.83 (0.000)	10.142
Q14	1.14 (0.352)	1.76 (0.366)	0.098
Q15	1.13 (0.497)	1.82 (0.496)	0.013
Q16	1.07 (0.259)	1.85 (0.224)	0.348
Total	98	133	—

After determining the number of people in each type of LITR, the next step was to examine the conflict management styles of these leaders and their relationship with the types of LITR. The conflict management style questionnaire, according to the average answer of each respondent, defines a specific conflict management style for people. Table 5 is obtained by categorizing these styles in each of the LITRs.

From the results of Table 5, it is clear that leaders with developmental and structured LITR use an agreement style to resolve conflicts. Leaders with selective LITR use the attack style and leaders with functional LITR use the avoidance style to resolve conflicts.

### 9.1 | Correlation Test of ITR and Conflict Management

In this part, to measure the impact of ITR on conflict management styles, a correlation test was conducted between these two variables. Since both variables of LITR and conflict management



style are nominal variables, the lambda test is used to check the correlation between these two variables. The results of the lambda test are shown in Table 6.

As shown in Table 5, three distinct values are reported under the Lambda coefficient column, reflecting the relationship between LITR and conflict management (CM). When LITR is treated as the dependent variable predicted by CM, the Lambda value is 0.250, indicating a moderate predictive power. Conversely, when CM is considered the dependent variable predicted by LITR, the Lambda value increases to 0.595, suggesting a stronger predictive relationship. The significance levels associated with these correlations are provided in the approximate significance column.

Additionally, the results include the Goodman and Kruskal tau tests and the uncertainty coefficient test, which assess associations between nominal variables. Their correlation

coefficients are listed in the value column toward the end of Table 5, with corresponding significance levels shown in the final column.

Overall, these statistical results demonstrate a significant association between LITR and conflict management styles. Based on these findings, the conflict management styles characteristic of leaders corresponding to each LITR type are illustrated in Figure 4.

The results of the table show that when the LITR is developmental and structured, the conflict management style used by them is agreement. When the LITR becomes selective, the leader uses an attack style, and when the LITR becomes functional, the leader uses an avoidance style.

## 10 | Discussion (Study 2)

The survey results revealed the presence of four distinct clusters derived from the collected data. These clusters, labeled as a focus on growth, destiny, and formal versus informal relationships, led to the identification of four types of Leadership Implicit Theories of Relationships (LITR). The Developmental LITR, characterized by a focus on growth and informal relationships, was the most prevalent among the leaders studied. Following this, the Functional LITR, which emphasizes growth combined with formal relationships, was the second most frequent type. The Selective LITR (focusing on destiny and informal relationships) and Structured LITR (focusing on destiny

**TABLE 4** | Classification of leaders in LITR (N=231).

<b>Cluster 1 (Number of Case)</b>		
<b>Cluster 2 (Number of Cases)</b>		
	<b>Destiny (2)</b>	<b>Growth (1)</b>
Informal (2)	selective n = 34	Developmental n = 99
Formal (1)	structured n = 27	Functional n = 71

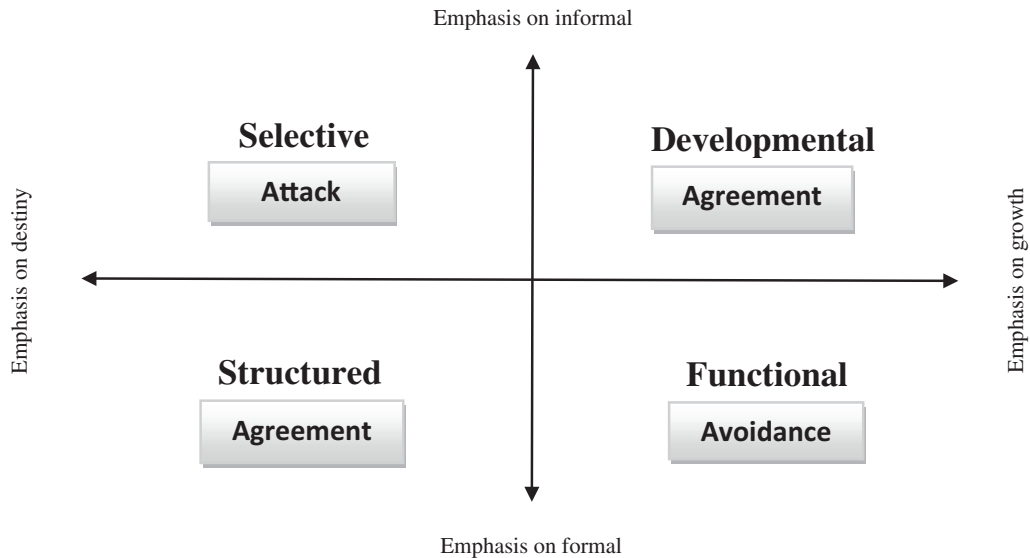
**TABLE 5** | Classification of leaders in LITR (N=231).

<b>Conflict management style type of LITR</b>	<b>Agreement</b>	<b>Avoidance</b>	<b>Attack</b>	<b>sum</b>
Developmental	99	—	—	99
selective	8	—	26	34
Functional	17	54	—	71
structured	27	—	—	27
sum	139	62	30	231

**TABLE 6** | Directional measures.

			<b>Value</b>	<b>Asymptotic Standard Error</b>	<b>Approximate T<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Approximate Significance</b>
Nominal by Nominal	Lambda	Symmetric	0.434	0.094	5.645	0.000
		LITR Dependent	0.250	0.041	5.645	0.000
		CM <sup>a</sup> Dependent	0.595	0.097	4.310	0.000
	Goodman & Kruskal tau	LITR Dependent	0.182	0.016		0.000
		CM Dependent	0.370	0.101		0.000
	Uncertainty Coefficient	Symmetric	0.257	0.041	5.005	0.000
		LITR Dependent	0.186	0.036	5.005	0.000
		CM Dependent	0.290	0.087	3.330	0.000

<sup>a</sup>Conflict management style.



**FIGURE 4** | LITR and appropriate conflict management style (present study).

and formal relationships) were less common but still notable among the participants.

After categorizing leaders based on their LITR type, the study proceeded to examine the conflict management styles of each leader. Conflict management styles were grouped into three main categories: agreement, avoidance, and attack. Each leader was assigned to one of these categories based on their highest average score from the conflict management style questionnaire.

Subsequently, the relationship between leaders' LITR types and their conflict management styles was analyzed using a proportional correlation test appropriate for the variable types. The analysis confirmed a significant correlation between LITR and conflict management style.

In conclusion, the findings suggest a clear association between LITR types and preferred conflict management styles. Leaders with Developmental and Structured LITR predominantly adopt an agreement style in managing conflicts. Those with Functional LITR tend to use avoidance strategies, while leaders with Selective LITR are more likely to employ an attack style in conflict situations.

## 11 | Conclusions

This research introduced and empirically validated a multidimensional model of Leadership Implicit Theories of Relationships (LITR), offering a significant extension of the traditional growth–destiny framework by incorporating additional dimensions of formality and relational purpose. The findings identified four distinct relational profiles among leaders—developmental, functional, structured, and selective—each associated with a specific conflict management style. These profiles reveal how leaders' underlying beliefs shape their interpersonal strategies and ultimately influence organizational dynamics.

### 11.1 | Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it expands the application of implicit theories of relationships (ITRs) from psychology into the organizational leadership domain. Second, it proposes a novel typology (LITR) that integrates beliefs about growth vs. destiny, intimacy vs. formality, and person- vs. task-orientation. Third, it establishes a predictive link between LITR and leaders' preferred conflict resolution strategies (agreement, avoidance, or attack), thus providing a cognitive-affective foundation for understanding leadership behavior.

### 11.2 | Implications for Practice

To enhance the practical utility of these findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. **Leadership Assessment and Development Programs:** Organizations should incorporate LITR assessment tools into leadership training and coaching. For example, a developmental leader who believes in growth and informal relationships can be further supported through training in collaborative problem solving and emotional regulation. In contrast, a structured leader, who values destiny and formality, may benefit from scenario-based training that reinforces constructive communication within rigid systems.
2. **Conflict Resolution Strategy Alignment:** Leaders with different LITR profiles should adopt conflict management strategies that complement their relational beliefs while addressing their limitations. Functional leaders, for example, who tend to avoid conflict due to formal frameworks, can be coached on low-risk dialogue techniques and boundary-setting conversations. Selective leaders—more likely to use attack styles—can be trained to recognize

emotional triggers and practice assertive, not aggressive, communication.

3. Team Composition and Selection Criteria: HR professionals can use LITR profiles to assist in team formation. Structured leaders, who emphasize alignment from the outset, may be more effective in task-oriented teams with defined roles, while developmental leaders thrive in environments requiring flexibility and interpersonal growth. For instance, placing a developmental leader in a startup context can leverage their growth mindset and relationship-building tendencies.
4. Relational Climate Diagnostics: Organizations may implement “relational audits” to assess the implicit beliefs of leadership teams and their alignment with the organizational culture. This insight can guide strategic interventions, for example, identifying when a leader’s formality-oriented approach clashes with a team that values psychological safety and openness.
5. Leader-Follower Compatibility: Understanding both leaders’ and followers’ relational beliefs can support better matching in mentorship, supervision, or project collaboration. A mismatch, such as a destiny-formal leader paired with growth-informal team members, can lead to friction. Awareness and intentional matching can improve trust, cohesion, and performance.

### 11.3 | Future Directions and Limitations

This study opens multiple avenues for future research. Exploring LITR across diverse cultural, generational, and industry contexts can refine its applicability. Additionally, extending this model to follower beliefs and examining the **relational fit** between leaders and their teams may offer new insights into trust formation, team resilience, and leadership effectiveness.

A limitation of this study was the inability to capture situational variation in leadership behavior. Leaders may adapt their relational approach depending on context, hierarchy, or team maturity. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies could provide a more dynamic understanding of how implicit relational beliefs evolve and interact with external factors.

Finally, by developing and validating the LITR model, this study deepens our understanding of how cognitive-affective relational schemas shape leadership behavior. It provides a robust theoretical and practical foundation for improving leader development, team dynamics, and conflict management processes in organizations. Leaders and organizations that recognize and align implicit relational beliefs with leadership practices will be better equipped to foster cohesive, adaptive, and high-performing teams.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. No external funding was received for this research, and the authors have no affiliations with organizations or entities that could be perceived as influencing the findings or interpretations presented in this manuscript. If additional information or clarification is required, the authors are available to provide further details.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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