



The role of trust in buyer–seller conflict management

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ABSTRACT

The present study merges work in the interpersonal relationship and buyer–seller literature to address how trust interacts with attributions to impact the effect of partner communication on conflict resolution perceptions in buyer–seller relationships. Understanding the processes underlying conflict resolution is important given that conflict is inherent in relational exchange and that conflict resolution is related to investments, satisfaction, and commitment. Results of the present research suggest that partner use of editing in communication (the ability to self-censor overreaction to negative behavior) influences conflict resolution efficacy of response through the process of responsibility attribution. Further, the combined influence of attribution of partner blame and trust is important in understanding conflict resolution efficacy of response.

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1. Introduction

While the benefits of collaborative relationships have been rightfully lauded, two concurrent themes have emerged in the literature which hold the potential to contribute to understanding when and how desired relational outcomes will accrue to partners. The first theme relates to the ubiquitousness of conflict and the central role of managing conflict in order to build relational investments, satisfaction, and commitment (c.f., Rosenbloom, 1973; Frazier, 1983; Dant and Schul, 1992; Bantham et al., 2003; Welch and Wilkinson, 2005). The second theme relates to the prominence accorded trust in the buyer–seller relationship literature (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Although the potential benefits of trust have received significant attention in organizational settings, there has been a tendency to emphasize the construct's relevance in social interaction (Gambetta, 1988), and yet there has been significantly less empirical exploration of exactly what role trust plays, particularly in intermediate processes (i.e., conflict resolution) that lead to subsequent positive gains in performance and satisfaction (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001). The question of how the degree of trust in buyer–seller relationships might impact the ability of dyadic partners to effectively manage conflict remains unanswered.

This study addresses that question through an integration of buyer–seller relationship, interpersonal relationship, and trust literatures. Specifically, the study explores the issue of how the level of trust in ongoing buyer–seller relationships affects the communication

behavior-attribution of blame–conflict resolution process. While each of these areas has received attention, this is the first study to examine relationships among all of these constructs at the level of the buyer–seller dyad. Given the ubiquity of conflict and the significance of trust in relational exchange, this would appear to be an important area for marketing researchers and practitioners interested in how to maintain effective collaborative business relationships.

This research aims to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, although the marriage metaphor has played an important role in understanding business relationships (c.f., Dwyer et al., 1987), there have been repeated calls to extend the transfer from marital relationships to buyer–seller relationships as a means of deepening the understanding of relational dynamics (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Tynan, 1997; Celuch et al., 2006). Consistent with this orientation are perspectives emphasizing the focal importance of *interactions among individuals* to understanding how organizations coordinate activities (c.f., Jap, 1999; Tellefsen, 2002; Haytko, 2004). To this end, the study integrates conceptual and empirical work from the interpersonal relationship literature related to attribution, trust, and efficacy perceptions as a means of developing a more nuanced understanding of the cognitive processes implicated in conflict resolution in business relationships.

This work also extends the buyer–seller relationship literature through an exploration of trust as a potential moderator in attribution–response efficacy processes in conflict resolution. Dirks and Ferrin (2001) note that the vast majority of empirical studies devoted to the organizational consequences of trust have examined main effects of the construct. Indeed, trust as a mediator of various relational antecedents and consequences has received impressive support in some studies (c.f., Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Yet the construct has not always worked as predicted in others (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Han and Wilson, 1993;

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Ganesan, 1994) which may point to the possibility that it operates in alternative ways.

The literature on close relationships highlights the importance of efficacy perceptions in conflict and conflict resolution (c.f., Doherty, 1981; Fincham and Bradbury, 1987). However, questions are raised about weaker than expected effects for efficacy perceptions in some studies which point to conceptual and operational issues (Fincham and Bradbury, 1987). This research attempts to address these issues by exploring efficacy perceptions related to outcomes as well as capability, and develop reasoning to support differential results for the types of efficacy perceptions which may help to account for prior results with this construct.

2. Communication behavior and attribution processes

Communication is recognized for its central role in effective buyer–seller relationships and specifically for its role in conflict–conflict management (Assael, 1969; Dwyer et al., 1987; Anderson and Narus, 1990; Helper, 1991; Ellram, 1991; Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Ellram and Hendrick, 1995; Claycomb and Frankwick, 2004). Several specific communication behaviors (i.e., active and nondefensive listening, disclosure, and editing—the ability to self-censor a focus on and overreaction to negative events and behavior) are identified in the buyer–seller literature as important enablers of relational effectiveness (Bantham et al., 2003; Kasouf et al., 2006).

Editing as a communication behavior is important to the present research because the attentional and behavioral responses of partners in conflict often orient to negative events and exchanges which results in negativity spirals that are characteristic of partners managing conflict ineffectively. (Bantham et al., 2003). Specifically, how might editing (or a lack of editing) be implicated in cognitive mechanisms associated with conflict and conflict resolution in buyer–seller relationships?

Attribution theory has been applied extensively to enhance the understanding of the dynamics of close relationships (Fincham, 2001). This framework holds that individuals understand social phenomena by inferring the causes of events and actions. Within the marital literature, two classes of attributions have been distinguished: causal attributions – related to the locus, stability, and globality of the cause of an event; and the more specific responsibility attributions – which focus only on the locus of cause for the event, such as self or partner (Fincham et al., 2000). Work in this literature identifies a saliency bias for active, intense, and negative stimuli in making relational inferences (Kellermann, 1984; Kellermann, 1989). Further, during conflict episodes, there is a tendency to attribute negative behaviors to the relational partner (Bradbury and Fincham, 1990) which, in turn, is implicated in the identified actor–observer bias associated with the tendency to blame the partner for the conflict (Sillars, 1980; Bradbury and Fincham, 1990).

Extending thinking from the interpersonal relationship literature to the buyer–seller relationship context, the expectation is that editing by one's relational partner during conflict (i.e., censoring the focus on the negative and censoring the use of negative communication behavior) will be strongly negatively related to blaming the partner for the conflict. Thus, when a relational partner fails to edit during conflict (i.e., focuses on the negative and uses negative communication behavior) this behavior will directly contribute to blaming the partner for the conflict.

3. The attribution–efficacy model of conflict

A prominent theoretical framework in the interpersonal relationship literature posits that conflict in close relationships is associated with two cognitive processes – attribution and efficacy (Doherty, 1981). In this framework, the attribution process addresses the explanation of the occurrence of the conflict across several dimen-

sions with the most important being the locus of the cause. Later revisions to the framework extend this thinking with responsibility attributions playing a central role (c.f., Fincham, 1985).

The second major component, efficacy processes, includes expectations about conflict resolution activities focusing on beliefs about ability to execute behavior. Further, such beliefs can be oriented toward an individual or the dyad. Efficacy expectations are significant in that they are associated with persistence in attempts to resolve conflict (Doherty, 1981). In summary, the framework posits significant roles for attribution and efficacy processes in the resolution of dyadic conflict and subsequent relationship satisfaction. Overall, the model has received empirical support with efficacy perceptions found to mediate the attributions–satisfaction relationship (c.f., Fincham et al., 2000). While the findings are significant because they place efficacy perceptions related to conflict resolution as immediate antecedents to relational satisfaction, issues are raised about the efficacy construct as well as boundary conditions for effects.

Fincham and Bradbury (1987) note that when dyadic partners are considering requirements to resolve conflicts, they are likely to consider whether possible actions are likely to be effective, and whether they can perform the actions. This distinction between efficacy of response (outcome expectations) and response self-efficacy (capability expectations) is recognized in theories of personal control (Bandura, 1997; Skinner, 1995). Confounding the two types of efficacy perceptions may explain the weak results for efficacy in some prior research (Fincham and Bradbury, 1987).

Synthesizing and transferring from the close relationship literature relevant to communication, attribution, and efficacy, the expectation is that, due to saliency and actor–observer biases, partner editing will be negatively related to the responsibility attribution of blaming the partner for the conflict. Further, based on the attribution–efficacy theory of conflict, attribution of partner blame should mediate the relationship between partner editing and an individual's efficacy perceptions related to conflict resolution. However, based on the distinction between outcome and capability efficacy expectations, mediation is expected for efficacy of response (outcome-related perceptions), but no mediation is expected for response self-efficacy (capability-related perceptions).

Due to the observed saliency of the other dyadic partner in close relational exchange, both in terms of attention to partner behavior and in attribution processes, attribution of partner blame (an external locus of cause) should not be strongly implicated in perceptions of self-behavior oriented to future conflict resolution behavior. That is, the partner's behavior should not impact the *individual's perceived ability to execute* future conflict resolution behaviors. In other words, response self-efficacy perceptions should be independent of the perceived cause of the event given that the self is not attributed as the causal agent in the conflict. However, a very different perspective should hold for efficacy of response (outcome expectations). Attribution of partner blame (an external locus of cause) should mediate the effect of partner editing on efficacy of response perceptions. That is, the blameworthy nature of the partner behavior should be clearly implicated in the individual's behavior to actually address future outcomes – resolution of the conflict. The expectations of outcomes resulting from future behavior aimed at resolving the conflict should be dependent on the perceived cause of the event given that the partner is attributed as the causal agent in the conflict. Based on the preceding discussion, it is hypothesized that in the buyer–seller dyad:

H1. Partner editing will not work through (be mediated by) attribution of partner blame to influence an individual's conflict resolution response self-efficacy (i.e., perceived ability).

H2. Partner editing will work through (be mediated by) attribution of partner blame to influence an individual's conflict resolution efficacy of response (i.e., outcome expectations) (please refer to Fig. 1).

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