



The combined effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on creativity



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ABSTRACT

Studies have consistently found that relationship conflict adversely affects work outcomes, prompting the conclusion that such conflict should be avoided. Challenging this established finding, we propose that relationship conflict has a *positive* effect on creativity when the relational self is salient. Specifically, we hypothesize that relational selves' relationship-focused goal may be frustrated within a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation, triggering cognitive persistence that boosts their creativity by causing them to think in more depth and detail about their conflict. Data from the US (Experiment 1) and Korea (Experiment 2) supported our hypotheses. A subsequent study extended these findings to process conflict (Experiment 3). Our research highlights the overall finding that frustration of goals that are meaningful for individuals promotes their creativity through the mediation of cognitive persistence.

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1. Introduction

Relationship conflict refers to the tension stemming from interpersonal incompatibilities such as clashes of personalities or life values (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Prior work has documented group-level consequences of relationship conflict among team members (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In particular, studies have consistently found that intragroup relationship conflict diminishes team performance and members' satisfaction, prompting the conclusion that such conflict should be avoided (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Moreover, efforts to resolve relationship conflict have been considered futile (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). However, relationship conflict in the workplace is inevitable, because the complexity of most work requires significant interdependence among coworkers (Jehn, 1995) that can lead to clashes of personalities or values. Thus, effective organizational practices should include a means of harnessing relationship conflict. Only a few studies (Lu, Zhou, & Leung, 2011; Rispens, Greer, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2011; Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009) have examined conditions under which relationship conflict can have positive effects on work outcomes. Our research further contributes to filling this gap.

We attempt to investigate for whom, and for what specific work outcomes, relationship conflict has beneficial effects. Individuals' reactions to a conflict may evidently differ (Lu et al., 2011). We suggest that relationship conflict can be leveraged through individual characteristics that can moderate (or reverse) the negative effects of relationship conflict on work outcomes. Thus, unlike previous studies that have mostly focused on the group level, our study examined relationship conflict at the *individual* level. Relationship conflict may be especially problematic for those whose self-definition relates to harmonious relationships, and who place great value on creating such relations. The term *relational self* refers to such individuals (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Compared with others, relational selves' cognition and subsequent work outcomes would be significantly affected by relationship conflict. We applied relational self theory as our theoretical framework for hypothesis construction, because it can generate novel hypotheses that reveal unprecedented consequences of relationship conflict. That is, when relationship conflict is viewed from the perspective of relational self theory, enhanced creativity—defined as the ability to generate novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996)—surprisingly, but logically, follows such conflict. Specifically, a conflictual relationship situation may frustrate the desire of relational selves for a harmonious relationship, triggering their perception of the problematic situation from a new standpoint and generating useful solutions to resolve it. They may think “out of the box,” harnessing their creativity to improve their situation and achieve their relationship-focused goal.

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In sum, our research aims to examine hypotheses derived from relational self theory (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cross et al., 2000), positing that the relational self moderates the effect of relationship conflict on creativity (Experiments 1 and 2). Another objective is to examine whether the same logic, explaining the combined effect of relationship conflict and the relational self on creativity, is generalizable to a different type of conflict (process conflict) and self (the independent self) (Experiment 3).

Our work contributes theoretically to the interactional approach of creativity research by revealing a new causal link between situational (relationship conflict) and personal (relational self) factors and individual creativity. Moreover, it connects and extends organizational behavior research on relationship conflict and relational self theory within social psychology by showing that an unexpected positive work outcome—enhanced creativity—emerges from the combination of relationship conflict and the relational self.

2. Relationship conflict and work outcomes

Relationship conflict is known to generate suboptimal group functioning by evoking negative emotions and hampering intra-group trust (Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Langfred, 2004; Rispens, Greer, & Jehn, 2007). Conflict studies have begun to document situational moderators that attenuate the negative effects of relationship conflict on work outcomes (Lu et al., 2011; Rispens et al., 2011; Tekleab et al., 2009). Specifically, group members with high relational closeness within a conflictual relationship situation strive to maintain good relationships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Accordingly, relationship conflict decreases group-level helping behavior and increases counterproductive work behaviors only in groups that are relationally distant (vs. close) (Rispens et al., 2011). Moreover, relationship conflict was only found to have a negative effect on team cohesion under conditions involving less open discussion and conflict resolution (Tekleab et al., 2009). Other research has shown that the negative effect of relationship conflict on individual-level knowledge-sharing and OCBI (Individual-directed Organizational Citizenship Behaviors) is amplified under a high reward system for relationship-building (i.e., how much employees perceive that good interpersonal relationships are related to promotions), but not under a low reward system (Lu et al., 2011).

Our work extends this evolving research by examining for whom and for what specific work outcomes relationship conflict has beneficial effects. We propose that the relational self moderates the effect of relationship conflict on creativity, and that this effect is mediated by cognitive persistence.

3. Relational self theory

The relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cross et al., 2000) refers to an individual who defines the self in relation to specific or general significant/close others, expressed as “me when I am with my partner or close friends.” Relational selves consider outcomes for others close to them as their own, and greatly value their responsiveness to the needs of these close others. Thus, maintaining harmonious relationships is critical for them. Relational selves also consider interdependence and role responsibility as important factors for their achievements. The relational self is relevant within both interpersonal and group relationships as relational selves emphasize harmonious intragroup relationships featuring strong bonds, solidarity, interdependence, and reciprocity both with significant others and group members (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Lee, Adair, Mannix, & Kim, 2012).

The relational self construct is both trait- and state-based. Individuals may demonstrate culturally or dispositionally high or low levels of relational self. Specifically, women, who are socialized to care for others, tend to be more relational than men (Cross & Madson, 1997). Those with East Asian cultural backgrounds (e.g., Koreans), emphasizing social interdependence, tend to be more relational than those with Western backgrounds (e.g., North Americans), emphasizing autonomy (Lee, Brett, & Park, 2012; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, a state (vs. trait) based relational self can be temporarily activated within a group of individuals, regardless of their pre-existing individual or cultural differences, by asking them to recall a relationship with a specific partner, to define who they are in terms of close relationships, or to think about their role as a spouse, partner, friend, or family member (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). That is, although disposition, gender, and culture influence an individual's level of “relational-ness,” the relational self exists in everyone, because all of us have memories of relationships with some significant others. A strong situational stimulus (e.g., experimental priming) can foster temporary salience of individuals' relational selves—regardless of their general disposition—and unconsciously influence their cognition, motivation, and behavior (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006).

Individuals with high trait-based levels of relational self, or whose state-based relational self is activated, are highly committed to pursuing their relationship-focused goal, that is, building and maintaining harmonious relationships with close others. Their cognition and motivation are significantly influenced by the pursuit of this goal and its frustration (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2000), including in relation to group-based relationship conflict. Thus, their cognitive processing of the conflict situation, and their motivation to fulfill their frustrated relationship-focused goal, would be significantly affected by relationship conflict.

Pursuit of a relationship-focused goal is a unique characteristic of the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2000). By contrast, the independent self is represented by individuals with an autonomy-focused goal who define the self as being self-reliant and separate from others. They consider their identities as autonomous and distinct from those of other individuals or group members (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals with high trait-based levels of independent self, or whose state-based independent self is activated, place great value on pursuing their autonomy-focused goal (Shweder & Bourne, 1982). In our study, the independent self serves as a comparative control condition for the relational self (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). Because building and maintaining a harmonious relationship is the primary goal of relational (vs. independent) selves, relationship conflict (frustration of a relationship-focused goal) should affect cognitive processing and creativity when the relational self, but not the independent self, is salient.

4. Effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on cognitive persistence

Relational self theory emphasizes the persistence of relational selves in achieving their relationship-focused goal (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006). Thus, relational selves should demonstrate persistence in their thinking related to frustration of their relationship-focused goal and its achievement. As such, we predict that a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation will have a more positive effect on cognitive persistence—defined as concerted efforts and perseverance related to thorough and in-depth thinking or elaborative cognitive processing (De Dreu,

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