Preface

Task conflict, information processing, and decision-making: The damaging effect of relationship conflict

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ABSTRACT

A popular theoretical assumption holds that task-related disagreements stimulate critical thinking, and thus may improve group decision making. Two recent meta-analyses showed, however, that task conflict can have a positive effect, a negative effect, or no effect at all on decision-making quality (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). In two studies, we built upon the suggestion of both meta-analyses that the presence of relationship conflict determines whether a task conflict is positively or negatively related to decision making. We hypothesized and found that the level of perceived relationship conflict during task conflict (Study 1), and the actual presence (vs. absence) of relationship conflict during task conflict (Study 2), increased group members' rigidity in holding onto suboptimal initial preferences during decision making and thus led to poor decisions. In both studies the effect of relationship conflict on decision making was mediated by biased use of information.

Introduction

Many researchers and practitioners have argued and found that task-related disagreements can stimulate critical thinking, and thus may improve group decision making (e.g., Amason, 1996; Deutsch, 1973; Jehn, 1995; Nemeth, 1995; Schulz-Hardt, Brodbeck, Mojzisch, Kerschreiter, & Frey, 2006). In contrast to these findings, two meta-analyses of the intragroup conflict literature found no support for an overall positive association between task conflict (disagreements that follow from different task-related viewpoints) and group performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). Although De Dreu and Weingart's initial meta-analysis of 30 studies on intragroup conflict even showed an overall negative association between task conflict and group performance, a more recent meta-analysis of 116 studies by De Wit, Greer, et al. (2012) showed that overall, the association between task conflict and group performance is neither negative nor positive. Moreover, De Wit et al.'s results showed that the association between task conflict and group performance depends on moderating factors such as the association between task conflict and relationship conflict (disagreements that arise from interpersonal incompatibilities and include affective elements such as feeling friction and tension; Jehn, 1994). More specifically, in line with earlier findings by De Dreu and Weingart, the findings of De Wit et al. showed that task conflict and group performance were more positively related among studies where the association between task and relationship conflict was relatively weak rather than strong.

These results suggest that groups are more likely to benefit from a task conflict when it occurs in the absence (vs. presence) of a relationship conflict (e.g., Shaw et al., 2011). Yet meta-analyses can only suggest inferences at the study level, not at the group or individual level, and so the two meta-analyses could not test this hypothesis directly, nor could they investigate the processes that may underlie the damaging effect of relationship conflict (cf. Lau & Cobb, 2010). To fill this void, we present here two studies of how relationship conflict impairs the link between task conflict and group decision-making. We propose that the presence of relationship conflict during a task conflict has two important consequences. First, it makes group members more likely to rigidly retain an initially preferred decision alternative. Second, it makes group members process information in a biased manner, using their own information during decision making, rather than the information they could (or do) receive from other group members.

By examining the damaging effect of relationship conflict on the linkages among task conflict, information processing, and decision making, our research clarifies one of the circumstances that may help or hinder the potential beneficial effect of task conflict on group performance (e.g., Behfar & Thompson, 2007; De Dreu, 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). In addition, it extends experimental research on task conflict and group

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decision making, which so far has neglected to examine the role of relationship conflict (e.g., Scholten, Van Knippenberg, Nijstad, & De Dreu, 2007; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006). Furthermore, our research extends correlational research on the consequences of task and relationship conflict (e.g., Jehn, 1995) by experimentally inducing both task and relationship conflict.

Conflict and rigidity in decision making

When group members work toward a common goal (e.g., designing a new product, or maximizing the return on investment), a task conflict may arise when members have diverging task-related viewpoints. Our research focuses on two different reasons why task conflict and relationship conflict can co-occur. First, there may be misinterpretations of a task conflict as a relationship conflict. This can happen when disagreement about a task is taken too personally, causing group members to feel that they also disagree on a more personal level. Second, an unrelated relationship conflict can arise during a task conflict, due to disagreements about diverging political or artistic preferences, or from incompatible personalities. We propose that in both cases, the presence of relationship conflict is likely to cause increased rigidity during a task conflict.

Task conflicts are easily misinterpreted as relationship conflicts because task-related viewpoints often become strongly intertwined with group members' self-views, and people quickly develop feelings of ownership over their viewpoints (e.g., De Dreu & Van Knippenberg, 2005). Self-verification theory suggests that scrutiny and/or rejection of task-related viewpoints can seem like a negative assessment of the self (e.g., Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). Hence, during task conflict, group members may feel that they are being criticized at a more personal level. As a result, task-related debates can be perceived as personal attacks and misinterpreted as relationship conflicts (e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981; Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Torrance, 1957; Yang & Mossholder, 2004).

This misinterpretation of a task conflict as a relationship conflict is likely to cause counterproductive cognitions and behaviors (Simons & Peterson, 2000). In response to attacks onto their self-views, individuals often become defensive (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) and make a shift from a cooperative mindset towards a more competitive mindset (De Dreu & Van Knippenberg, 2005). Although competitive mindsets may assist group members in protecting and maintaining their self-concepts, they often come at the expense of finding a mutually agreeable solution (e.g., Deutsch, 1973). More specifically, competitive mindsets may lead

to an escalation of commitment and even positional bargaining, in which parties argue for a certain task-related viewpoint as a goal in itself, regardless of any underlying interests (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Relationship conflicts that are not directly related to a task conflict, but instead arise independently from that task conflict, are likely to cause rigidity as well. When debates about more personal matters create friction, negative emotions, and interpersonal animosity (all the ingredients of a relationship conflict), these problems can easily spill over to determine how group members react to a task-related debate. The presence of a relationship conflict, for instance, may encourage hostile interpretations of task-related viewpoints, thereby creating 'a self-fulfilling prophecy of mutual hostility and conflict escalation' (Simons & Peterson, 2000, p. 104). Hence, instead of approaching a task-related debate with an open-mind, group members may become more competitive during a task conflict and reduce their willingness to consider and use the viewpoints of their fellow group members (e.g., Janssen, Van De Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999).

Indeed, ample research on dyadic and group conflict suggests that competitive mindsets can lead to rigidity in the form of distributive bargaining, derogation of counterparts, and a reluctance to disconfirm initial preferences (De Dreu, 2008; De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Tjosvold, 1998; Toma & Butera, 2009). Given all this, we propose that during group decision-making, group members are more likely to rigidly hold onto their initial opinions when they encounter a task conflict in the presence (compared to the absence) of a relationship conflict (Hypothesis 1).

Conflict and biases in information processing

As shown in Fig. 1, one possible process through which group members can become more rigid in holding onto their initial opinions, is that group members process information in a more biased manner when they encounter a task conflict in the presence of relationship conflict (e.g., Janssen et al., 1999). For example, relationship conflict may cause group members to focus on information that they possess themselves and that supports their initial viewpoint, rather than on information that they receive from other group members and that may possibly be inconsistent with their own viewpoint. As a result of this biased information processing, group members may be less likely to doubt their own initially preferred decisions and therefore hold onto these initial decisions (e.g., Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojzisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007).
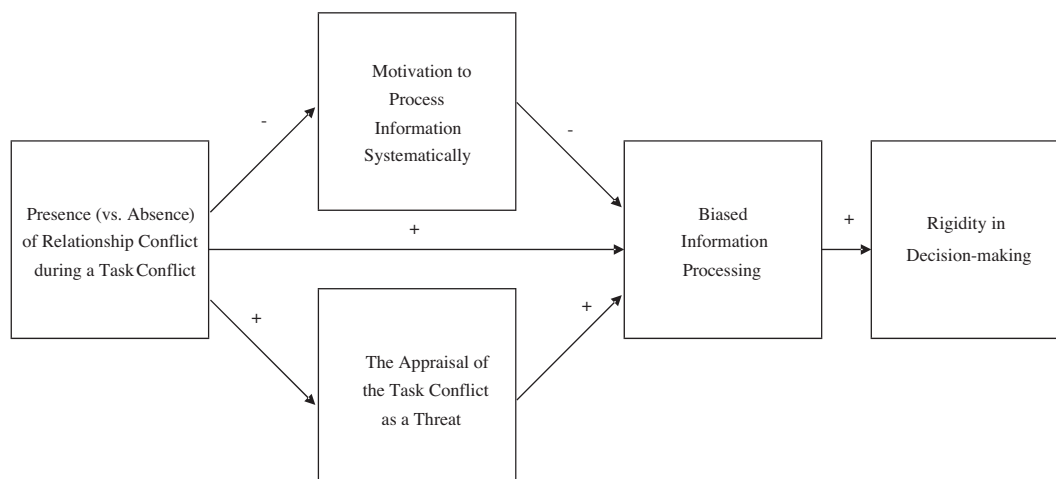

Fig. 1. Effects of the presence (vs. absence) of a relationship conflict during a task conflict on information processing and decision-making.