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Reports

Exhausting or exhilarating? Conflict as threat to interests, relationships and identities

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ABSTRACT

Some conflicts are experienced as depleting and exhausting whereas others are experienced as stimulating and invigorating. We explored the possibility that the focus of perceived threat in conflict determines whether it produces taxing stress or vitalizing arousal. Studies 1 and 2 established that attending to threats to interests, relationships, and identities during interpersonal conflict differentially relates to motivational goals, empathy and perspective-taking, femininity, and a collectivistic self-construal. Study 2 also found that perceived threats to relationships are associated with lower challenge appraisals and energy mobilization. Studies 3 and 4 experimentally manipulated threats to different targets and demonstrated causal effects of threat perceptions on self-reported energy mobilization and the consumption of comfort foods. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that conflicts which threaten relationships are experienced as significantly more depleting than conflicts that threaten either tangible interests or elements of individuals' identities, and explain when, why and for whom conflict is exhausting.

Introduction

Conflicts can be stressful and exhausting. Trapped in a lingering marital dispute or bogged down in a relationship conflict at work can lead to a depleted self and frazzled nerves. Consistent with this view, a recent review of the literature found evidence for "positive and moderate correlations between conflict at work and anxiety and frustration, between conflict at work and physical complaints, and between conflict at work and the exhaustion dimension of burnout" (De Dreu, 2008; p. 13). However, conflicts can also be activating and invigorating. Athletes often experience a surge of energy during competitions and many find negotiations to be invigorating. Consistent with this view, Deutsch (1973, pp. 8–9) proposed that conflict "prevents stagnation, it stimulates interest and curiosity… it is the root of personal and social change. Conflict is often part of the process of testing and assessing oneself and, as such, may be highly enjoyable as one experiences the pleasure of the full and active use of one's capacities". Clearly, conflicts can sometimes produce taxing stress and at other times vitalizing arousal.

The current research tests the novel hypothesis that whether conflict exhausts or energizes depends on what is perceived to be threatened in conflict: tangible interests, social relationships, or elements of one's identity. The observation that conflict is inherently associated with perceptions of threat dates back to Maslow, who viewed conflict as emanating from "the direct deprivation, or thwarting, or danger to the basic needs" (1943a, p. 84). More recent frameworks have similarly called attention to the pivotal role that perceptions of threat play in various conflicts within as well as between individuals and groups (Berkowitz, 1993; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). We propose that whether people perceive a conflict to pose a threat to their interests, relationships, or identities is a key differentiator for when conflict exhausts versus energizes.

In the current research, our first studies empirically establish the conceptual distinction between perceived threats to interests, relationships and identities in interpersonal conflict. Specifically, we demonstrate that the tendencies to attend to threats to interests, relationships and identities during interpersonal conflict differentially relate to stable individual differences in personal value priorities (Schwartz, 1992), interpersonal responsiveness (Davis, 1983), femininity–masculinity (Bem, 1981), and individualism–collectivism (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). We then use both correlational and experimental designs to explore whether perceived threats to these different targets determine the extent to which individuals experience their conflicts as taxing and depleting or as activating and energizing. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that conflicts that threaten relationships are experienced as significantly more depleting and exhausting than conflicts that threaten either tangible interests or elements of individuals' identities.

Interests, relationships, and identities as distinct concerns in conflict

We define interpersonal conflict as a state of actual or perceived incompatibility between two or more individuals that poses a threat

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to a valued end (Jehn, 1995; Schelling, 1980). We define threat as the perception of impending negative or harmful consequences (Staw, Sanderlands, & Dutton, 1981). Thus, we argue that an interpersonal situation involving incompatibility between individuals in goals, opinions, or any other valued dimension must evoke at least a minimal amount of threat in an individual to qualify as a conflict. For example, a junior faculty member publically disagreeing with a senior faculty member would only qualify as a conflict if one or both of them perceived that this situation posed a threat to their tangible interests (e.g., getting tenure), social relationships (e.g., with other colleagues), or important identities (e.g., being considered a rigorous scholar).

As this example illustrates, the threatened target can be a tangible interest, a social relationship, or an element of one's identity. Social–psychological theories suggest that individuals and groups engage in three broad tasks: "protecting and promoting their interests, establishing and maintaining their relationships, and affirming and expressing their identities" (Kelman, 2006, p. 24). The theoretical distinction between interests, relationships, and identities recurs in one form or the other in various theories, including theories of social influence (Kelman, 1961), basic human needs (Maslow, 1943b), leadership (Howell & Shamir, 2005; Judge & Piccolo, 2004) and organizational commitment (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993).

The theoretical distinction between interests, relationships, and identities recurs also in the conflict literature. Research on intergroup conflict distinguishes threats to tangible interests (e.g., safety, property), social relations (e.g., trust, reciprocity), and personal and social identities (e.g., values, ideology; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Riek et al., 2006). Negotiation researchers similarly distinguish interest-based negotiations (Bazerman & Neale, 1992; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), relational forms of negotiating (Curhan, Neale, Ross, & Rosencranz-Engelmann, 2008; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O'Brien, 2006), and negotiations pertaining to valued identities (i.e., beliefs and ideologies: Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Wade-Benzoni et al., 2002). Recent research on subjective value in negotiation, in particular, has demonstrated that negotiators are motivated to protect their interests, develop positive relationships, and affirm their identities (Curhan, Elfenbein, & Kilduff, 2009; Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006). Following these theoretical frameworks, we distinguish interpersonal conflicts in this work based on whether they threaten primarily tangible interests, social relationships, or elements of individuals' identities.[1]

Antecedents and correlates of perceived threats to interests, relationships, and identities

Although people care about their material interests, social relationships, and identities, they do not always attend to these concerns equally. For instance, cultural collectivism and femininity have been identified in the negotiation literature as two critical variables that increase the saliency of relational concerns in conflict (Brett, 2007; Gelfand et al., 2006). Greater relational concerns, in turn, have been associated with greater empathy and longer time-perspectives (Greenhalgh & Gilkey, 1993) as well as economically deficient agreements and greater relational capital (Curhan et al., 2008; cf. O'Connor & Arnold, 2011). Thus, we expected that a tendency to focus on threats to relationships in conflict will correlate positively with femininity, collectivism, empathy and perspective-taking.

Previous research on information processing in conflict and negotiation suggested that social motivations drive the kinds of information that conflict parties attend to, encode, and retrieve (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003; De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008). Thus, people's goal-pursuits should affect the type of threats they attend to in conflict. In particular, people who are motivated by self-transcendence goals are likely to pay more attention to their relationships, whereas those who are motivated by self-enhancement goals are likely to pay more attention to their interests and identity. This hypothesis is consistent with research showing that personal value priorities affect worries by increasing attention to and perception of threats to important goals (Schwartz, Sagiv, & Boehnke, 2000). In line with these frameworks, we predicted that self-transcendence goals (benevolence and universalism: Schwartz, 1992) will be associated with higher attentiveness to threats to relationships and lower attentiveness to threats to interests or identities. In addition, we predicted that self-enhancement goals (power and achievement: Schwartz, 1992) will be associated with higher attentiveness to threats to interests and (public) identities and lower attentiveness to threats to relationships. Finally, we predicted that conservation values (conformity, tradition, and security: Schwartz, 1992), will be associated with higher attentiveness to threats to identities.

Consequences of perceived threats to interests, relationships and identities: Cognitive appraisals and energy mobilization

We propose that conflicts that threaten different targets are associated with different cognitive appraisals and patterns of energy mobilization (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996), as well as different behavioral reactions (Dallman et al., 2003; Zellner et al., 2006). Cognitive appraisals of situations play a crucial role in determining psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions to events in the immediate environment (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993; Tomaka, Blascovich, Kibler, & Ernst, 1997). For instance, Tomaka et al. (1993) suggested that "threatened individuals perceive the potential for loss, with little, if anything, to be gained in the situation. Challenged individuals, however, perceive the possibility of gain… as well as loss in the situation" (p. 248). Organizational research on threat and opportunity appraisals similarly suggests that uncontrollable events that lead to a potential loss activate a threat schema whereas controllable events that lead to potential gain activate an opportunity schema and lead to feelings of confidence and adequacy (Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Jackson & Dutton, 1988).

In addition to shaping people's cognitions, threat and challenge appraisals have also been shown to influence energy mobilization in individuals. Specifically, compared to threat appraisals, challenge appraisals are associated with lower levels of experienced stress and increased energy mobilization, which is manifested in greater physiological reactivity. These cognitive and energetic reactions, in turn, facilitate active coping to meet task demands, thereby increasing both perceived and actual task performance (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Tomaka et al., 1993, 1997). Although cognitive appraisals of threat and challenge shape physiological reactions to situations, experimentally inducing the distinct physiological patterns of activation associated with these experiences does not produce the corresponding cognitive appraisals (Tomaka et al., 1997).

We propose that conflicts that threaten social relationships are experienced as significantly more depleting and exhausting than conflicts that threaten either interests or identities, partly because the former are less likely than the latter to elicit challenge appraisals. Previous research showed that the immediate response to social rejection and threats to belonging is characterized by a blend of negative emotions (e.g., sadness, hurt) and cognitions (e.g., loneliness, isolation) as well as distress and lowered self-esteem. Placing high value on the threatened relationship can lead to withdrawal and

[1] Previous research further distinguished between private and public elements of individuals' identities (e.g., Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Because we posit that the energetic effects of conflict are driven primarily by whether or not individuals perceive threats to their social relationships, this paper focuses less on the important distinctions between threats to different types of interests and identities, and more on the fundamental differences between threats to relationships on the one hand, and threats to interests and identities on the other hand.