Task and relationship conflict in short-term and long-term groups: The critical role of emotion regulation

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Short research note

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Task and relationship conflict in ad-hoc and permanent groups: The critical role of emotion regulation

Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the triple interaction of task conflict, emotion regulation and group temporariness on the emergence of relationship conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – A field study was conducted to test the interaction of emotion regulation and task conflict on the emergence of relationship conflict in 43 ad-hoc groups with 44 permanent groups.

Findings – The results show that the highest chance that task conflict evolves into relationship conflict is when groups (both ad-hoc and permanent) have less effective emotion regulation processes, while task and relationship conflict are rather decoupled in permanent groups scoring high on emotion regulation.

Research limitations/implications – This study concludes with a discussion of the obtained results in terms of their implications for conflict management in teams. Further research should explore the moderation effects in longitudinal studies in order to fully test the variables in our model.

Originality/value – The paper answers the call for contingency models of intragroup conflict and tests the moderating effect of two such contingencies in the relationship between task and relationship conflict.

Key-words: task and relationship conflict, emotion regulation, temporary groups

Article type – Research note.

Initial empirical evidence shows a strong and positive association between task and relationship conflict in groups (Jehn, 1994, 1995, 1997). Nevertheless, recent studies (Ayoko, Callan & Hartel, 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Nair, 2008; Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Yang & Mossholder, 2004) suggests that several contingency factors moderate this relationship. The antecedents and consequences of the two types of conflicts were investigated in groups varying in their degree of permanency, yet no systematic attempts were made to explore their interplay in ad-hoc and permanent groups. Although conflict is closely connected with the emotional life of groups, no attempts were made to empirically test the moderating role of emotion regulation between task and relationship conflict (Nair, 2008; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). The aim of this study is to test the impact of a three way interaction between task conflict, degree of group temporariness and emotion regulation on relationship conflict.

Conflict and emotion regulation in teams

Conflict is a fact of group life and it takes many shapes and forms. A common distinction is made between task conflict (disagreements about the content of the task due to different viewpoints, opinions and ideas) and relationship conflict (interpersonal incompatibilities and frictions among the group members resulting in tension, annoyance and animosity) (Jehn, 1995). Some empirical studies supported the independence of these two types of conflict (Pinkley, 1990, Jehn, 1997), while others doubted their differential impact on team performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In general scholars tend to agree with the conclusion of the meta-analysis reported by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) that conflict is detrimental for team performance because it creates negative emotionality and it distracts team members from the task (Greer, Jehn & Mannix, 2008; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Nair, 2008).

However, recent evidence suggests that several contingencies impact on the interplay between task and relationship conflict and therefore, and this interplay is essential for team effectiveness (Curşeu & Schruijer, 2010; DeDreu & Weingart, 2003; Greer, Jen & Manix, 2008). As a consequence, conflict researchers show an increased interest in developing contingency models of conflict, taking into account the factors and circumstances that impact on the interplay between task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; Guerra et al., 2005; Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Greer et al., 2008; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Research to date strongly supports the moderating role of trust and shows that when trust is present, task conflict has a lower chance of developing into relationship conflict. The lack of trust in teams may lead group members to feel attacked while exchanging ideas in group settings, and therefore the probability that task conflict evolves in relationship frictions is higher (Curşeu & Schruijer, 2010; Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Intragroup conflict is closely associated with emergent emotional states in groups. Especially relationship conflict is associated with anger, tension and other negative emotional states. Nevertheless, task conflict can also trigger negative emotional states (e.g., dissatisfaction, frustration). Emotions play also a central role in conflict resolution. Desivilya and Yagil (2005) show that cooperative conflict management strategies were associated with positive intra-group emotional states, while Bell and Song (2005) show that group emotions impact on the selection of conflict resolution strategies, by mediating the role of cognitive appraisal of conflict. Therefore, group members' ability to work with these experienced emotions is likely to be a relevant contingency factor that impacts on the interplay between task and relationship conflict.

Yang and Mossholder (2004) in their model of decoupling task and relationship conflict argue that collective emotional intelligence is a core contingency for the interplay of the two types of conflict. Collective emotional intelligence is an emergent group property and refers to groups' capacity of identifying and working with the emotions felt/expressed as a result of group interactions. Group emotional regulation is defined as the process of detecting and solving discrepancies between current and desired emotional states (Yang & Mossholder, 2004). It entails the ability to maintain group-beneficial emotions and deal with disruptive emotions of the group. Teams that have a poor emotional regulation are likely to experience increased task and relationship conflict. Also, team emotion regulation has a small moderating role in the relation between task and relationship conflict on conflict intensity and duration for destructive reactions to conflict has been proved to be not significant so far (Ayoko , Callan & Hartel, 2008). Therefore, in line with Yang and Mossholder's (2004) third proposition, we hypothesize:

H1: *In groups with effective emotional regulation processes, task conflict is less likely to evolve into relationship conflict.*

Group emotion regulation is a core component of collective emotional intelligence (Yang & Mossholder, 2004) and is therefore an emergent state manifested as a higher order phenomenon. Similar with other emergent states (e.g., conflict, trust, team cognition, cohesion), emotion regulation describes the team as a whole, and emerge from and in the same time shape the local dynamics of the team (Curşeu, 2006). Effective emotion regulation takes time to emerge, and thus emotion regulation processes are less likely to be effective in ad hoc groups as compared to permanent groups. Previous research on ad-hoc project teams reveals that conflict has a negative

impact on performance, because the benefits of task conflict do not overcome the cost of distraction from the focal task. In ad-hoc (temporary) teams, there may not be enough time for the improved processes that can result from conflict resolution to feed back into improved performance (Druskat & Kayes, 2000). In other words, ad-hoc groups experiencing high levels of task conflict and with a rather low level of emotion regulation are likely to experience increased levels of relationship conflict. Furthermore, while ad-hoc (temporary) groups are limited in their duration and membership (duration is usually defined by task accomplishment), well-established groups have a history of interactions as well as prospect for such interactions in the future. Group members in permanent groups share a common group identity and, had the time to develop norms for working together and are aware they will have to work together in the future (Druskat & Wolff, 1999). In such groups emotion regulation processes could be more effective in disentangling task from relationship conflict. However, if permanent groups experience rather high levels of task conflict, yet they have less effective emotion regulation processes, it is likely that they will experience increased levels of relationship conflict. We argue that the potential of emotion regulation to disentangle the task to relationship conflict relation is contingent on the degree of group temporariness. Therefore, our first hypothesis is:

H2: *In groups with effective emotional regulation processes, task conflict is less likely to evolve into relationship conflict and this moderation effect is stronger in permanent rather than ad-hoc groups*.

METHOD

Sample

Data was collected in a sample of 417 students (244 men and 163 women; mean age=21.29, SD=2.38) from a Dutch university. All students were first year students and the study was carried out during the first study unit in order to limit the biases of previously working together in groups. The students were organized in 43 ad-hoc (temporary) groups that worked together during one lecture alone and 44 longer-term (permanent) groups that worked together during the whole semester. The ad-hoc (temporary) had to solve a case-study and answer a set of questions as a group. The longer-term (permanent) group had the task of conducting a research in an organization and write the research report. The permanent groups worked together for 14 weeks. Both type of teams filled in the questionnaires at the end of their task.

Instruments

Task conflict and *relationship conflict* were measured by eight items (four for task conflict and four for relationship conflict) from an intra-team conflict scale introduced by Jehn (Jehn,1995; Jehn et al., 1999). Sample items for task conflict include: "To what extent are there differences of opinions regarding the task in your team", and for relationship conflict: "How much emotional conflict is there in your work group". The answers were recorded on a 5 point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for task conflict scale was .75 (M=2.64, SD=.47) and for relationship conflict .81 (M=1.64, SD=.51).

Emotional regulation was evaluated with 6 items constructed by the authors. Some sample items are: "It was difficult to calm down quickly when we got mad at each other" (reverted) or "When we experienced positive emotions, we knew how to make them last". Cronbach's alpha for the emotional regulation scale was .72 (M=3.71, SD=.41). For the two types of conflict and emotion regulation, individual scores were aggregated into group scores after computing the Rwg index (James, Demaree &

Wolf, 1984). The within group agreement index (Rwg) can take values between zero and one, and generally, a value of .70 or higher is considered to reflect a reasonable amount of agreement within a team. All teams had an Rwg index higher than 0.70 for both conflict scales as well as for the emotion regulation scale.

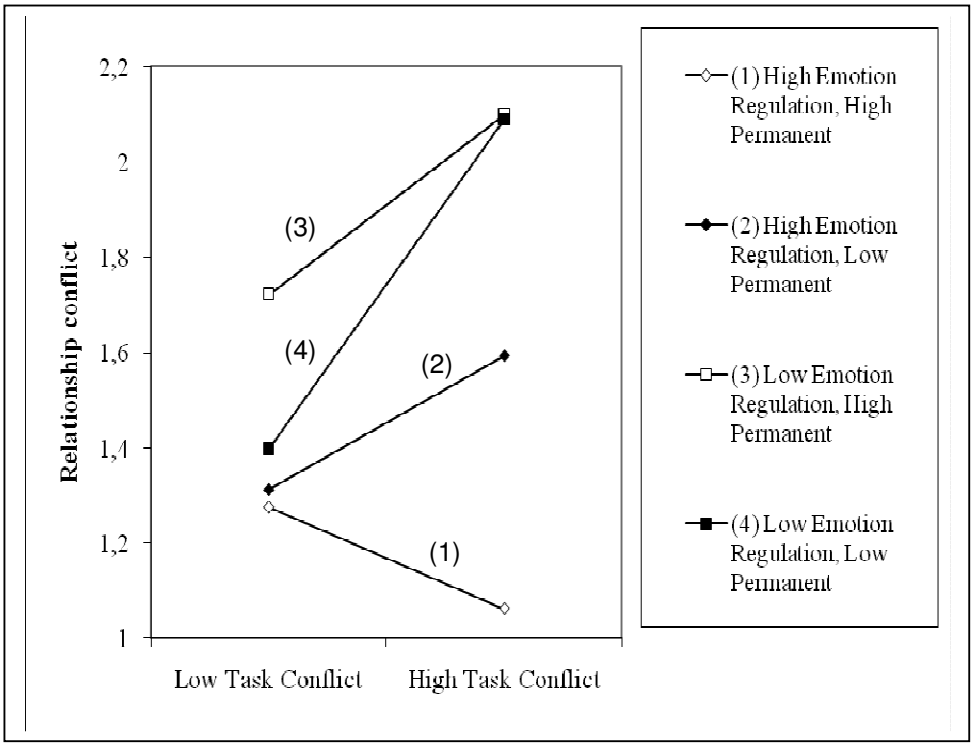
RESULTS

We regressed task conflict, degree of group temporariness and emotion regulation as well as the two way interaction terms in the first step, and their three way interaction in the second step on relationship conflict. In order to reduce muticolinearity, the predictors were centered before computing the cross product terms (Aiken & West, 1991). The results of the OLS regressions are presented in Table 1.

We further on calculated the differences between pairs of slopes as described in Dawson and Richter (2006). The regression slopes for the two way interaction effect are presented in Figure 1. As predicted by Hypothesis 2, the interaction of task conflict with emotion regulation is significant only in permanent groups.

Although all two away interactions are significant (in both models), the three way interaction term is not significant and the results of the paired slope comparison are in

Figure 1. The interaction effect between task conflict, emotion regulation and type of groups on relationship conflict (the results of the pair slopes comparison are presented in the Notes)



Notes:
High Permanent = permanent groups; Low Permanent = Ad-hoc groups

Pair of slopes	t-value for slope difference	p-value for slope difference
(1) and (2)	-1,644	0,104
(1) and (3)	-1,997	0,049
(1) and (4)	-2,660	0,009
(2) and (3)	-0,480	0,633
(2) and (4)	-1,575	0,119
(3) and (4)	-1,224	0,225

Table 1. Regression results for the three way interaction between task conflict, degree of group temporariness and emotion regulation on relationship conflict

		Relationship conflict	
Model /Step		1	2
1	Task conflict (TC)	,30***	,28**
	Emotion regulation (ER)	-,56***	-,55***
	Degree of group temporariness (DT)	-,08	-,09
	TCxER	-,23*	-,23**
	TCxDT	-,19*	-,19*
	ERxDT	-,19*	-,20*
2	3 way interaction (TCxDTxER)		-,04
F change		14.97***	.20
R^2		.52	.53
AdjR^2		.49	.48

Legend: *p<.05; **p<.01, ***p<.001 degree of temporariness is coded as a dummy variable with 1 for permanent and 0 for temporary groups.

Table 2. Regression results for the two way interaction between task conflict and emotion regulation on relationship conflict for permanent and temporary groups

		Permanent groups		Temporary groups	
Model /Step		1	2	1	2
1	Task conflict	.24*	.08	.46**	.54***
	Emotion regulation	-.55***	-.55***	-.32*	-.39**
3	Emotion regulation x Task conflict		-.28*		-.22
F change		20.05***	3.73*	12.13***	2.61
R^2		.49	.53	.37	.41
AdjR^2		.47	.50	.34	.37

Legend: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

line with Hypothesis 2. In order to further explore the three way interaction effects, we carried out a subgroup analysis based on degree of permanency (Dawson & Richter, 2006). Therefore, a separate set of OLS regressions were conducted to estimate the impact of the two way interaction of task conflict and emotion regulation on relationship conflict separately in temporary as well as permanent groups. Task conflict and emotion regulation were entered in the first step and the cross product term in the second step. The results are presented in Table 2.

As hypothesized, task conflict has a positive impact on relationship conflict and the effect is stronger when groups have less rather than more effective emotion regulation processes, therefore, H1 is fully supported. Moreover, emotion regulation has a negative direct impact on relational conflict across all models. The hypothesized three-way interaction of task conflict, degree of temporariness and emotion regulation is not significant, yet the inspection of the regression slopes as well as the paired comparison provide support for H2. As the separate two way interaction test shows, the emotion regulation reduces the predictive value of task conflict for relationship conflict more for the permanent groups than for the temporary ones. Our results show that emotion regulation disentangles task and relationship conflict in permanent rather than ad-hoc groups.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of the study was to test the three way interaction effect of task conflict, degree of group temporariness and emotion regulation on relationship conflict. The

results show that in permanent groups with high emotion regulation mechanisms, task conflict has a lower predictive value for relationship conflict. Emotion regulation has been already been argued to play a moderating role in the relationship between task and relationship conflict (Nair, 2008; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). The core contribution of our paper is proving that this moderating role is also influenced by the degree of group temporariness. Emotion regulation seems to pay off best in permanent rather than ad-hoc (temporary) groups.

The results reported here have both theoretical and practical relevance. First, the paper contributes to the attempts to identify contingency factors that may decouple task and relationship conflicts (Nair, 2008; Yang & Mossholder, 2004) and it tests a three way interaction, supporting therefore the role of emotion regulation and degree of temporariness as core moderators for the impact of task conflict on relationship conflict. The paper contributes therefore to the efforts to build contingency theories explaining the role of intra-group conflicts in group dynamics and performance. Furthermore, we add to the literature shedding light on the specific dynamic of ad-hoc groups by pointing to the different interplay of task-and relational conflict in these groups.

Second, the results reported in the paper have important practical implications. In order to keep the task conflict decoupled from relational conflict, groups should develop effective emotion regulation processes. By choosing a trainable process as our moderator, we open doors for the control of relationship conflict in groups. The results of this study contribute therefore to the attempts to identify factors that block task conflict to degenerate into relationship conflict.

Several limitations of the current study need to be discussed as well. First, we have used student groups varying in their degree of permanency, and although all

students were first year students and were involved in similar educational programs, other group level differentiating factors might have been present as well. Further longitudinal studies should therefore investigate these interaction effects. Second, since we have used self-reported data, common method bias is a possible problem, however, we also note that this problem is less critical when testing interactions (Evans, 1985), as we did in this study. Finally, the subgroup analysis limits the power of our analysis, yet because the degree of temporariness is a dichotomous variable we did not have to perform an artificial split of this moderator variable. Moreover, the paired slopes comparison allows for tests across the boundaries of groups and thus shows support for our second hypothesis.

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