

Working Paper

“Don’t worry, relationship conflict won’t hurt us” Cultural Beliefs about the Consequences of Conflict

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Abstract

Three cross-cultural studies examined cognitive representations of conflict providing evidence of cultural similarities and differences in expectations and behavioral intentions. In Study 1 Americans exhibited an optimistic bias relative to East Asians in their beliefs about relationship conflict, but not conflict in general. Study 2 suggests that these findings cannot be alternatively accounted for by cultural differences in perceptions about the distinction, or lack thereof, between relationship and task-focused forms of conflict. Furthermore, the results demonstrated an interaction effect such that both European Americans and Koreans prefer to proactively address and resolve task conflict, whereas only European Americans perceive that it is relatively unnecessary to address relationship conflict to achieve task performance. Study 3 confirmed that these cultural patterns have behavioral implications, such that Americans were more likely than East Asians to join a group talented but likely to experience relationship conflict. Together, results showing cultural asymmetries in how people make sense of relationship conflict suggest important implications for interpersonal and intra-group dynamics in intercultural contexts.

Keywords: Culture, Conflict Frames, Groups, Teams, Holistic Thinking

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Cultural Beliefs About the Consequences of Conflict

From the time of Tocqueville (1840) to the present, observers of American culture have remarked that despite being highly individualistic, Americans more than others exhibit a strong propensity to join groups (e.g., Bellah et al., 1996). Yet despite this proclivity, certain circumstances may complicate anyone’s decision to join and remain in particular groups. One deciding factor may involve subjective beliefs about conflict (Gelfand, et al., 2002). For instance, imagine that Laurie is in the position of deciding whether to join a team being put together to complete a high-visibility project. During an exploratory meeting it becomes apparent that the highly skilled members of this team do not get along interpersonally, so she reasonably concludes that relationship conflict is inevitable. How Laurie reacts to this realization will likely depend on how much she thinks relationship conflict may offset the contribution of existing talent by hampering a team’s ability to accomplish task-related objectives.

Prior research suggests that the nature of an individual’s intuitions about conflict--also referred to as conflict frames or schemas (Pinkley, 1990)--are grounded in deep-seated cultural assumptions about how different types of interpersonal dynamics affect a variety of organizational outcomes (Gelfand, Nishii, Holcombe, Dyer, Ohbuchi, & Fukuno, 2001). Complementary to the rich literature on actual consequences of conflict, there is a growing interest in understanding implicit and explicit assumptions about the causal links between beliefs and consequences. In this paper we contribute to this emerging theoretical and empirical literature on culture and cognitive representations of conflict (e.g., Adair, Brett, & Okumura, 2001; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2006; Morris & Gelfand, 2004) by describing three experiments that

examine within and between cultural similarities and differences in conflict schemas and behavioral intentions.

As a backdrop to this research, Laurie's conundrum raises interesting issues about the correspondence between cultural beliefs about conflict and the actual consequences of relationship conflict found in the rich empirical literature on the topic. Indeed, it may appear a forgone conclusion that most everyone would have an adverse reaction to the situation presented to Laurie given the robust empirical evidence indicating that relationship conflict impedes a team's task performance (for reviews see De Drew & Weingart, 2003 and Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Yet, recent theory on attributes of American workways (Sanchez-Burks, 2005) suggest that for some forms of conflict more than others there may be a greater disconnect between beliefs and documented findings than might be expected. More broadly, the assumptions about conflict that people bring to teams become particularly relevant and important to understand as global organizations replace hierarchical structures and instead rely on team-based arrangements to improve quality, productivity, customer service, and the experience of work for their employees (Thompson, 2003).

Relationship Conflict: Cultural Beliefs and Folk Wisdom

Research on beliefs and cultural folk wisdom about conflict, conducted primarily within the context of negotiations, have revealed deep-seated variation in cognitive representations of conflict (e.g., Gelfand & Brett, 2004; Pinkley, 1990). This shift to understanding mental models of conflict, in contrast to its actual consequences, has proved useful in understanding how cognitions shape decision making and behaviors in conflict situations. For example, whereas Americans perceive negotiation as an impersonal, task-focused conflict creating winners and losers, Japanese more commonly perceive negotiation as conflict centered on the principle of compromise (Gelfand et al., 2001). These differences in turn influence each party's strategy

selections, outcome preferences, and evaluations of other parties in the negotiations—differences that can lay the roots for subsequent misunderstanding (Gelfand et al., 2002). Thus, conflict schemas, developed through experience and socialization in particular social-cultural contexts, operate as a mechanism through which culture influences perceptions and reactions to conflict (Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarra, Pearson, & Villareal, 1997).

Extending beyond the context of negotiation, the present research focuses more broadly on cultural cognitions about the consequences of relationship conflict in teams as well as behavioral intentions regarding the prospect of working with a group likely to experience relationship conflict. To assess what features of these cognitions are specific to relationship conflict as opposed to conflict in general, the present research also assesses beliefs and reactions to another form of conflict, namely task conflict. The disagreements and tensions that can influence a group's ability to succeed in their task objectives can be differentiated, at least conceptually, by whether they concern the task at hand or relational issues (Cosser, 1956; Clark & Mills, 1993; Jehn, 1995). For example, disagreements about which of two grant-funding opportunities a lab should pursue, or how a team will market its product to a potential client, are examples of *task conflict*, which arise from differing ideas and opinions among group members about the content of the work itself. Groups also can experience disagreements based on relational concerns unrelated to the task per se. This *relationship conflict* arises from interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, and can include tension, animosity, and annoyance.

Empirically, the consequences of task and relationship conflict for workgroups have been shown in certain cases to have distinct patterns. Although task and relationship conflict can co-occur (e.g., Simons & Peterson, 2000; Simon, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004), a recent meta-analysis finds that compared to relationship conflict, task conflict tends to be associated with both costs and, albeit to a lesser extent, benefits (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Task conflict, for

example, can improve performance in part because moderate amounts of disagreement allow members to critically analyze their work and explore all alternatives (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). However, task conflict can harm performance when it interferes with routine work (Jehn, 1995), when the group members lack trust in one another (Peterson & Behfar, 2003), or when it degenerates into relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995). Overall, conclusions about the consequences of task conflict leave open the possibility that at least under certain conditions it can be beneficial to group success, despite its otherwise clear potential to be detrimental.

Although there remains a lively (and task-focused) debate concerning the conditions under which task conflict might be beneficial to groups (for a review see Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), there is a rare unanimity about the consequences of relationship conflict: In virtually every instance examined empirically, the emergence of relationship conflict has been shown to be detrimental to performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The harm caused by relationship conflict appears at both the individual and group levels of analysis (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) and includes reduced productivity (Wall & Nolan, 1986), reduced creativity (Amabile et al., 1996), and reduced satisfaction with the group (Jehn et al., 1999). Together, these studies show that whereas information about the presence of task conflict may not always be sufficient to predict a team's ability to accomplish its task, the presence of relationship conflict should provide highly diagnostic information—a team that does not get along has little chance of performing well.

Indeed, given the bleak outlook for workgroups likely to experience relationship conflict, it may be unlikely or rare to encounter examples where a cultural group would not recognize how such conflict reliably limits a team's ability to succeed. Maintaining such disbelief in the effects of relationship conflict would require a group to give far less weight to relational concerns over task concerns in estimating the factors that predict project performance. Yet this

possibility may not be far fetched in light of recent cultural and cognition research on ideological assumptions about the importance of relational versus task concerns in organizations (Sanchez-Burks, 2005). In the present research we examine how an individual's folk wisdom about the consequences of relationship compare to empirically established consequences reported in prior research.

There is a rich literature in social psychology showing substantial variation in the relational schemas cultural groups use to understand and navigate social interactions at work (e.g., Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Hui & Kuk, 1997). A common theme in this literature is the diverse way in which interpersonal harmony in social and work settings is maintained through complex beliefs, norms, and institutions. Despite substantive differences in relational practices and traditions, the modal tendency within this global distribution appears to be a common emphasis on the importance of the social-emotional dimension, save for one consistent exception: mainstream American culture (Sanchez-Burks, 2005; see also Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002).

The importance of relational concerns is heightened at work in cultures such as Korea, where relationships are based on a notion of *chaebol* or company familialism (Kim, 1988; see also Ambady, Koo, Lee, & Rosenthal, 1996); in China where the importance of maintaining a strong, dense network of interpersonal relationships in business is captured in the constructs *you-yi and quanxi* (Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Li, Tsui, & Weldon, 2000); and Mexico as well, where relational schemas, referred to as *simpatia*, focus attention simultaneously on the task and on maintaining social harmony (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). However, an opposite pattern is found among mainstream European-Americans, where work contexts tend to activate schemas that diminish the importance of and attention to the relational dimension in a manner that reflects *Protestant relational ideology* (PRI) (Sanchez-Burks, 2005). We draw on

PRI theory and prior empirical research on this American ideology as a lens to understand expectations about conflict. Paradoxically, PRI suggests that it may be quite rational—perhaps even commonsensical—for Americans to assume that relationship conflict does not necessarily hinder a group's performance, notwithstanding that virtually all evidence of its detrimental effects was confirmed in studies conducted with American participants. Thus, cultural analyses of East Asian societies such as Korea and China, highlighting beliefs about the importance of relational dynamics, suggest an alignment with empirical evidence of the actual consequences of relational conflict. In contrast, cultural analyses of American culture suggest the potential for an asymmetry in American's conflict beliefs vis-à-vis these empirical findings. Given this potential for an American rather than an East Asian asymmetry in conflict beliefs, we review research on PRI theory to develop specific hypotheses about cultural similarities and differences in conflict expectations and corresponding behavioral intentions.

PRI theory describes a unique feature of American culture that influences the development and accessibility of relational schemas used to navigate work compared to non-work social interactions. Sociological, historical, and psychological research links PRI to the beliefs and practices of the founding Protestant communities of European American society (McNeill, 1954; Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Weber, 1947). Although originally tied to explicit religious connotations reflecting proper behavior, beliefs about the importance of restricting relational concerns while working were secularized and incorporated into the contemporary work ethos of European American culture (Fischer, 1989; Lenksi, 1963; Weber, 1904). Through a mutual constitution of participation in social contexts that promote a restricted role for relational concerns, European Americans have developed relational schemas that propagate the ideology.

Cognitive and behavioral evidence for PRI shows that within work contexts, European Americans relative to other cultural groups show impoverished recall for interpersonal events but comparable recall for task-related events. Americans also exhibit a tendency to reason that effort spent maintaining interpersonal work dynamics necessarily limits a team's ability to accomplish task objectives (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000). They also show lower levels of non-conscious behavior indicative of relational attunement (i.e., behavioral mirroring), lower levels of attention to relational cues in communication at work compared to non-work contexts (Sanchez-Burks, Lee, Choi, Nisbett, Zhao, & Koo, 2003), and they attend less to subordinates' intrinsic motivations at work (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2004). Together these studies show that for Americans in general, and for European Americans in particular, work settings activate relational schemas that diminish the importance of relational concerns.

To examine evidence of PRI manifested in beliefs about relationship conflict, we conducted three cross-cultural experiments. Study 1 examined whether Americans exhibit an optimistic bias relative to East Asians in their beliefs specifically about relationship conflict. Study 2 tested whether this pattern can be alternatively explained by cultural differences in perceptions about the distinction—or lack thereof—between relationship and task conflict. In Study 2 we do not address the ongoing debate about whether these types of conflict are theoretically or empirically distinct (for a thorough discussion and data on this question see De Drew & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Simon, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004); rather we focus on lay beliefs about whether they are distinct forms of conflict that can be separated conceptually and empirically. Finally, Study 3 tested whether these cultural differences have behavioral implications, such that Americans would be more likely than East Asians to join a group fraught by relationship conflict.

Study 1

To test whether cognitive representations of conflict differ across cultures we first tested the importance decision-maker's attribute to relationship conflict. PRI theory suggests that differences in importance given to relational versus task concerns at work within the U.S. suggest the following within-culture hypothesis: Americans will perceive relationship conflict as less detrimental to workgroup performance than non-relationally based conflict such as task conflict—a pattern that would be at odds with many analyses of the actual consequences of conflict. With regard to between-culture patterns of conflict expectations, it will depend on the type of conflict. Whereas research has not found East-West differences in beliefs about the importance of task-objectives at work, there is much to suggest differences in beliefs about the importance of the relational dimension of work (Sanchez-Burks & Lee, in press). In East Asian societies (e.g., Korean, China), there is a tendency to afford equal or greater importance to relational concerns at work in contrast to the diminished importance to these concerns found for Americans (e.g., Ambady et al., 1996; Holtgraves, 1997; Farh et al., 1998; Li, Tsui, & Weldon, 2000; Sanchez-Burks, 2005). Together these literatures suggest the following culture by conflict type interaction hypothesis: The cultural differences between Americans and East Asians will be more pronounced for beliefs regarding the effects of relationship conflict compared to those dealing with task conflict. Americans should be more skeptical than Koreans or Chinese about the negative effects of relationship conflict.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 136 European Americans (68 men and 68 women; age: $M = 32.0$ years; $SD = 2.2$), 80 Koreans citizens (40 men and 40 women; age: $M = 31.8$ years; $SD = 3.1$), and 56 Chinese citizens (28 men and 28 women; age: $M = 32.8$ years; $SD = 2.8$) from a business graduate school at a large Midwestern university in the U.S. Korean and Chinese participants

arrived in the U.S. approximately two months prior to the study to begin graduate studies in business; none had prior experience within the U.S. Participants completed the task as part of an in-class exercise. Gender and age were not significant covariates in any of the analyses. In addition, based on preliminary analysis showing no significant main effects or interactions between Korean and Chinese participants, data for these two groups were combined into one variable (East Asian).

Materials and Procedure

PRI Beliefs About Conflict. Participants completed a survey in which they indicated their level of agreement with statements regarding task and relationship conflict using a 5-point Likert scale (-2 = *completely disagree*, +2 = *completely agree*). Prior to responding to the statements, participants read through definitions that specified what we meant by relationship and task conflict, as used in prior research (c.f., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). These definitions read: “Relationship conflict involves disagreements based on personal and social issues that are not related to the team’s work. Task conflict involves disagreements about the work that is being done within the team and is not related to personal and social issues.” The conflict beliefs measure consisted of a six-item task conflict belief scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$) and a six-item relationship conflict belief scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$). The items from these two scales were randomly interspersed throughout the single version of survey. Example statements include, “Task (relationship) conflict is an absolute roadblock to a team accomplishing its work” and “Interpersonal friction (task conflict) does not necessarily get in the way of a team’s performance” (reversed coded). (See Appendix for the complete set of items.) Higher scores on each measure signal agreement that conflict impairs group performance.

Results

Participants' beliefs about conflict were analyzed using a Culture (European American vs. East Asian) X Conflict Type (Task Conflict vs. Relationship Conflict) mixed ANOVA, with conflict type as the within-subject variable. There was a main effect of Culture indicating that European Americans ($M = 0.40$, $SD = 0.74$) compared to East Asians ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.76$) were less likely to agree that conflict overall is detrimental to group performance, $F(1,270) = 8.79$, $p < .01$. There was also a main effect of Conflict Type indicating that, overall, task conflict ($M = 0.62$, $SD = 0.77$) was viewed as more detrimental to group performance than relationship conflict ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.73$), $F(1,270) = 4.59$, $p < .05$. These main effects were qualified, however, by a significant Culture by Conflict Type interaction, $F(1,270) = 10.27$, $p < .01$, suggesting that European Americans differed from Koreans in their agreement concerning the consequences of relationship conflict versus task conflict (see Figure 1).

As predicted, contrasts conducted for each type of conflict showed that European Americans ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.74$) were significantly less likely than Koreans ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 0.62$) to agree that relationship conflict is necessarily detrimental to task performance, $t(270) = 4.57$, $p < .001$. However, with respect to task conflict, European Americans ($M = 0.62$, $SD = 0.74$) were as likely as East Asians ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.80$) to agree that conflict in this domain hampers group performance, $t(270) < 1$. Within-culture contrasts further show that European Americans believed that relationship conflict was significantly less likely than task conflict to hamper group performance, $t(270) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, whereas East Asians judged both types of conflict as having relatively equivalent effects, $t(270) < 1$.

Discussion

The results from Study 1 provide evidence showing that European Americans were more optimistic relative to East Asians about the relative unimportance of conflict to group performance. In line with our theoretical predictions, this optimism about conflict was limited to

conflict in the relational domain and not an overall cultural bias about conflict. Moreover, the pattern of results within and between cultures suggests a more complex cultural pattern of beliefs that complicate simpler models of East-West main effect differences in emphases on group harmony.

The results highlight that East-West differences in beliefs about how conflict can harm group performance emerge only for certain forms of conflict—namely in the relational domain where Americans generally place less importance in accordance with PRI. Though this pattern of results cannot be attributed to cultural main effect differences in concern for minimizing conflict (Americans were as concerned as East Asians about conflict in the task domain), they might be plausibly attributed to differences in analytical and holistic thinking (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), because the Americans might be better able to distinguish the two types of conflicts than East Asians. Study 2 was designed to address this potential limitation, by testing whether both cultural groups cognitively distinguished between task and relational conflict to the same degree.

Study 2

Task and relationship conflict have been differentiated theoretically (e.g., Jehn & Berdersky, 2003) and empirically under certain conditions (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, Simons & Peterson, 2000; Simon, McIntyre & Friedman, 2004). Many studies, including Study 1 in this article, provide participants with explicit definitions of the differences between task and relationship conflict. However, it is unclear whether these definitions conform to how people from different cultural traditions perceive of these two types of conflicts. It may be that East Asians may actually not distinguish the two to the same degree as Americans; for East Asians, task conflict may inherently entail relationship conflict. This would suggest that the relative optimism of Americans concerning relational compared with task conflict found in Study 1 may

not be valid support for our theoretical analysis, but instead be an unrelated artifact. Study 2 examines this issue directly by assessing the extent to which Americans and East Asians agree whether or not it is possible to differentiate relationship and task conflict.

Furthermore, Study 2 assesses whether East Asians and Americans differ with respect to behavioral strategies for addressing these task and relational forms of conflict. Based on the findings of Study 1, we reasoned that individuals would show a preference for resolving those forms of conflict believed to be most detrimental to group performance if left unchecked. Thus, we hypothesized that Americans compared to East Asians (in this study, specifically Koreans) would be less inclined to try to resolve relationship conflict but would be equally likely to try to resolve task conflict.

Methods

Participants

The participants included 18 European Americans (13 men and 5 women; age: $M = 31.1$ years; $SD = 1.7$) and 12 Koreans (8 men and 4 women; age: $M = 32.8$ years; $SD = 4.2$) from a large Midwestern university in the U.S. Korean participants arrived in the U.S. approximately two months prior to the study to begin graduate studies in business; none had prior experience within the U.S. Participants completed the task as part of an in-class exercise. Gender and age were not significant covariates in any of the analyses.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed three question items for this study that were embedded in a larger general prescreening survey administered earlier in the semester. The first item provided participants with the definitions of task and relationship conflict described in Study 1 and then stated, "Although these definitions differentiate task conflict and relationship conflict, people often vary in how much they believe it is actually possible to separate these types of conflict. In

your opinion, to what extent is it possible to separate relationship conflict and task conflict?”

Responses were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *don't know*, 7 = *very much*). Two additional items asked participants to state their level of agreement with the following statements: ‘when task conflict arises, one should proactively try to resolve the task conflict’ and ‘when relationship conflict arises, one should proactively try to resolve the relationship conflict’ using 7-point Likert scales (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*).

Results

Differentiating Task and Relationship Conflict. A Culture X Conflict Type ANOVA was conducted on the degree to which participants differentiated the two types of conflict, followed by a sequence of planned contrasts. There was no support for the notion that Americans more than Koreans perceive that it is possible to separate task and relationship conflict, as indicated by the lack of a culture main effect for Culture, $F(1,28) < 1$, ($M_s = 4.73(1.27)$ vs. $5.23(1.42)$ respectively).

The nature of the Likert scale used in this study provided a reference point from which it is possible to additionally assess meaningful levels of agreement versus disagreement on the question of whether these two forms of conflict can be conceptualized as distinct (i.e., midpoint represents “don’t know”). Thus, we conducted contrasts separately for each cultural group to examine whether they differed from the midpoint of the scale, thus indicating they agree task and relationship conflict are in fact distinct. These contrasts showed that both Koreans ($t(28) = 12.30$, $p < .001$) and European Americans ($t(28) = 13.30$, $p < .001$) significantly differ from the midpoint indicating an agreement that it is possible to separate task and relationship conflict (Midpoint = 4; European American $M = 4.73(1.27)$, Korean $M = 5.23(1.42)$).

Both cultural groups believe the two types of conflict are distinct. Thus, there is no support for the argument that the findings from Study 1 could have alternatively resulted from

cultural differences in analytical (better able to distinguish, i.e., Americans) versus holistic (less able to distinguish, i.e., East Asians) ways of thinking.

Behavioral Intentions. Next, we analyzed participant's behavioral intentions for dealing with conflict using a Culture (European American vs. Korean) X Conflict Type (Task Conflict vs. Relationship Conflict) mixed ANOVA, with type of conflict as the within participant variable. A main effect of culture indicated an overall greater preference among Koreans ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.01$) than European Americans ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.60$) to proactively try to resolve conflict in general, $F(1,28) = 4.70$, $p < .05$. A main effect of conflict type indicated a general preference to try to resolve task conflict ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.20$) than relationship conflict ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.70$), $F(1,28) = 6.40$, $p < .05$. As predicted, however, there was a significant culture by conflict type interaction, $F(1,28) = 4.50$, $p < .05$ (See Figure 2).

Whereas European Americans and Koreans were similar in their agreement that one should proactively try to resolve task conflict ($M_s = 6.00(1.31)$ vs. $5.82(1.10)$ respectively), $t(28) < 1$, Americans were significantly less likely than Koreans to agree the same effort should be put forth in trying to resolve relationship conflict ($M_s = 3.92(1.19)$ vs. $5.60(0.92)$ respectively), $t(28) = 2.68$, $p < .05$. Moreover, a follow-up within culture contrast showed that Americans indicated more disagreement with a proactive strategy for addressing relationship conflict than task conflict, $t(28) = 2.70$, $p < .05$. Koreans showed no such difference $t < 1$. Overall, Americans appear to place less importance on relationship conflict than do Koreans, and Americans place less importance on relationship conflict than task conflict. There were no other significant contrast effects.

Discussion

Consistent with prior theoretical and empirical analyses that relied mostly on European or North American decision makers, study 2 confirmed that both Koreans and Americans distinguished between relationship and task conflict. These findings provide initial cross-cultural support for the conceptual distinction between these two types of conflict among lay decision makers. Furthermore, they substantiate the findings of Study 1; these findings indicate that Americans believed task conflict would hamper group performance more so than relationship conflict, whereas East Asians equally weighted the consequence of both types of conflict, conflicts both cultural groups previously had been shown to differentiate conceptually.

Interestingly, Study 2 also provides evidence that both European Americans and Koreans prefer to proactively address and resolve task conflict. Whereas Koreans also demonstrated a proclivity to address and resolve relationship conflict, European Americans did not. This result is consistent with the previous finding that Americans did not believe relationship conflict hampers group performance. If it does not present a detriment to group outcomes, as indicated by study 1, then there is no logical reason to expend energy to address and resolve relationship conflict.

In general, the nature of the cultural variation appears to coincide with the domain of relationship conflict. In both Studies 1 and 2, Americans and East Asians appear to hold similar beliefs and show similar behavioral strategies with respect to task conflict, but they consistently differ with respect to relationship conflict. The question we address in the next study is whether this pattern of beliefs would likewise influence the decision of Americans and East Asians to join groups that potentially are ridden by high task or relationship conflict.

One methodological limitation of this research endeavor, that has yet to be addressed, is the fact that the data for Studies 1 and 2 were collected in the U.S., such that Americans' beliefs were assessed in an intra-cultural setting (on their own turf), whereas beliefs and preferences of

East Asians who participated may have been shaped by their experiences living as a visitor in a foreign culture. Thus, the heightened concern for interpersonal harmony (in both task and relationship domains) exhibited by Koreans and Chinese in Studies 1 and 2 could have been influenced by an outsider's perspective and might differ from how they perceive the consequences of conflict in their native culture. To empirically address this issue, in Study 3 we also sought to replicate the conflict beliefs and preferences results with a sample of Koreans living in their native society (i.e., Seoul, Korea).

Study 3

The primary goal of Study 3 was to further examine how PRI-beliefs about conflict correspond to behavioral intentions in conflict situations. Specifically, we tested how Americans versus Koreans would react to situations where relationship conflict is likely to occur in a group. Americans and Koreans were asked to consider how they would respond to an offer to join a team that is both technically highly talented and also highly likely to experience relationship conflict. Building on earlier findings showing that for Americans relationship conflict is not necessarily detrimental to group performance, we hypothesized Americans more than Koreans would be more likely to accept the invitation to join the group. Conversely, given the earlier findings indicating that relationship conflict is of greater concern to Koreans than to Americans suggesting that for Koreans relationship conflict would more clearly negate the technical talents of the team, we hypothesized Koreans more than Americans would decide to decline the invitation to join such a team. A condition in which technical talent was held constant but where there was no indication of relationship conflict was included in the experimental design to provide a baseline comparison for evaluating within and between cultural patterns in decisions regarding these workgroup offers.

Method

Participants

The participants included 76 European Americans (42 men and 34 women; age: $M = 25.0$ years; $SD = 5.0$) and 85 Koreans (55 men and 30 women; age: $M = 23.0$ years; $SD = 3.9$) from large universities in the U.S. and Korea, respectively. Participants completed the task as part of an in-class exercise. Gender and age were not significant covariates in any of the analyses.

Materials and Procedure

Beliefs About Relationship and Task Conflict. Participants completed the same conflict beliefs survey as described in Study 1. Koreans completed a translated version of the survey. The Korean version of all materials was developed and translated from English by a Korean member of the research team and then back translated by an independent individual. All minor discrepancies were discussed and resolved to ensure conceptual equivalence. To control for the unintended influence that completing the conflict beliefs scale might have on responses to the vignettes described below, the scale was administered after participants had completed their responses to the vignettes.

Vignettes Describing an Offer to Join a Workgroup. Participants received at random one of two versions of a vignette in which they were to imagine themselves faced with a decision about joining a new work group.¹ Both versions began with the following preamble:

Imagine that you work for a flexible matrix organization where most projects last six to eight months. Your current project will end in four weeks. The organization allows for some autonomy in choosing projects, and traditionally you meet with your manager and lock in your next project two weeks before rolling off your current project. You value project success, thus you care that the next one is successful. Before you meet with your manager, you receive an e-mail from Pat, the project leader of one of the upcoming projects. Pat has heard about you from your current project leader and wants you to join the team in his area. Although

the group will be starting small, Pat says that if development goes well, the group will expand within nine months and will be looking for people to assume team lead roles. Pat also believes your skill set nicely complements two other people who will be joining the team: Chris, who has a strong background in operations, and Terry, who can offer important finance skills. Bottom line, this collection of people brings to the table a high level of skill in areas critical for task success on the project. As you learn more about the project, you find out you will have to work with Chris and Terry very closely on a daily basis. During your time with the organization, you have met them once or twice, but have never worked on a project with either of them.

In one version (henceforth referred to as the “no relationship conflict,” or NRC, condition), we told participants they anticipated getting along well with Chris and Terry.

Yet based on these encounters, you get the sense the group will get along very well. You can picture the three of you getting together when you’re not working on the project, and you are highly confident you will have a really good time working together.

In the other version (the “relationship conflict,” or RC, condition), we told participants their team would not get along well socially.

Yet based on these encounters, you get the sense the group will not click socially. You cannot picture the three of you getting together when you’re not working on the project, and you believe the group is likely to have disagreements on personal/social issues, although not necessarily on anything related to the project.

Finally, both versions concluded with the manager asking the participant for a decision.

Due to the strong need to fill this position, Pat would like your decision on whether you will join this project within the next two days. Deciding by this deadline, however, would mean making a decision before you know about other possible projects. Thus, you have to decide whether to join Pat’s group or see if there is another group you would prefer to join.

The design of the vignette portion of the experiment was a 2 (Conflict condition: RC vs. NRC) X 2 (Culture: European Americans vs. Koreans) between-subjects factorial.

Workgroup Evaluation and Decision. After reading one of the two vignettes, participants indicated whether they would ultimately join the team (1 = *Yes*, 2 = *No*).

Results

Conflict Beliefs. Participants' beliefs and expectations about conflict were analyzed through a Conflict Type X Culture mixed ANOVA. Neither the main effect of Conflict Type ($p = .55$) nor Culture ($p = .11$) was significant. However, consistent with the results of Study 1, the interaction between Conflict Type and Culture was significant, $F(1,159) = 26.76, p < .001$, showing that European Americans differed from Koreans in their relative expectations concerning the consequences of relationship versus task conflict. Contrasts conducted for each type of conflict confirmed the predicted pattern, with European Americans ($M = 0.24, SD = 0.61$) significantly less likely than Koreans ($M = 0.73, SD = 0.58$) to believe that relationship conflict is necessarily detrimental to task performance, $t(159) = 5.27, p < .001$. However, with respect to task conflict, European Americans ($M = 0.56, SD = 0.78$) were as likely as Koreans ($M = 0.34, SD = 0.79$) to agree that conflict in this domain hampers a team's performance, $t(159) = 1.74, p = n.s.$ Contrasts conducted within each culture show that whereas Koreans rated the consequences of relationship conflict as more harmful than those of task conflict, $t(159) = 4.15, p < .01$, the opposite was true for Americans, who were significantly less likely to agree that relationship conflict was as harmful as task conflict, $t(159) = 3.18, p < .01$.

Behavioral Intent. Finally, we examined participants' ultimate willingness to join groups likely (versus unlikely) to experience relationship conflict through Chi-square analyses conducted on Americans' and Koreans' yes-or-no decisions. As hypothesized, and consistent with their expectations about the respective types of conflict, European Americans were

significantly more likely (63.3%) than Koreans (36.7%) to join even when relationship conflict was likely, $\chi^2(N = 77) = 7.33, p < .01$, but more similar in their likelihood to accept the offer (57.7 % vs. 42.3% respectively) when relationship conflict was unlikely to occur in the team, $\chi^2(N = 84) = 3.23, p > .05$.

Discussion

Study 3 provided an initial test of the behavioral effect of the American optimistic bias about relationship conflict. The scenario presented to participants in this experiment represented a dilemma for those skeptical about the causal link between relationship conflict and task performance. Our results suggest that European Americans were less sure of this link relative to Koreans, suggesting a belief that a team's performance on task objectives is not inextricably tied to its ability to get along. Americans were as certain as Koreans about the negative influence that task conflict can have on workgroups. This interaction between culture and type of conflict is consistent with prior cross-cultural studies showing a greater cultural divide in workplace cognition and behavior within the interpersonal domain (Sanchez-Burks & Lee, *in press*). Together these results suggest that Americans have expectations about the consequences of relationship conflict that differ (a) from their beliefs about task conflict, (b) from results of prior meta-analyses on actual effects of relationship conflict, and (c) from the expectations held by East Asians.

General Discussion

Across three cross-cultural studies on conflict cognitions and behavioral intent we found evidence consistent with PRI theory. Americans more than Koreans do not agree that conflict necessarily hampers team task performance, but only when the conflict is in the relational domain. When juxtaposed to prior empirical research on the effects of team conflict, these representations of conflict can be described as an optimistic bias regarding the consequences of

relationship conflict. Americans more than Koreans were optimistic that team performance can prevail despite the presence of interpersonal friction. However, Americans were as convinced as Koreans that task-conflict would hamper team performance. This cultural asymmetry in beliefs about relationship conflict is consistent with American culture's relational ideology wherein the relational dimension is regarded as less relevant and important in work settings (Sanchez-Burks, 2005) and East Asian's tradition of emphasizing the importance of this dimension in work settings as much (or more) than in non-work social settings (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). The consistent pattern of cultural similarities with regard to task-focused conflict further suggests that cultural cognitions about conflict vary more in the relational domain than in the task domain. Study 2 ruled out the alternative possibility that the lack of an optimistic bias for Koreans reflected their inability to differentiate relational and task conflict. In fact, both Koreans and Americans showed a similar ability to cognitively differentiate between each form of conflict. These lay beliefs endorsing the notion that task and relational conflict can be separated are particularly interesting in light of recent scholarly debates about this very issue from an empirical perspective (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Tidd, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004).

This paper further contributes to the conflict literature by suggesting that cultural beliefs about conflict correspond to behavioral strategies. In group situations with both technical talent and a high potential for relationship conflict, East Asians showed behavioral intentions that reflected a strong belief that the talent would be completely offset by the conflict: They were more likely to avoid such groups. Americans, on the other hand, were more willing to join such a talented team that would likely experience relational turmoil, consistent with their expectations that such conflict would not necessarily be detrimental to the group's ability to succeed.

As in prior research on PRI theory, the present research relied on assessments of relational importance in different domains. For example, where in prior research PRI has been measured by assessing relational attunement in task versus social contexts (e.g., Sanchez-Burks, 2002), the present research measured PRI in the domain of conflict by assessing beliefs about task conflict and relationship conflict. The utility of this theory rests in its ability to go beyond cultural main effect predictions and also specify a domain where cultural differences should be more pronounced (i.e., the relational domain) versus a domain where greater cultural similarities should appear (i.e., the task domain). It is limited by its focus on societies grounded in Calvinist traditions (e.g., U.S.) rather than culture-general dimensions, but this also may be a strength given the lacuna of cultural theory to explain the unique cultural work style of societies such as mainstream America.

A limitation of the present research is the reliance on behavioral intent measures rather than actual behavior in conflict situations. Although people may have reported their belief about how they would decide and react to groups likely to experience conflict, their actual behavior may not always correspond to these *a priori* beliefs. In future research it would be worthwhile to examine through behavioral group studies the specific similarities and differences in the way cultural groups process and respond to task and relationship conflict. Such observations could provide additional insights needed to develop proactive strategies that culturally diverse teams can adopt when members disagree over whether relational turmoil will necessarily inhibit their task performance.

The results of this article also shed light on why people may be averse to entering groups that pose a risk of experiencing conflict, even of the task-focused variety. The belief among both cultural groups is that task conflict is highly likely to reduce team performance. This belief,

however, may limit the opportunity to learn first hand that the causal link between task conflict and performance can in fact be moderated, for example, by increasing group trust (Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000). The results further suggest that although virtually every study on the topic finds that relationship conflict impairs group performance, this may not always be the case for every workgroup if each member of the team does not expect it to be necessarily harmful. Such optimism, at least on the part of some group members, may help prevent a team from self-fulfilling prophecies where mere cues of relationship conflict set the team on a downward spiral independent of the initial severity of the conflict. Thus, there may yet be a way for teams to achieve task performance even when interpersonal discord exists. An example of the benefits of maintaining a divide between task and relational concerns while in the midst of relationship conflict is found in the collaboration of Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills during their translation of Weber's work into English (Weber, 1947) — a book that, ironically, includes an analysis of American's low relational focus at work. Their collaboration yielded the following correspondence:

"It's a pity Mills, that our glorious rows finally have come to the unglorious end. Unable to follow to the glorious heights of your moral elevation, I look forward to seeing you vanish in the snow white peaks of your moral Olympus. And now to business," he continued, without hesitation or explanation.

- Description of a letter from Hans H. Gerth to C. Wright Mills, February 19, 1945 (Oakes & Vidich, 1999, p. 45)

This passage illustrates an interesting juxtaposition of the existence of interpersonal friction between work partners and their ability to achieve joint success. Although purely anecdotal, our findings suggest it would be unlikely that Mills or Gerth would have continued with the collaboration if they had believed their interpersonal animosity would hinder the success of their translation. For some people, it may appear perplexing as to how a relationally

tumultuous collaboration could nevertheless be highly successful. But our results suggest that it would appear quite plausible to many European Americans; even if people do not get along, they should still be able to focus on their jobs and accomplish task-objectives. Despite having a belief that is at odds with prior research, societies in which people are more optimistic about a group's ability to prevail in spite of relationship conflict appear more likely to take a chance on collaboration with warning signs of interpersonal discord, given the collaboration has the right talent. That Americans' cognitive representations of conflict differ from experimental findings to date appears both intuitive and puzzling. Findings of perceptions that are at odds with independent observations are not uncommon, but it is ironic that the culture most often sampled in studies that document the negative effects of relational conflict is the very group least likely to have corresponding beliefs; therein lies the paradox of this American optimism.

Footnotes

¹ The vignette as well as the rest of the questionnaire was presented to participants in their native language. For the Korean versions, this included replacing the English names with common Korean names.

Appendix

Task Conflict Measures

1. To predict a team's likely success in completing a difficult project, one does not necessarily need to know about the team members' ability to agree on the task. (R)
2. Task conflict is an absolute roadblock to a team accomplishing its work.
3. For a team to successfully complete a job, they must first focus their attention on resolving task conflict before moving forward on the project.
4. Task conflict gets in the way of a team's potential to complete a task successfully.
5. Disagreement about the task does not necessarily get in the way of a team's performance. (R)
6. Task conflict necessarily limits a team's potential to achieve success on a project.

Relationship Conflict Measures

1. To predict a team's likely success in completing a difficult project, one does not necessarily need to know about the team members' ability to get along. (R)
2. Relationship conflict is an absolute roadblock to a team accomplishing its work.
3. For a team to successfully complete a job, they must first focus their attention on resolving relationship conflict before moving forward on the project.
4. Relationship conflict gets in the way of a team's potential to complete a task successfully.
5. Interpersonal friction does not necessarily get in the way of a team's performance. (R)
6. Relationship conflict necessarily limits a team's potential to achieve success on a project.

R = reverse coded

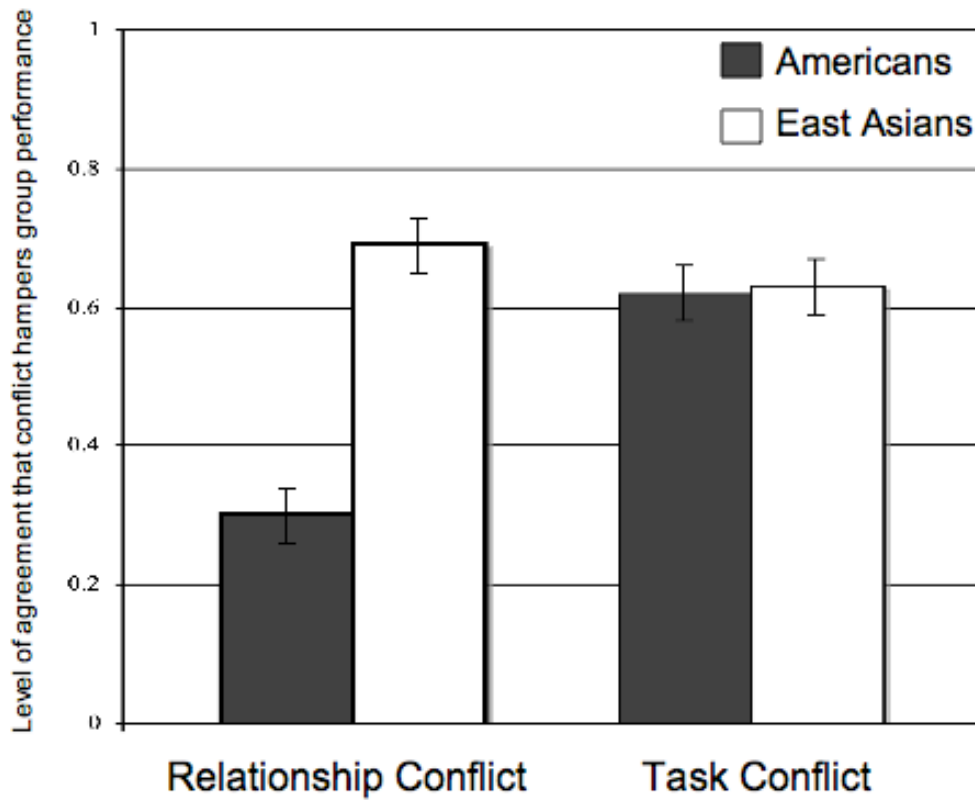


Figure 1. Beliefs about intragroup conflict as a function of conflict type and culture. Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error. (Study 1)

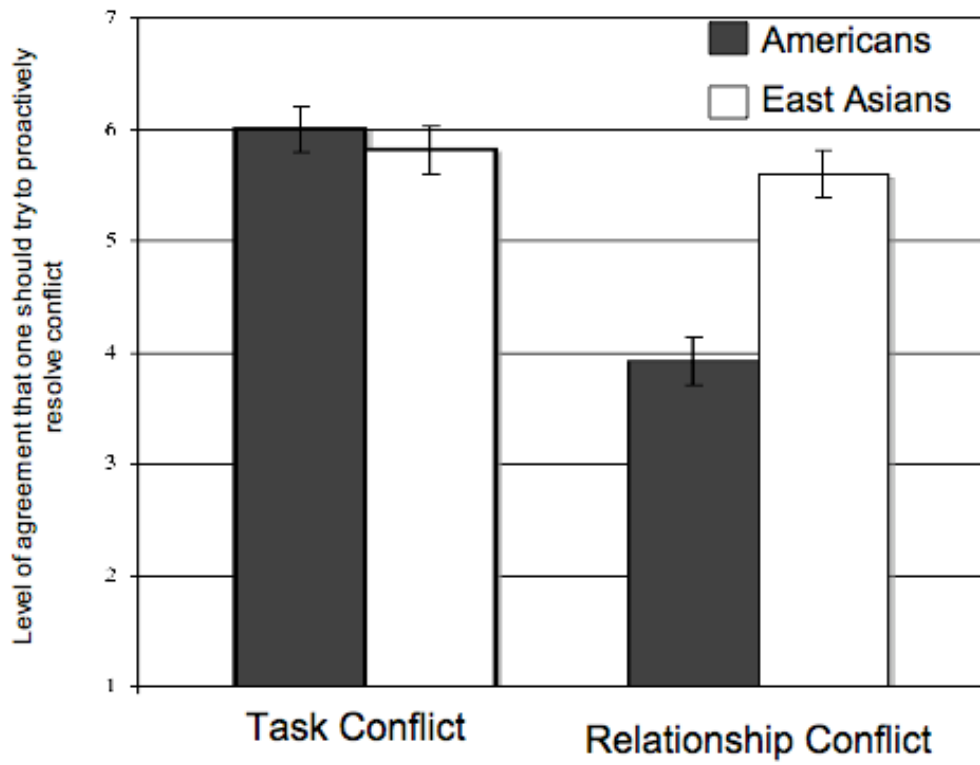


Figure 2. Behavioral strategies in response to group conflict as a function of culture and conflict.

Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error. (Study 2)

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