

Working Paper

Is Team Harmony Necessary for Success? Cultural Beliefs about Conflict and Team Performance

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Ross School of Business Working Paper Series
Working Paper No. 909
September 2004

This paper can be downloaded without charge from the
Social Sciences Research Network Electronic Paper Collection:
<http://ssrn.com/abstract=901775>

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Portions of this paper were presented at the 2003 Academy of Management meeting in Seattle, Washington and at the 2004 American Psychological Association conference in Honolulu, Hawaii.

We thank Emily Heaphy, Fiona Lee, Michel Wedel, and participants of the University of Michigan Department of Management & Organizations weekly seminar for their comments and insights on earlier versions of this work. We thank Li'er Wong and Kelly Anderson for help with data collection.

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Abstract

Despite empirical evidence that relationship conflict hampers team performance, recent cultural psychology theories have posited that European Americans underestimate the negative influence of relationship conflict. Consistent with research on Protestant Relational Ideology, a cross-cultural experiment showed that compared with Koreans, European Americans were less likely to believe that relationship conflict—but not task conflict—limits a team’s ability to succeed. European Americans were also more likely to join a talented team despite its likelihood of experiencing relationship conflict. Furthermore, secondary analyses showed that the cultural effect observed in participants’ decisions to join the potentially conflict-ridden team was related to participants’ beliefs about whether relationship conflict is detrimental to team performance.

Is Team Harmony Necessary for Success?

Cultural Beliefs about Conflict and Team Performance

Imagine that you have recently embarked on an important team project. After a few meetings, it becomes apparent that this highly skilled team does not click interpersonally, and you believe that relationship conflict will be inevitable during the project. How you react to this situation will depend on how you make sense of it—particularly your beliefs about whether relationship conflict can hamper a team’s ability to accomplish task-related objectives. If you are an avid reader of the literature on team conflict (for a review see Jehn & Bendersky, 2003), you might become rather disturbed given the bleak outlook this research suggests is in store for teams such as yours. Indeed, as made evident by a remarkably robust pattern across field and experimental studies, intragroup relationship conflict impedes team performance on task objectives (see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003 for a recent meta analysis). Whether one’s reaction is based on an informed perspective or intuition, the perception that relationship conflict is likely to emerge may make one wary of this team project, even if the members possess critical skill sets.

Despite a possible correspondence between intuition and empirical evidence, recent cultural psychology research on relational ideology suggests that the link between interpersonal harmony in a team and a team’s performance is not in fact common sense for certain cultural groups, European Americans in particular. This research, on what is referred to as *Protestant Relational Ideology* or PRI (Sanchez-Burks, 2002), shows that a distinguishing attribute of European Americans’ work style is a tendency to give diminished importance to the relational dimension of workplace interactions (see Sanchez-Burks, 2004 for a review). This suggests that the presence of conflict in the interpersonal domain (i.e., relationship conflict) may not be perceived by European Americans to be inherently detrimental to task performance. Paradoxically, this would suggest that the very population (i.e., European Americans) that

provided evidence that relationship conflict hampers task performance might be the population least likely to agree that such a causal relationship exists.

In this research, we use PRI theory (Sanchez-Burks, 2002) and research on conflict frames (Gelfand et al., 2001; Pinkley, 1990) to derive hypotheses that contrast with prior empirical findings on conflict. In particular, we study cultural beliefs about the consequences of relationship conflict and how these beliefs shape people's reactions to situations likely to involve relationship conflict. We propose that European Americans have a mental model about the consequences of relationship conflict that (a) departs from what empirical studies find in actual workgroups, (b) differs from their beliefs about task conflict, and (c) differs from the beliefs about relationship conflict held by other cultural groups. In the present research, we present a cross-cultural, multi-method experiment that examines European Americans' expectations concerning the influence of relationship conflict on workgroup performance and their respective responses to an offer to join a highly skilled workgroup that is likely to experience such conflict. To examine whether these beliefs are unique to conflict concerning relationships and unique to the characteristics of European Americans in particular, we compare these beliefs to those concerning task conflict and to the beliefs held by a sample of East Asians.

Conflict and Its Consequences

Within a workgroup, conflict can emerge in a variety of ways. For example, people can disagree about which of two advertising campaigns to fund, whether they should enter merger talks with a competitor, or how shareholders will react to the latest quarterly earnings statement. These are examples of task conflict, which exists "when there are disagreements among group members about the content of tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions" (Jehn, 1995, p. 258). People can also have disagreements based on relational concerns that are unrelated to the task per se. Such disagreements, or relationship conflict, exist "when there are interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes

tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group” (Jehn, 1995, p. 258).

Although these two types of conflict are often correlated (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000), studies have shown them to be empirically and theoretically distinct in their effect on group performance (Jehn, 1995; Pinkley, 1990; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

The importance of distinguishing relationship and task conflict is revealed in their differential effects on group performance. Conclusions about the consequences of task conflict remain equivocal as empirical studies show both benefits and costs associated with task-focused debate. Task conflict can lead to improved performance, presumably because moderate amounts of disagreement allow members to critically analyze their work and explore all alternatives (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). Conversely, task conflict can harm performance when it interferes with routine work (Jehn, 1995), when the group members lack trust in one another (Simons & Peterson, 2000), or when it degenerates into relationship conflict (Jehn, 1997).

For relationship conflict, empirical studies show an unusually straightforward and robust pattern: relationship conflict, in virtually every instance, is detrimental to performance. The harm caused by relationship conflict has been shown at both the individual and group levels of analysis (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) and includes reduced productivity (Wall & Nolan, 1986), creativity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996), and satisfaction (Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999).

The theorized mechanisms by which relationship conflict negatively influences teams are numerous: interpersonal conflict takes time and energy away from working on the task (Evan, 1965; Jehn, 1995; Pelled, 1996); it causes anxiety that hinders members’ cognitive functioning (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981); it decreases members’ ability to objectively process new information (Pelled, 1996); it reduces member motivation (Van Dyne, Jehn, & Cummings, 2002), cooperation, and goodwill (Deutsch, 1969); and it prevents teams from building consensus and implementing decisions (Amason & Schweiger, 1994; Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954).

Moreover, in a review of the effects of conflict conducted across fields including anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, and organizational behavior, Jehn and Bendersky (2003) proposed a contingency perspective outlining the conditions under which each type of conflict will have a positive or negative effect. Within this comprehensive contingency model, the authors did not propose a single situation in which relationship conflict might not have a negative effect on workgroup dynamics and team outcome.

Together, this research provides substantial evidence that relationship conflict hampers team performance. Whereas information about the presence of task conflict may not be sufficient to predict a team's ability to accomplish its task, the presence of relationship conflict provides highly diagnostic information—a team that does not get along will not perform well.

The above literature focuses on the actual effects of relationship conflict rather than beliefs about its effects. Yet it is also necessary to understand people's beliefs about conflict because the manner in which people construe work situations will influence affective and behavioral reactions. For example, beliefs about the importance of team harmony will shape whether an offer to join a rancorous yet talented team presents a dilemma or an unequivocal opportunity. To the extent that relationship conflict and team performance are negatively and inextricably linked, it would be reasonable to expect everyday beliefs about conflict to be consistent with this literature—particularly within those cultures (e.g. the U.S.) in which this causal link has been established.

In the following section, we review research on PRI to develop the argument that contrary to this robust effect, European Americans may not perceive relationship conflict as consequential to team success and that these beliefs differ from intuitions about task conflict and from the beliefs of people from other cultural groups. Our theoretical framework builds on the notion that culture shapes people's interpretations of conflict, providing particular conflict frames (Pinkley, 1990) that shape reactions, decisions, and behaviors.

Culture and Relationships in the Workplace: PRI

Within cultural psychology, there is a rich literature showing substantial differences in how cultures approach interpersonal relations (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998). A common theme in this literature is the variation in how interpersonal harmony is maintained through complex beliefs, norms, and institutions. Although cultures vary in their relational practices and traditions, it appears that most share a common importance assigned to social, emotional, and relational concerns in virtually every context (Park & Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). However, there exists an anomaly to this consensus regarding the importance of relational concerns: European American relational patterns in work settings (Sanchez-Burks, 2004).

Studies on the cultural construct used to explain this anomaly, referred to as Protestant Relational Ideology, or PRI (Sanchez-Burks, 2002), show that when compared with non-work settings, at work European Americans are guided by relational schemas that place diminished importance on relational concerns. Akin to an institutional imprinting perspective (Jacobs & Campbell, 1961; Stinchcombe, 1965), sociological, historical, and psychological research links PRI patterns to the beliefs and practices of the founding Protestant communities of European American society (Fischer, 1989; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Weber, 1947). Over time beliefs about the importance of restricting relational concerns while working were secularized and incorporated into the contemporary ethos of European American culture (Fischer, 1989; Weber, 1947).

Studies on PRI show, for example, that European Americans use face-saving strategies when communicating bad news in a non-work setting but use a blunter, direct communication style at work (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003). The expectation is that at work, European Americans put aside social, emotional, and relational concerns and focus on the task, thereby diminishing the need to communicate in a manner designed to preserve interpersonal harmony. In contrast,

East Asian and Latin American groups maintain or increase their relational focus when they enter the workplace. Other studies have shown how European American work patterns include a belief that efforts toward interpersonal concerns necessarily hamper productivity and that a team's task focus is more important than its interpersonal dynamics (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000). Together, research on PRI shows how relational dynamics are given less weight in European American work contexts compared to social settings and to the beliefs and practices of many other cultures.

Conflict Frames and Culture

How people make sense of conflict situations and how culture shapes these construals has been examined previously, with the greatest interest among negotiation scholars (Bazerman & Carroll, 1987). Pinkley (1990), for example, finds that negotiators have specific cognitive interpretations of conflict, or *conflict frames*, that they bring with them to the situation. Conflict frames are cognitive structures that guide interpretation, strategy selection, outcome preferences, and evaluations of other parties in the conflict (Pinkley, 1990). While Pinkley emphasized how frames are based on situational cues and past experiences, Gelfand and colleagues (Gelfand et al., 2002; Gelfand et al., 2001) have expanded the work by demonstrating that conflict frames are also shaped by culture. For example, whereas Japanese perceive negotiation conflicts in terms of a compromise focus, Americans perceive these negotiations more in terms of winning and losing (Gelfand et al., 2001). Thus, cultural groups can bring a different lens to the negotiating table that shapes their interpretations and reactions to conflict (also see Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarra, Pearson, & Villareal, 1997)

In the present research, we build on this tradition as we use a PRI perspective to examine European American beliefs about the consequences of conflict in work teams. In a cross-cultural experiment, we examine (a) beliefs about relationship conflict, (b) responses to an offer to join a talented workgroup that is likely to experience relationship conflict, and (c) some exploratory

assessments of how beliefs about conflict relate to these responses. Based on prior PRI research, we anticipated that European Americans would be less likely to perceive the presence of relationship conflict in a team as necessarily limiting the team's ability to succeed on task objectives—a perception at odds with empirical research on the actual consequences of relationship conflict. To test the prediction that this belief is specific to relationship conflict and not applicable to conflict more generally, we measured beliefs about the consequences of relationship and task conflict. Task conflict is by definition devoid of relational aspects, and therefore PRI theory provides no basis for expecting European Americans to place diminished importance on its effect on task performance. In addition, to test the prediction that these belief patterns are characteristic of European Americans and are not part of a universal folk wisdom, we compared European Americans' beliefs to those held by Koreans, a cultural group not associated with PRI and one that has appeared in prior research to examine hypotheses derived from PRI theory (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003). Specifically, we predicted that European Americans would differ from Koreans with respect to relationship conflict beliefs but not with respect to beliefs about task conflict.

To examine whether these beliefs are manifested in responses to conflict situations, we measured how receptive European Americans and Koreans would be to an offer to join a highly talented team for an upcoming project. We presented participants with one of two versions of such an offer. In both versions the team profiles indicated that this particular collection of individuals possessed the talent and skills needed for task success. However, in one version the group members were expected to get along well, while in the other version the members were expected to experience relationship conflict. Participants were asked to indicate the overall attractiveness of the team, how long they would need to make a final decision, and whether they would or would not ultimately join the team. We did not anticipate any cultural differences when there was no indication that the team would experience relationship conflict, but we

predicted that compared with Koreans, European Americans would be more receptive to the offer when relationship conflict among the team members was likely. Moreover, reasoning that such a decision becomes less difficult to make the more one believes that relationship conflict has negative consequences for the team, we predicted that Koreans would require less time to make their decision than would European Americans.

Method

Participants

Participants were 64 European Americans (34 men and 30 women; age: $M = 25.0$ years; $SD = 5.4$) and 85 Koreans (55 men and 30 women; age: $M = 23.0$ years; $SD = 2.3$) from large universities in the U.S. and Korea, respectively. Gender and age were not significant covariates and will not be discussed further.

Materials and Procedure

Participants received 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 begin with the following instructions:

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 team you work with 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. 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 and on a daily basis. During your time with the organization, you have met Chris and Terry once or twice, although you 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 that they anticipated getting along well with Chris and Terry.

Yet based on these encounters, you get the sense that 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 that 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 that 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 to see if there is another group you would prefer to join.

After reading one of the two versions, participants indicated on 6-point Likert scales whether the team represented an attractive opportunity (1 = *Very unattractive*, 6 = *Very attractive*), how much time they wished they had to make the decision (1 = *I could decide right now*, 6 = *I need the full two weeks*), and whether they would ultimately join the team (1 = *Yes*, 2

= *No*). Next, participants completed a survey that asked them to rate their level of agreement with statements regarding task conflict and relationship conflict using a 5-point Likert scale (-2 = *completely disagree*, +2 = *completely agree*). Items from the 6-item task conflict belief measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$) and the 6-item relationship conflict belief measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$) were randomly interspersed (see Appendix for these items). After finishing the experiment, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Beliefs about Conflict. A 2 (conflict type: relationship vs. task, within-subjects) X 2 (culture: Korean vs. European American; between-subjects) MANOVA showed a significant interaction, $F(1, 147) = 27.54, p < .001$, and non-significant main effects, p 's $> .10$. To interpret this difference, we looked across culture. As predicted and as shown in Figure 1, when compared with Koreans ($M = 0.73, SD = 0.58$), European Americans ($M = 0.21, SD = 0.64$) were much less likely to agree that relationship conflict is necessarily detrimental to task performance, $t(147) = -5.18, p < .001$. However, for task conflict there was no difference between the two groups. European Americans ($M = 0.57, SD = 0.74$) and Koreans ($M = 0.34, SD = 0.79$) were equally likely to agree that task conflict hampers a team's performance, $t(147) = 1.78, p = .08$. Together the pattern of results supports our hypotheses that European Americans have unique beliefs about relationship conflict but less so about task conflict. Consistent with PRI theory, European Americans are more skeptical than Koreans about the harm relationship conflict can have on a team's ability to achieve task success, but both hold similar beliefs with regard to the effects of task conflict.

Overall Attractiveness. In addition to the likelihood of intragroup conflict, an offer to join a team may contain other aspects that differ across cultures. To ensure that the two versions were equated in overall attractiveness across the cultural groups, we measured how attractive

overall participants perceived the team offers. A 2 (team: RC vs. NRC) X 2 (culture: Korean vs. European American) ANOVA on attractiveness showed a main effect of culture, $F(1, 145) = 6.40, p = .01$, indicating that European Americans rated the team offers as more attractive overall ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.13$) than did Koreans ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.90$). There was also a main effect of team, $F(1, 145) = 53.06, p < .001$, indicating that overall the NRC team was more attractive ($M = 4.47, SD = 0.95$) than the RC team ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.81$). The interaction effect was non-significant, $p > .05$. To control for unintended cultural differences in overall receptiveness to team offers, attractiveness ratings were used as a covariate in subsequent analysis.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Time to Decide. Next, we examined our hypotheses that European Americans would be more receptive than Koreans to an offer from a talented team that was likely to experience relationship conflict. If one is confident that relationship conflict will prevent even a talented team from succeeding, the decision to accept this offer should present less of a dilemma than if the conflict-performance link is perceived to be more tentative. As a result, we would expect people with the former perspective to require less time to decide to join the team than people with the latter perspective. As shown in Figure 2, a 2 (team: RC vs. NRC) X 2 (culture: Korean vs. European American) ANOVA on decision time revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 68) = 7.85, p < .01$. Both main effects were non-significant ($F < 1$). As predicted, when presented with an offer from a team that is likely to experience relationship conflict, Koreans ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.51$) required less time to make a decision than European Americans ($M = 4.70, SD = 1.07$), $t(68) = 2.25, p = .03$. In contrast, when invited to join a talented team that was unlikely to experience relationship conflict, there was relatively less difference between the decision times of European Americans ($M = 4.06, SD = 0.96$) and Koreans ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.19$), $t(76) = -1.61, p > .11$.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Yes-or-No Decision. A more definitive measure of receptiveness to the team's offer is the participants' yes-or-no responses. The 2 (team: RC vs. NRC) X 2 (culture: Korean vs. European American) logistic regression on yes-or-no decision (see Table 1) showed a significant main effect of culture, $\beta = -0.39$, $z = -1.95$, $p = .05$, indicating that European Americans were more likely overall to accept the offer. The main effect of team and the interaction were non-significant, p 's $> .50$.

Follow-up contrasts reveal that, as anticipated, European Americans tended to be more likely than Koreans to join even when relationship conflict is likely, $\beta = 0.52$, $z = 1.73$, $p = .08$; however, both cultural groups were equally likely to accept the offer when relationship conflict was unlikely to occur in the team, $\beta = 0.34$, $z = 1.22$, $p = .22$.

Mediation Analysis. Although not part of our original research strategy, assessing the participants' beliefs about conflict after they responded to the scenario provided us with the opportunity to use mediation analysis to examine how the beliefs related to the responses. This aspect of our findings should be regarded as preliminary. To do these analyses we followed the three-step procedure for testing statistical mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1177), first for time to decide then for final yes-or-no decision. The first equation, which regressed time to decide (dependent variable) on culture (independent variable, which was dummy coded as European American = 0, Korean = 1), was significant $\beta = 0.38$, $t(68) = 2.25$, $p = .03$, replicating the earlier contrast effect. In the next equation, beliefs about relationship conflict (proposed mediator) was regressed on culture, which showed a marginal effect, $\beta = 0.14$, $t(68) = 1.89$, $p = .06$. Together these regression models show a relationship between culture (IV) and time to decide (DV) and between culture (IV) and beliefs about relationship conflict (proposed mediator). Finally, we regressed time to decide on both culture and beliefs about relationship

conflict. As a moderate sign of mediation, culture dropped from significance to marginal significance, $\beta = -0.31$, $t(68) = -1.85$, $p = .07$ (Sobel test, $p = .21$).²

Next, we conducted a series of regressions to examine whether beliefs about the consequences of relationship conflict mediate ultimate decisions to join a team likely to experience relationship conflict. The first equation, which regressed yes-or-no decisions (dependent variable) on culture (independent variable) showed a main effect, $\beta = -0.50$, $z = -1.91$, $p = .06$. The second step, in which beliefs (proposed mediator) were regressed on culture, appears in the prior analysis, $p = .06$. Finally, we regressed ultimate decisions both on culture and beliefs about relationship conflict. This equation, indicating full mediation, showed that culture dropped from significance to non-significance, $\beta = -0.39$, $z = -1.43$, $p = .15$ (Sobel test, $p = .13$). Thus, this set of equations provides modest support that beliefs about relationship conflict mediate decisions on whether to join a team that is likely to experience relationship conflict. As noted earlier, though, these results should be treated as preliminary.

General Discussion

In this study we extend research on the consequences of conflict by examining people's beliefs about these consequences, how these beliefs are culturally situated, and how they shape reactions to the prospect of experiencing relationship conflict. Supporting our predictions derived from PRI theory, we found that European Americans, compared to Koreans, are less likely to believe that relationship conflict necessarily limits a team's ability to succeed, but they do not differ in their beliefs regarding task conflict. This lack of appreciation among European Americans about the effects of relationship conflict was apparent when compared to Koreans, who were more decisive (i.e., took less time) when contemplating the offer to join or not join a talented yet likely uncongenial team. Koreans were also far less likely to say yes to such an offer compared with European Americans. Further, secondary analyses suggest that participants'

beliefs about conflict were related to their decision responses. Together these findings provide a new perspective on how culture can shape beliefs about conflict, so much so that it renders them inconsistent with one of the most robust findings in conflict research and with what may appear to be common sense to other cultures.

Limitations

The present research relied on creating psychologically real, nonetheless hypothetical, vignettes to examine how beliefs about conflict shape decision-making processes. Although this paradigm provided strong experimental control, it may not tap additional complexities that might be found by examining actual work teams. For example, the consequences for one's career and livelihood substantially raise the stakes for joining a team that will be successful, which may cause one to downplay the notion that relationship conflict will prevent the team from ever achieving its potential. This limitation, however, may be less applicable to our findings regarding people's beliefs about the consequences of conflict because prior conflict research on student groups has shown similar dynamics and processes to those found in research on teams in work organizations (Duffy, Shaw, & Stark, 2000; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Porter & Lilly, 1996).

Also, our cross-cultural design focused on interactions between domains of conflict and culture rather than on solely cultural main effects in order to minimize biases such as reference-group effects (Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002). Nonetheless there are calls among cultural psychologists to go beyond self-report measures and use more online techniques and fewer attitudinal questionnaires (Kitayama, 2002). Our use of vignettes and forced-choice responses were designed to address the call. Culture, however, is not merely in people's minds; it is "out there." By observing actual teams in action and taking a systems view approach, we can better assess individuals' beliefs about conflict and their reactions to situations in which conflict may arise (Kitayama, 2002).

Future Work

Given that most research on existing teams shows that relationship conflict hurts group performance, our finding that European Americans endorse a more equivocal perspective is quite remarkable. Are their beliefs accurate reflections of their experiences? Or are these individuals Pollyannas who are clinging to false hope in their team's ability to focus on the task? Considering that a few empirical studies do report little or no ill effects of relationship conflict on performance (e.g., Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999), it is possible that these beliefs do accurately reflect individuals' experiences and by chance we disproportionately sampled from this population. Alternatively, it could merely be wishful thinking. Individuals steeped in a culture that downplays relational concerns at work would probably *want* to believe that relationship conflict cannot constrain their performance. Thus, this remains an open question for future research.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study have implications for how managers can approach work groups and some of their seemingly inevitable pitfalls. One potential downside of the conflict literature is that it implies that groups containing relationship conflict are automatically handicapped from reaching their full potential. Managers who believe this may refrain from putting together the most qualified team because some interpersonal tension exists between particular individuals. Although our findings would not argue that such thinking is imprudent, they do suggest that it is also important to consider what the members think about conflict. If all members agree that relationship conflict does not matter, then perhaps the way in which they interact will turn the beliefs into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Given the increasing presence of multicultural work groups, knowing about these cultural differences can help managers handle situations where conflict proves problematic. This is where our finding that actual beliefs about conflict relate to cultural variation takes on particular

relevance. Often there is an assumed fixity in thinking about cultural differences. It is as though we observe that two people act differently because of different cultural backgrounds and we resign ourselves to an observed difference “just being the way it is.” By thinking about these differences in terms of beliefs, we not only develop a more accurate picture of the differences we are witnessing, but we also broaden our search for problems to include not just multicultural teams but also monocultural teams. As part of its training program, an organization could educate its employees on the different ways in which people think about conflict in order to help all employees handle conflict when it arises.

Conclusion

‘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)

Our goal in undertaking this research was to address the relationship between conflict and performance and to better understand how people think about this link. The above passage from Gerth to Mills, authors of a seminal translation of Weber into English (Weber, 1946), represents an interesting juxtaposition of the existence of interpersonal friction between work partners and their ability to achieve joint success. To some, reading about such collaboration is utterly paradoxical; they cannot conceive of a situation in which members who do not get along at all can still produce anything remotely successful. Yet to others, it is seen as just one other way of doing business; even if people do not get along, they should still be able to focus on their jobs and accomplish their goals. From a theoretical standpoint, our findings complement the work on conflict frames (Pinkley, 1990) and demonstrate that culture plays an important role in shaping

the ways in which individuals think about the consequences of conflict. From a practical standpoint, we show that different individuals may hold different views about the relationship between conflict and performance and that both may be correct. The more management can help all group members be aware of each other's points of view, the better the group can become at knowing when to take advantage of opportunities that on first glance appear doomed and when to stay away from situations that look promising but would ultimately end in disaster.

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.

² As an additional check of construct validity, subsequent analysis shows that beliefs about task conflict do not mediate the relationship between cultural background and time to decide (beliefs about task conflict are not predicted by cultural background, $p = .14$). Furthermore, as would be expected, mediation was not found for the decisions regarding a team in which relationship conflict is unlikely, $p = .11$.

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 culture. Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.

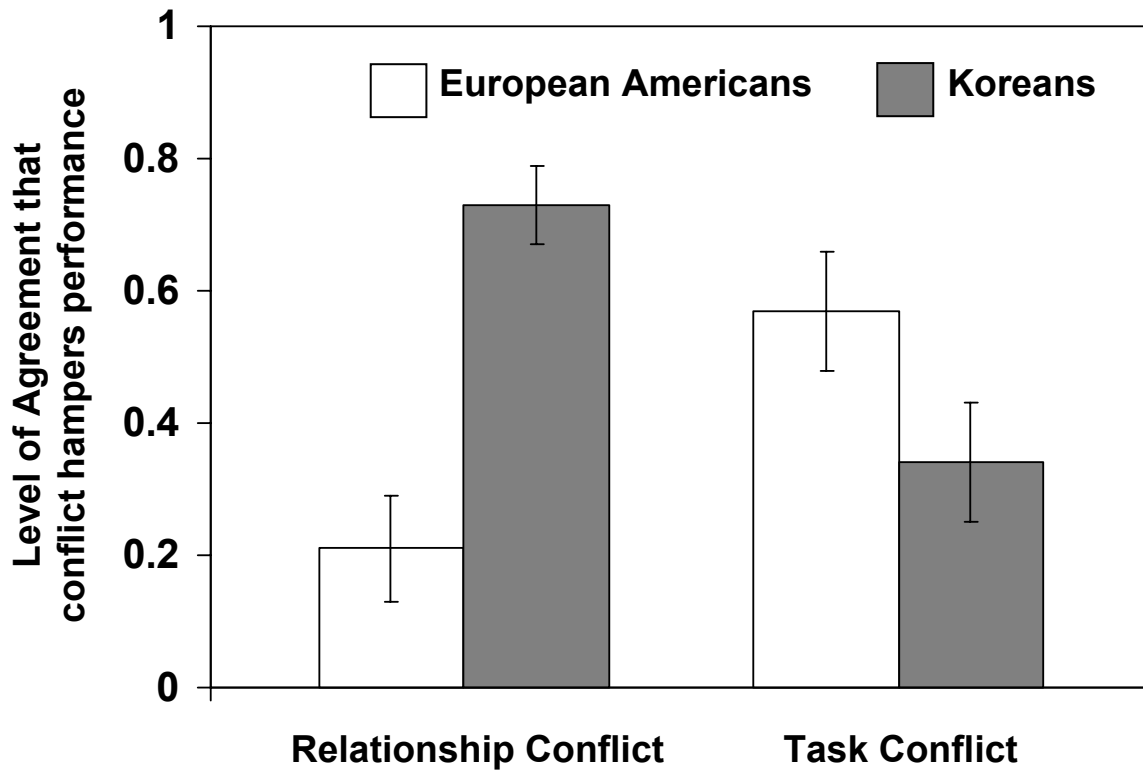


Figure 2

Preferred time to decide as a function of culture and vignette version. Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.

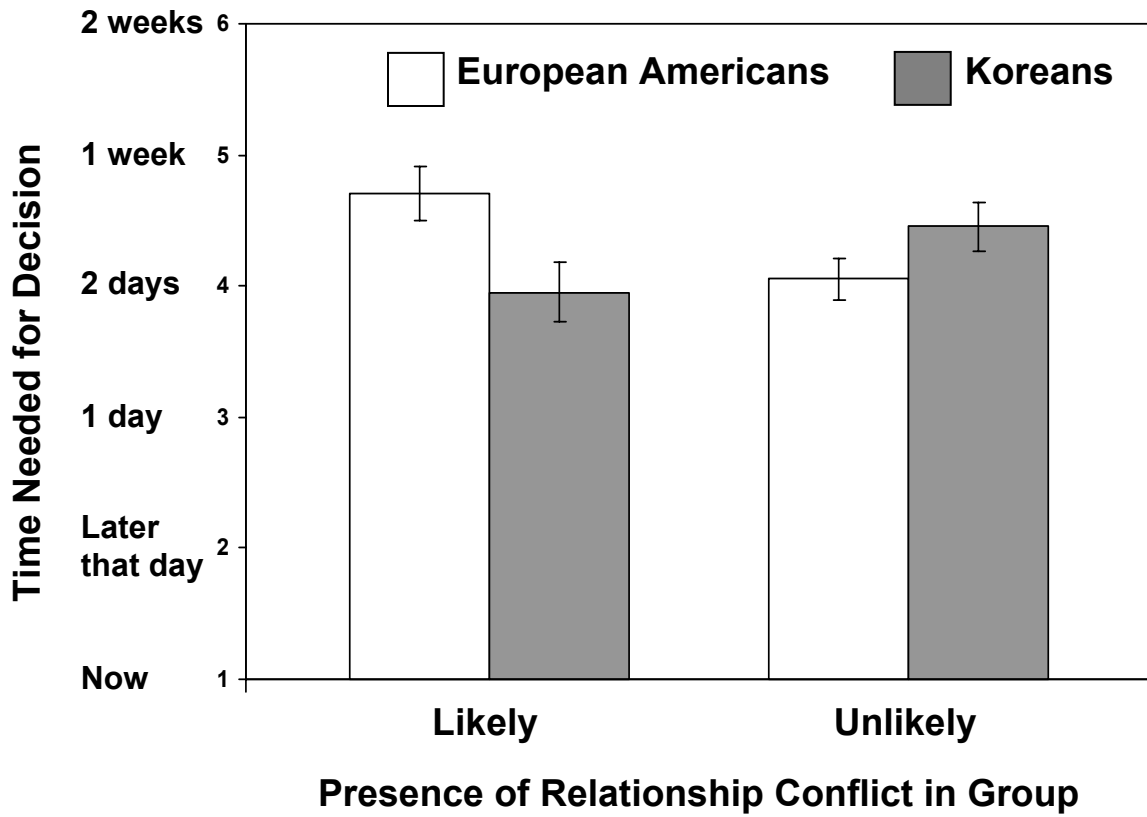


Table 1

Logistic regression of decision to join the team as a function of culture and vignette version, controlling for overall attractiveness.

<i>Variable</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Culture	0.39	0.20	1.95	.05
Vignette Version (RC or NRC)	0.08	0.23	0.35	.73
Culture X Vignette Version	-0.11	0.20	-0.55	.59
Attractiveness	1.20	0.27	4.39	<.001
Constant	-4.71	1.11	-4.23	<.001

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