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The combined effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on creativity

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ABSTRACT

Studies have consistently found that relationship conflict adversely affects work outcomes, prompting the conclusion that such conflict should be avoided. Challenging this established finding, we propose that relationship conflict has a positive effect on creativity when the relational self is salient. Specifically, we hypothesize that relational selves’ relationship-focused goal may be frustrated within a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation, triggering cognitive persistence that boosts their creativity by causing them to think in more depth and detail about their conflict. Data from the US (Experiment 1) and Korea (Experiment 2) supported our hypotheses. A subsequent study extended these findings to process conflict (Experiment 3). Our research highlights the overall finding that frustration of goals that are meaningful for individuals promotes their creativity through the mediation of cognitive persistence.

1. Introduction

Relationship conflict refers to the tension stemming from interpersonal incompatibilities such as clashes of personalities or life values (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Prior work has documented group-level consequences of relationship conflict among team members (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In particular, studies have consistently found that intragroup relationship conflict diminishes team performance and members’ satisfaction, prompting the conclusion that such conflict should be avoided (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Moreover, efforts to resolve relationship conflict have been considered futile (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). However, relationship conflict in the workplace is inevitable, because the complexity of most work requires significant interdependence among coworkers (Jehn, 1995) that can lead to clashes of personalities or values. Thus, effective organizational practices should include a means of harnessing relationship conflict. Only a few studies (Lu, Zhou, & Leung, 2011; Rispens, Greer, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2011; Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009) have examined conditions under which relationship conflict can have positive effects on work outcomes. Our research further contributes to filling this gap.

We attempt to investigate for whom, and for what specific work outcomes, relationship conflict has beneficial effects. Individuals’ reactions to a conflict may evidently differ (Lu et al., 2011). We suggest that relationship conflict can be leveraged through individual characteristics that can moderate (or reverse) the negative effects of relationship conflict on work outcomes. Thus, unlike previous studies that have mostly focused on the group level, our study examined relationship conflict at the individual level. Relationship conflict may be especially problematic for those whose self-definition relates to harmonious relationships, and who place great value on creating such relations. The term relational self refers to such individuals (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Compared with others, relational selves’ cognition and subsequent work outcomes would be significantly affected by relationship conflict. We applied relational self theory as our theoretical framework for hypothesis construction, because it can generate novel hypotheses that reveal unprecedented consequences of relationship conflict. That is, when relationship conflict is viewed from the perspective of relational self theory, enhanced creativity—defined as the ability to generate novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996)—surprisingly, but logically, follows such conflict. Specifically, a conflictual relationship situation may frustrate the desire of relational selves for a harmonious relationship, triggering their perception of the problematic situation from a new standpoint and generating useful solutions to resolve it. They may think “out of the box,” harnessing their creativity to improve their situation and achieve their relationship-focused goal.

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In sum, our research aims to examine hypotheses derived from relational self theory (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cross et al., 2000), positing that the relational self moderates the effect of relationship conflict on creativity (Experiments 1 and 2). Another objective is to examine whether the same logic, explaining the combined effect of relationship conflict and the relational self on creativity, is generalizable to a different type of conflict (process conflict) and self (the independent self) (Experiment 3).

Our work contributes theoretically to the interactional approach of creativity research by revealing a new causal link between situational (relationship conflict) and personal (relational self) factors and individual creativity. Moreover, it connects and extends organizational behavior research on relationship conflict and relational self theory within social psychology by showing that an unexpected positive work outcome—enhanced creativity—emerges from the combination of relationship conflict and the relational self.

2. Relationship conflict and work outcomes

Relationship conflict is known to generate suboptimal group functioning by evoking negative emotions and hampering intra-group trust (Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Langfred, 2004; Rispens, Greer, & Jahn, 2007). Conflict studies have begun to document situational moderators that attenuate the negative effects of relationship conflict on work outcomes (Lu et al., 2011; Rispens et al., 2011; Tekleab et al., 2009). Specifically, group members with high relational closeness within a conflictual relationship situation strive to maintain good relationships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Rushton & Van Lange, 2003). Accordingly, relationship conflict decreases group-level helping behavior and increases counterproductive work behaviors only in groups that are relationally distant (vs. close) (Rispens et al., 2011). Moreover, relationship conflict was only found to have a negative effect on team cohesion under conditions involving less open discussion and conflict resolution (Tekleab et al., 2009). Other research has shown that the negative effect of relationship conflict on individual-level knowledge-sharing and OCBI (Individual-directed Organizational Citizenship Behaviors) is amplified under a high reward system for relationship-building (i.e., how much employees perceive that good interpersonal relationships are related to promotions), but not under a low reward system (Lu et al., 2011).

Our work extends this evolving research by examining for whom and for what specific work outcomes relationship conflict has beneficial effects. We propose that the relational self moderates the effect of relationship conflict on creativity, and that this effect is mediated by cognitive persistence.

3. Relational self theory

The relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Cross et al., 2000) refers to an individual who defines the self in relation to specific or general significant/close others, expressed as “me when I am with my partner or close friends.” Relational selves consider outcomes for others close to them as their own, and greatly value their responsiveness to the needs of these close others. Thus, maintaining harmonious relationships is critical for them. Relational selves also consider interdependence and role responsibility as important factors for their achievements. The relational self is relevant within both interpersonal and group relationships as relational selves emphasize harmonious intragroup relationships featuring strong bonds, solidarity, interdependence, and reciprocity both with significant others and group members (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Lee, Adair, Mannix, & Kim, 2012).

The relational self construct is both trait- and state-based. Individuals may demonstrate culturally or dispositionally high or low levels of relational self. Specifically, women, who are socialized to care for others, tend to be more relational than men (Cross & Madson, 1997). Those with East Asian cultural backgrounds (e.g., Koreans), emphasizing social interdependence, tend to be more relational than those with Western backgrounds (e.g., North Americans), emphasizing autonomy (Lee, Brett, & Park, 2012; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, a state (vs. trait) based relational self can be temporarily activated within a group of individuals, regardless of their pre-existing individual or cultural differences, by asking them to recall a relationship with a specific partner, to define who they are in terms of close relationships, or to think about their role as a spouse, partner, friend, or family member (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Cross, Hardin, & Gereck-Swing, 2011). That is, although disposition, gender, and culture influence an individual’s level of “relational-ness,” the relational self exists in everyone, because all of us have memories of relationships with some significant others. A strong situational stimulus (e.g., experimental priming) can foster temporary salience of individuals’ relational selves—regardless of their general disposition—and unconsciously influence their cognition, motivation, and behavior (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006).

Individuals with high trait-based levels of relational self, or whose state-based relational self is activated, are highly committed to pursuing their relationship-focused goal, that is, building and maintaining harmonious relationships with close others. Their cognition and motivation are significantly influenced by the pursuit of this goal and its frustration (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2000), including in relation to group-based relationship conflict. Thus, their cognitive processing of the conflict situation, and their motivation to fulfill their frustrated relationship-focused goal, would be significantly affected by relationship conflict.

Pursuit of a relationship-focused goal is a unique characteristic of the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2000). By contrast, the independent self is represented by individuals with an autonomy-focused goal who define the self as being self-reliant and separate from others. They consider their identities as autonomous and distinct from those of other individuals or group members (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals with high trait-based levels of independent self, or whose state-based independent self is activated, place great value on pursuing their autonomy-focused goal (Shweder & Bourne, 1982). In our study, the independent self serves as a comparative control condition for the relational self (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). Because building and maintaining a harmonious relationship is the primary goal of relational (vs. independent) selves, relationship conflict (frustration of a relationship-focused goal) should affect cognitive processing and creativity when the relational self, but not the independent self, is salient.

4. Effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on cognitive persistence

Relational self theory emphasizes the persistence of relational selves in achieving their relationship-focused goal (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006). Thus, relational selves should demonstrate persistence in their thinking related to frustration of their relationship-focused goal and its achievement. As such, we predict that a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation will have a more positive effect on cognitive persistence—defined as concerted efforts and perseverance related to thorough and in-depth thinking or elaborative cognitive processing (De Dreu, 2004).
Specifically, cognitive persistence pertains to the degree of sustained and focused cognitive effort expended on a task, as measured by intensity and/or time (Nijstad, De Dreu, Rietzschel, & Baas, 2010). Goal commitment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for cognitive persistence. That is, goal commitment evokes cognitive persistence only when an individual experiences goal-related frustration (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2008, 2012). When individuals perceive their situation as problematic for achieving their goal, they engage in focused, systematic, and detail-oriented solution seeking (Ambady & Gray, 2002; Nijstad et al., 2010; Schwarz & Bless, 1991). Moreover, when the motivation to think is high, individuals engage in elaborate cognitive processing by examining available information and considering relevant issues (Pettit & Cacioppo, 1986). Because relational selves are committed to their relationship-focused goal (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006), we expect that they should demonstrate cognitive effort and persistence when their goal is frustrated. In a conflictual relationship situation, relational selves should persist in in-depth and detailed thinking aimed at overcoming constraints and finding solutions for achieving their relationship-focused goal. By contrast, relational selves in a harmonious relationship situation, having fulfilled their relationship-focused goal, lack motivation to invest further cognitive effort. In support of these propositions, previous research has shown that relational selves recall more information about past roommates with whom they were distant (vs. close). The suggested mechanism was that relational selves’ desire to avoid uncomfortable relationships prompts them to attend more carefully to their distant roommates’ values/beliefs (Cross & Morris, 2003). If frustrated relationship-focused goals drive these patterns, the positive effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation on cognitive persistence should manifest only when the relational self, but not the independent self, is salient. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1. The effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation on cognitive persistence will be more positive when a relational self is activated.

5. Effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on creativity

We further predict that cognitive persistence will mediate the link between a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation and relational selves’ creativity. We focus on cognitive persistence as the underlying mechanism, because the literature on creativity has documented how this variable accounts for creativity in the context of unfulfilled goals (De Dreu et al., 2008, 2012; Dietrich, 2004; Evans, 2003; Finke, 1996; Sagiv, Arieli, Goldenberg, & Goldschmidt, 2010; Simonot, 1997). An unfulfilled goal activates a mental process that enables individuals to block distracting thoughts, thereby concentrating intensely on the task at hand and exploring a smaller number of categories in depth to fully understand the problematic situation (Dreisbach & Goschke, 2004; Koch, Holland, & Van Knippenberg, 2008; Roskes et al., 2012). By enabling this concerted focus on a situation, and a systematic exploration of associated problems, cognitive persistence fosters creativity.

More specifically, cognitive persistence can enable distinct forms of creativity—convergent and divergent thinking (Finke, Ward, & Smith, 1992; Runco, 2007; Ward, Smith, & Vaid, 1997). Convergent thinking is a cognitive process that identifies the best and most appropriate solution to a problem (Brophy, 2000; Guilford, 1967). To find the best solution, individuals need to view a problem from a novel perspective by “thinking outside of the box” (Wiley, 1998). A second form of creativity, divergent thinking, is a cognitive process that generates a broad range of solutions or ideas (Guilford, 1967). This requires individuals to use their inductive and ideational cognitive abilities to expand their thinking (Runco, 2007). Engaging in in-depth and detailed thinking (cognitive persistence) is not necessarily synonymous with deriving the most appropriate solution (convergent thinking) or generating diverse ideas (divergent thinking). However, cognitive persistence is a precursor of convergent and divergent thinking and, thus, of creativity: The more thoroughly and deeply people think, the more likely they are to generate appropriate solutions or diverse ideas, demonstrating greater creativity (Boden, 1998; De Dreu et al., 2008, 2012; Dietrich, 2004; Finke, 1996; Roskes et al., 2012; Simonton, 1997).

Consequently, cognitive persistence in a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation should have a positive effect on relational selves’ creativity. Relational selves in a conflictual relationship situation would think deeply and in detail to understand the conflict source and develop creative solutions, thus achieving their relationship-focused goal. Conversely, relational selves in a harmonious relationship situation would not need to exert cognitive effort and creativity as they would have fulfilled their goal. Therefore, we expect a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation to have a positive effect on cognitive persistence and, in turn, on creativity when the relational self is salient. If this pattern is driven by frustration of relationship-focused goals, it should be evident only when the relational self (with a relationship-focused goal), but not the independent self (with an autonomy-focused goal), is elicited. In sum, cognitive persistence should affect creativity at the intersection of relationship conflict and the relational self. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 2. The effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation on creativity will be more positive when a relational self is activated.

Hypothesis 3. Cognitive persistence will mediate the link between a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation and relational selves’ creativity.

6. Extension to process conflict

Although relationship-focused goal pursuit is unique to the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2000), the underlying logic that goal frustration facilitates cognitive persistence and creativity (De Dreu et al., 2008; Nijstad et al., 2010; Roskes et al., 2012) should apply to any goal and its associated conflict situation. Thus, we expect this logic to apply to process conflict relating to disagreements on how task accomplishment should proceed (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Specifically, it should explain how process conflict exerts a positive effect on cognitive persistence and creativity when the independent self, but not the relational self, is salient. Process conflict occurs over logistical issues such as incompatibilities regarding work allocation, responsibility, delegation, and efficient work planning (Greer & Jehn, 2000, 2007; Jehn, 1997). We expect process conflict to frustrate independent selves’ autonomy-focused goals

Specifically, independent selves focus on their autonomy and self-reliance (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). They pursue what they
want and plan to organize their lives based on their personal desires, free from others’ interference. They try to decide and schedule their own activities without control from others. Thus, in a conflictual team-process situation, independent selves are likely to perceive the influence of others (team members) on their activities as hindering their ability to autonomously establish or control these activities. Moreover, because independent selves prefer working autonomously, they may seek clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities that would allow them to fulfill their duties themselves without relying on others. Thus, a conflictual team-process situation (with poorly established roles and responsibilities) is likely to frustrate independent selves’ autonomy-focused goals, causing them marked discomfort because of their inability to control their own schedules or roles.

To resolve the coordination issue involving others and thereby achieve their autonomy-focused goal, independent selves in a conflictual process situation would, therefore, think deeply and in detail to generate creative solutions. By contrast, independent selves in a harmonious process situation (with clear roles and responsibilities) would not need to exert cognitive effort and creativity, having already fulfilled their autonomy-focused goal. Thus, just as relationship conflict (frustration of a relationship-focused goal) is expected to have a positive effect on cognitive persistence and creativity when the relational self (a relationship-focused goal) is salient, process conflict (frustration of an autonomy-focused goal) should have a positive effect on cognitive persistence and creativity when the independent self (an autonomy-focused goal) is salient. Thus, we have:

**Hypothesis 4.** The effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) process situation on cognitive persistence will be more positive when an independent self is activated.

**Hypothesis 5.** The effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) process situation on creativity will be more positive when an independent self is activated.

**Hypothesis 6.** Cognitive persistence will mediate the link between a conflictual (vs. harmonious) process situation and independent selves’ creativity.

### 7. Overview of the experiments

We conducted a series of four experiments: one pilot and three hypothesis-testing studies. All of the experiments were designed to activate the state (not trait) based levels of the participants’ relational (vs. independent) selves to demonstrate the combined causal effects of an intragroup conflict situation and the self. The initial pilot study examined whether our manipulation of a conflictual relationship (vs. process) situation would be more relevant to the relational self and relationship-focused goal frustration. Conversely, manipulation of a conflictual process (vs. relationship) situation should be more relevant to the independent self and autonomy-focused goal frustration. Then we examined the combined effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on cognitive persistence and creativity in the US (Experiment 1) and Korea (Experiment 2). Last, we investigated whether the logic underlying the findings of Experiments 1 and 2 would be generalizable to process conflict (Experiment 3).

### 8. Pilot study

We predicted that the perception of a conflictual relationship (vs. process) situation interfering with the desire for a harmonious relationship would occur when a relational self, but not an independent self, was activated. Conversely, the perception of a conflictual process (vs. relationship) situation interfering with the desire for autonomy would occur when an independent self, but not a relational self, was activated. The experimental design was a 2 (self: relational vs. independent) × 2 (conflict situation: relationship vs. process) between-participants factorial design with random assignment to one of the four conditions.

### 8.1. Participants

The participants were 103 US-based Amazon Mechanical Turk users. They exhibited diverse occupations and the following demographics: 37.9% males; a mean age of 36.7 years; and representation of White (76.7%), African American (9.7%), Hispanic (6.8%), Asian (3.9%), and other (2.9%) ethnicities. Mechanical Turk has been used for data collection in multiple psychological studies. Its features and validity as a data collection tool are described in detail elsewhere (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010).

### 8.2. Materials

#### 8.2.1. Self

We used an adapted version of the Twenty Statements Test (McPartland, Cumming, & Garretson, 1961) to activate the state-based self and test its causal effect on our dependent variables. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the relational self condition and read the following passage (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lee et al., 2012):

*People often define themselves in terms of their relationships with close friends, family, or significant others. In the ten blank lines below, please list your relationships with your significant others that you think are close and important. For example, who are your close others? What do you and your close others do together? (Examples: We are high school friends. We are strong family. We went to a movie last weekend.)*

The remaining participants were randomly assigned to the independent self condition and read the following (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Lee et al., 2012):

*People often define themselves in terms of their unique characteristics, personalities, or traits. In the ten blank lines below, please list your unique characteristics, personality, traits, attitudes, hobbies, or ambitions. For example, who are you? What do you do? (Examples: I like photography. I am outgoing. I am tall.)*

All participants filled in the 10 blank lines provided below the priming instructions. Evidence confirming the effectiveness of this manipulation is presented in the result sections of Experiments 2 and 3 and in the supplementary materials.¹

#### 8.2.2. Conflict situation

Relational (or independent) selves and other group members may perceive different levels of conflict (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010). Thus, our conflict situation manipulation entailed the perception of equal levels of a conflictual (or harmonious) situation by the self and others. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the conflictual relationship situation. They were asked to recall (or imagine) a past experience.

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¹ More detailed information on manipulation checks conducted for all of the reported studies can be obtained from the first author.
The remaining participants were randomly assigned to the conflictual relationship situation with others in a group as follows:

You had a relationship conflict with other members in your group. Examples of relationship conflict areas are differences in personalities and values and misunderstandings in personal relations. In this situation, you perceived a high level of relationship conflict, and other members in your group also perceived a high level of relationship conflict.

The remaining participants were randomly assigned to the conflictual process situation. They were asked to recall (or imagine) a past experience in which they had a conflictual process situation with others in a group as follows:

You had a process conflict with other members in your group. Examples of process conflict are controversial procedures for accomplishing the task (e.g., issues of duty and resource allocation such as who should do what and how much responsibility should one have). In this situation, you perceived a high level of process conflict, and other members in your group also perceived a high level of process conflict.

Next, in the blank lines provided, all participants described the type of a group they were thinking about and their feelings and thoughts in that particular situation. The data presented in our main studies (and in the supplementary materials) showed that these situational manipulations of relationship conflict (Experiments 1 and 2) and process conflict (Experiment 3) were all successful.

8.2.3. Goal frustration

All participants were asked to assess the conflictual situational manipulation. They responded to two items: (1) “The situation interferes with my desire for harmonious relationships,” and (2) “The situation interferes with my desire for autonomy,” using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, 7 = strongly agree).

8.3. Results

8.3.1. Relationship-focused goal frustration

A 2 (self: relational vs. independent) × 2 (conflict situation: relationship vs. process) ANOVA revealed that neither the main effect of conflict situation (p > .10) nor the main effect of self (p > .20) was significant. However, as predicted, when a relational self was activated, a conflictual relationship situation was perceived to interfere more with the desire for harmonious relationships (M = 5.77, SD = 1.31) than a conflictual process situation (M = 4.87, SD = 1.89), F(1, 99) = 4.29, p < .05, η² = .04. This did not apply when an independent self was activated (conflictual relationship situation: M = 5.62, SD = 1.39 vs. conflictual process situation: M = 5.66, SD = 1.23; p > .30). This finding shows that our manipulation of a conflictual relationship (vs. process) situation was more relevant to relational selves whose relationship-focused goal was frustrated.

8.3.2. Autonomy-focused goal frustration

A 2 (self) × 2 (conflict situation) ANOVA showed that neither the main effect of conflict situation (p > .30) nor the main effect of self (p > .70) was significant. However, as predicted, when an independent self was activated, a conflictual process situation was perceived to interfere more with the desire for autonomy (M = 5.14, SD = 1.16) than a conflictual relationship situation (M = 4.03, SD = 1.76), F(1, 99) = 4.70, p < .02, η² = .06. This did not apply when a relational self was activated (conflictual process situation: M = 4.26, SD = 1.57 vs. conflictual relationship situation: M = 4.73, SD = 1.98; p > .30). These data confirm that our manipulation of a conflictual process (vs. relationship) situation was more relevant to independent selves whose autonomy-focused goal was frustrated.

9. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 aimed to test our hypothesis that the effects of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation on cognitive persistence and creativity would be more positive when a relational self, but not an independent self, was activated. We used a 2 (self: relational vs. independent) × 2 (relationship situation: conflictual vs. harmonious) between-participants design, with random assignment to one of the four conditions.

9.1. Participants

The participants were 113 US-based Amazon Mechanical Turk users. They exhibited diverse occupations and the following demographics: 52.2% males; a mean age of 35.2 years; and representation of White (77.9%), Asian (8.0%), African American (7.1%), Hispanic (5.3%), and other (1.8%) ethnicities.

9.2. Materials

9.2.1. Self

We used a self-priming method that has been validated in previous studies (Gardner et al., 1999; Lee, Lee, & Kern, 2011; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998).

All the participants read the following scenario:

Sostoras, a warrior in ancient Sumer, was largely responsible for the success of Sargon I in conquering all of Mesopotamia. As a result, he was rewarded with a small kingdom of his own to rule. About 10 years later, Sargon I was conscripting warriors for a new war. Sostoras was obligated to send a detachment of soldiers to aid Sargon I. He had to decide who to put in command of the detachment.

Half of the participants were then randomly assigned to the relational self condition and read the following scenario:

After thinking about it for a long time, Sostoras eventually decided on Tiglath who was his best friend. This appointment had several advantages. Sostoras was able to show his loyalty to his friend by giving him this high honor. He was also able to cement his friend’s loyalty to him. In addition, having Tiglath as the commander increased the strength and unity of their friendship. Finally, if Tiglath performed well, Sargon I would be indebted to the two friends, Tiglath and Sostoras.

The remaining participants were randomly assigned to the independent self condition and read the following scenario:

After thinking about it for a long time, Sostoras eventually decided on a talented general. This appointment had several advantages. Sostoras was able to make an excellent general indebted to him. This would solidify Sostoras’s hold on his own dominion. In addition, the very fact of having a general such as Tiglath as his personal representative would greatly increase Sostoras’s prestige. Finally, sending his best general would be likely to make Sargon I grateful. Consequently, there was the possibility of getting rewarded by Sargon I.

After reading this scenario, all participants indicated the extent to which they thought Sostoras’s decision was strategic using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all strategic to 7 = very strategic).
Moreover, the responses of participants to the question, “Why did Sostoras choose Tiglath?” were used to check the manipulation (Jin, 2010).

9.2.2. Relationship situation

Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the conflictual relationship situation (the same scenario used in the pilot study). The other half were randomly assigned to the harmonious relationship situation. They were asked to recall (or imagine) a past incident in which they had a harmonious relationship with others in a group. The situation was described as: “All members of your group, including you, felt satisfied with a harmonious relationship.” Then, in the blank lines provided, all participants described the type of group they were thinking about and their feelings and thoughts in that particular situation.

9.2.3. Cognitive persistence

We hired two independent coders (undergraduates) who were blind to the experimental conditions/hypotheses. They coded only participants’ descriptions of their feelings/thoughts regarding the relationship situation using our definition of cognitive persistence as in-depth/detailed thinking (De Dreu et al., 2008, 2012). In response to the question: “How deep and detail-oriented was the participant’s writing about his or her feelings and thoughts?” (Oral, 2006; Sosik, Kahal, & Avolio, 1998), they independently rated the degree of cognitive persistence on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). We averaged the two coders’ ratings to create a cognitive persistence index (inter-rater reliability = .91).

9.2.4. Creativity

After writing about their feelings and thoughts regarding a conflictual (or harmonious) relationship situation, the participants completed 20 items of the Remote Association Test (RAT: Bowers, Regehr, Balthazard, & Parker, 1990; Mednick & Mednick, 1967). This measure assesses the ability to identify associations between normally unrelated words. Participants read the following statement: “Each of the problems below consists of three clue words. For each problem, please think of a fourth word that relates to each of the other three clue words.” (Example: elephant – lapse – vivid; Answer: memory). Participants were required to suppress the seemingly strongest associative word and come up with a new associative word that was remote but related to the other two clue words (Mednick, 1962). This required thinking from a novel perspective, based on the ability to analyze associations between remote ideas. The RAT has been used within creativity studies to measure convergent type of creativity or general creativity levels (Cushen & Wiley, 2012; Dewhurst, Thorley, Hammond, & Ormerod, 2011; Storm, Angello, & Bjork, 2011; Subramaniam, Kounios, Parrish, & Jung-Beeman, 2008; Taft & Rossiter, 1966). We used the number of correct RAT answers provided as a creativity index for each participant.

9.3. Results

9.3.1. Manipulation checks

First, to assess the effectiveness of the self manipulation, we asked two independent coders (undergraduate students who coded only these data) to evaluate participants’ answers in response to the question: “Why did Sostoras choose Tiglath?” They coded the statements as being either relational (focusing on a relationship with close friends or significant others) or independent (focusing on unique characteristics, abilities, or traits). The inter-rater reliability of the coders’ ratings for both the relational and independent self was .82. Moreover, to assess the effectiveness of the conflict situation manipulation, we asked two independent coders (undergraduate students who coded only these data) to evaluate participants’ descriptions in response to the relationship situation manipulation as reflecting either a conflictual or a harmonious relationship situation (Table 1). The inter-rater reliability of the coders’ ratings for both the conflictual and the harmonious relationship situation was .99. The results of the manipulation checks are presented in detail in the supplementary materials (Appendix A). All manipulations used in Experiment 1 were found to be effective.

9.3.2. Cognitive persistence

A 2 (self: relational vs. independent) × 2 (relationship situation: conflictual vs. harmonious) ANOVA revealed that the main effect of relationship situation was marginally significant (p = .10), while the main effect of self was not (p > .90). More central to our hypothesis, as predicted, a conflictual relationship situation had a more positive effect on cognitive persistence (M = 3.53, SD = 1.32) than a harmonious relationship situation (M = 2.86, SD = 1.11) when a relational self was activated, F(1, 109) = 4.29, p < .05, η² = .04. This did not apply when an independent self was activated (conflictual relationship situation: M = 3.28, SD = 1.07 vs. harmonious relationship situation: M = 3.14, SD = 1.26; p > .60; Fig. 1). An effect on creative persistence was only observed when relationship conflict and the relational self were concurrent. These results support H1.

9.3.3. Creativity

A 2 (self) × 2 (relationship situation) ANOVA revealed that the main effect of relationship situation was marginally significant (p < .10), while the effect of self was not significant (p > .70). In line with our hypothesis, a conflictual relationship situation had a more positive effect on creativity (M = 12.40, SD = 4.99) than a harmonious relationship situation (M = 9.60, SD = 5.63) when a relational self was activated, F(1, 109) = 4.02, p < .05, η² = .04. This did not apply when an independent self was activated (conflictual relationship situation: M = 10.26, SD = 5.42 vs. harmonious relationship situation: M = 7.97, SD = 4.96; p > .30; Fig. 1). An effect on creative persistence was only observed when relationship conflict and the relational self were concurrent. These results support H1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflictual relationship situation</th>
<th>Harmonious relationship situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am a member of the Sunday school parents’ group at my church. The priest of the parish and the group members do not get along with each other because of different values. This is very frustrating and makes me angry</td>
<td>I enjoyed being with these friends. We had a good time together and everyone got along. I felt accepted and happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not like the fact that I was basically invisible to them and that they would talk among themselves as if I was not there. They would speak in Spanish and this made me feel really uncomfortable. They seemed to think they were better than me. When we carried out projects, if something was wrong they would blame me for it. They refused to help others who needed help unless, of course, they were also Hispanic. They thought they were better than everyone else.</td>
<td>I thought that it was wonderful to be part of a group in which everyone supported each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The situation was very negative. There was dissension among team members and with the boss who was playing the assistants against each other. I did not even like going to work knowing that there would be a negative feeling in the air. It just made me feel uncomfortable</td>
<td>The situation was very positive. We all had a good relationship with each other on and off the court. It was a nice period of my life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Please cite this article in press as: Jung, E. J., & Lee, S. The combined effects of relationship conflict and the relational self on creativity. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.06.006
Higher levels of cognitive persistence predicted creativity in the relational self condition, but not for the independent self condition.

![Graph](image1.png)

Fig. 1. Cognitive persistence as a function of the self and relationship situation in the US (Experiment 1). The difference between conflictual and harmonious relationship situations was significant for the relational self condition, but not for the independent self condition.

![Graph](image2.png)

Fig. 2. Creativity as a function of the self and relationship situation in the US (Experiment 1). The difference between conflictual and harmonious relationship situations was significant for the relational self condition, but not for the independent self condition.

relationship situation: $M = 11.86$, $SD = 5.72$ vs. harmonious relationship situation: $M = 10.86$, $SD = 4.24$; $p > .40$; Fig. 2). As predicted, only the concurrence of relationship conflict and the relational self affected creativity, thus supporting H2.

9.3.4. Mediation

Higher levels of cognitive persistence predicted creativity in the relational self condition ($B = 1.87$, $SE = .53$, $t = 3.52$, $p < .01$). Bootstrapping (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) revealed a significant indirect effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation on creativity through cognitive persistence in the relational self condition, 95% Confidence Interval $= [1.13, 2.84]$. As predicted, the positive effect of relationship conflict on creativity in the relational self condition was mediated by relational selves’ increased cognitive persistence in a conflictual relationship situation, thus confirming H3.

9.4. Discussion

These results provide support for our hypothesis that relationship conflict has a positive effect on creativity when the relational self is salient, because it motivates relational selves to think harder to find solutions to the conflict. An alternative explanation is that it is easier to write in detail about a conflictual interaction (a more intense emotional event) than about a harmonious one. However, the result indicating that a conflictual (vs. harmonious) relationship situation did not affect cognitive persistence and creativity when an independent self was activated—despite our providing identical instructions—suggests that a relationship-focused goal is a unique characteristic of relational selves. Its frustration prompts cognitive persistence in these individuals for its achievement.

These results supported our predictions but required replication using different samples and measures of self-priming and creativity. Thus in the next study, we recruited a Korean sample to establish the generalizability of our predicted effects across cultures. In addition, we recruited full-time employed participants to explore more direct organizational implications. Moreover, in Experiment 2, we used a different measure of creativity. The RAT, used for Experiment 1, is an appropriate measure of divergent creativity (where there is a single correct answer), but it only measures the novelty aspect of creativity, or the ability to make novel and unusual connections between ostensibly unrelated things. In Experiment 2, we used a measure of convergent creativity (where there is no single correct answer) that revealed both novelty and usefulness, with even more direct organizational relevance.

10. Experiment 2

Experiment 2 aimed to demonstrate converging evidence for our hypotheses across culture-based sample types and measurement approaches. The implications of relationship conflicts in a culture with a strong social norm of harmonious relationships (e.g., Korea) may differ from those in a less relational culture (e.g., the US). As Experiment 1 was conducted with US-based participants, we conducted Experiment 2 with Korean participants whose culture is highly relational (Lee, Brett et al., 2012). Confirmation of our hypotheses would thus provide strong causal evidence of the combined effect of relationship conflict and the relational (not independent) self on creativity across cultures. The experimental design was identical to that of Experiment 1: a 2(replication vs. independent) × 2 (relationship situation: conflictual vs. harmonious) between-participants design, with random assignment to one of the four conditions. All experimental materials were translated into Korean.

10.1. Participants

We contacted managers within multiple institutes in DaeDuck Science Valley, Daejeon, Republic of Korea, and explained our study’s objective through in-person meetings, seeking their agreement to liaise between us and their employees. These individuals distributed our survey to employees and collected data. Seventy-five Korean employees (64% males) participated and were each compensated with approximately US $5. The mean age of participants was 35.2 years. Their work experience averaged 7.9 years. Individuals distributed our survey to employees and collected data via email.

10.2. Materials

The manipulations of self and relationship situations and the measure of cognitive persistence were identical to those applied in Experiment 1.
in the pilot study and Experiment 1. We recruited two independent coders (undergraduate students who coded only these data) and averaged the two coders’ ratings to create an index of cognitive persistence (inter-rater reliability = .86).

10.2.1. Creativity

We adapted the creativity measure applied by Grant and Berry (2011). Participants were asked to imagine the following scenario:

The aim of the company or the institute you are working for is to become a world-class organization. But your company or institute is currently experiencing stagnation of growth. To improve this situation, the organization will form a Task Force Team (TFT). Please write down as many ideas as possible regarding the TFT selection criteria, management style, and performance assessment as possible. (A TFT is a group established to work on a single defined task or activity.)

We hired two coders who were full-time managers with over 10 years of work experience that included participation in multiple TFTs (they coded only these data). Blind to our experimental conditions and hypotheses, they independently rated each participant’s creativity on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all creative, 4 = somewhat creative, 7 = very creative), with creativity defined as entailing novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996). The coders read all participants’ answers before assigning creativity scores to obtain a good sense of the range of creativity. We averaged their ratings into a creativity index for each participant (inter-rater reliability = .90).

10.3. Results

10.3.1. Manipulation checks

To assess the effectiveness of the self manipulation, we asked two additional independent coders (who coded only these data) to evaluate participants’ self-descriptions in response to the self-priming (Gardner et al., 1999; Lee et al., 2012). They coded the statements as being either relational (having a positive or negative experience with a person close to them, such as a friend, spouse, romantic partner, or family member) or independent (having a positive or negative experience independent of others). The inter-rater reliability of the coders’ ratings for both the relational and independent self was .98. Moreover, we examined whether our relationship situation manipulation (which was effective for US participants in Experiment 1) was also effective for Korean participants. The coding procedure (which was done by two additional independent coders who coded only these data), was identical to that applied in Experiment 1 (Table 2). The inter-rater reliability of the coders’ ratings for both the conflictual and harmonious relationship situations was .91. The supplementary materials present the results of the manipulation checks (Appendix B). All the manipulations were successful.

10.3.2. Cognitive persistence

A 2 (self: relational vs. independent) × 2 (relationship situation: conflictual vs. harmonious) ANOVA revealed that the main effect of relationship situation was marginally significant (p < .10). The main effect of self was not significant (p > .10). As we hypothesized, a conflictual relationship situation had a more positive effect on cognitive persistence (M = 3.33, SD = 1.25) than a harmonious relationship situation (M = 2.41, SD = .96) in the relational self condition, F(1, 70) = 4.99, p < .03, η² = .07. This was not the case in the independent self condition (conflictual relationship situation: M = 3.33, SD = 1.14 vs. harmonious relationship situation: M = 3.22, SD = 1.61; p > .20; Fig. 3). Cognitive persistence was only boosted by the combination of relationship conflict and the relational self, thus replicating Experiment 1’s findings with Korean participants and supporting H1.

10.3.3. Creativity

A 2 (self) × 2 (relationship situation) ANOVA showed that neither the main effects of relationship situation (p > .30) nor of self (p > .70) was significant for creativity. More central to our hypothesis, a conflictual relationship situation had a more positive effect on creativity (M = 4.17, SD = 1.62) than a harmonious relationship situation (M = 3.06, SD = 1.54) when a relational self was activated, F(1, 71) = 4.55, p < .04, η² = .06. This did not occur when an independent self was activated (conflictual relationship situation: M = 3.28, SD = 1.68 vs. harmonious relationship situation: M = 3.75, SD = 1.64; p > .30; Fig. 4). Thus, the findings of Experiment 1 were replicated and supported H2. Again, creativity was affected positively only by the combination of relationship conflict and the relational self.

10.3.4. Mediation

Higher levels of cognitive persistence predicted creativity in the relational self condition (B = .44, SE = .20, t = 2.16, p < .04). Bootstrapping revealed that a conflictual (vs. harmonious)
11.4. Discussion

Derived from a different self-priming method and measure of creativity, these results replicated our findings for a US sample in Experiment 1 using a Korean sample. Experiment 2 showed that the relational self moderated the link between relationship conflict and creativity through cognitive persistence. Given that commitment to a relationship-focused goal is unique to relational selves (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006), relational conflict did not affect the cognitive persistence and creativity of Koreans with an activated independent self. Our experimental design enabled us to identify a compelling causal link between relationship conflict and creativity when a relational self (a relationship-focused goal), but not an independent self (an autonomy-focused goal), was activated.

Experiments 1 and 2 showed that frustration of a meaningful goal promoted cognitive persistence and creativity (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2008). We postulated that this logic would apply to the frustration of any goal, and not just a relationship-focused goal. Thus, Experiment 3 extends the findings of Experiments 1 and 2 by investigating whether this logic applies in the case of process conflict and autonomy-focused goal frustration.

11.1. Participants

The participants were 102 US-based Amazon Mechanical Turk users. They exhibited diverse occupations and the following demographics: 40.2% males; a mean age of 32.3 years; and representation of White (82.4%), Asian (6.9%), African American (4.9%), Hispanic (3.9%), and other (2%) ethnicities.

11.2. Materials

11.2.1. Self

The same manipulation was used as for the pilot study.

11.2.2. Process situation

Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the conflictual process situation (the same scenario used in the pilot study). The remaining participants were randomly assigned to the harmonious process situation and asked to recall (or imagine) a past incident in which they experienced a harmonious process situation with others within a group. The situation was described as follows:

You had a harmonious process with others in a group. All members of your group, including you, felt satisfied with the procedures for accomplishing the task (e.g., issues of duty and resource allocation such as who should do what and how much responsibility should be taken).

Then, in the blank lines provided, all participants described the type of a group they were thinking about and their feelings and thoughts in that particular situation.

11.2.3. Cognitive persistence

We relied on the same measure of cognitive persistence used in our earlier experiments. We recruited two additional independent coders (undergraduate students who coded only these data) and averaged the two coders' ratings as an index of cognitive persistence (inter-rater reliability = .96).

11.2.4. Creativity

We relied on the same RAT assessment used for Experiment 1.

11.3. Results

11.3.1. Manipulation checks

We relied on the same procedure used in Experiment 2 to assess the effectiveness of the self manipulation. The inter-rater reliability of the coders' ratings for both the relational and the independent self was .99. To assess the effectiveness of the process situation manipulation, we asked two additional independent coders (who coded only these data) to evaluate the participants' descriptions of a conflictual or harmonious process situation (Table 9). The inter-rater reliability of the coders' ratings for both the conflictual and harmonious process situations was .99. The detailed results of the manipulation checks are presented in the supplementary materials (Appendix C). All the manipulations were effective.

11.3.2. Cognitive persistence

A 2 (self: relational vs. independent) x 2 (process situation: conflictual vs. harmonious) ANOVA revealed that neither the main effect of process situation (p > .20) nor the main effect of self (p > .80) was significant. More central to our hypothesis, as predicted, a conflictual process situation had a more positive effect on cognitive persistence (M = 3.58, SD = 1.51) than a harmonious process situation (M = 2.66, SD = 1.20) when an independent self was activated, F(1, 98) = 4.70, p < .04, η² = .05. This did not occur when a relational self was activated (conflictual process situation: CI = [.02, .94]. Thus, H3 was again supported, with Korean participants.
Cognitive persistence was positively related to creativity in the independent self condition (Experiment 3). The difference between conflictual and harmonious process situations was significant for the independent self condition, but not for the relational self condition. Thus, Experiment 3 extended the findings of Experiments 1 and 2 by highlighting the enhancement of creativity when a relational self (a relationship-focused goal) was activated. Thus, Experiment 3 demonstrated that relationship-focused goal frustration (Experiments 1 and 2) was not the only factor that boosted cognitive persistence and creativity. This study showed that process conflict (frustration of an autonomy-focused goal) had beneficial effects on cognitive persistence and creativity when an independent self (an autonomy-focused goal) was activated. Creativity was affected only by a combination of process conflict and the independent self that generated cognitive persistence. By contrast, process conflict did not affect cognitive persistence and creativity when a relational self (a relationship-focused goal) was activated. Thus, Experiment 3 extended the findings of Experiments 1 and 2 by highlighting the enhancement of creativity resulting from cognitive persistence that occurs more generally when individuals experience frustration of a meaningful goal. Just as relationship conflict has a positive effect on creativity when the relational self is salient, process conflict has a positive effect on creativity when the independent self is salient. Both of these findings are explained by cognitive persistence. Thus, goal frustration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confictual process situation</th>
<th>Harmonious process situation</th>
</tr>
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| Four individuals were assigned to a group. It was very difficult to communicate within the group, and no one was motivated to work. We would talk about what we could do, but then we would not do it. No one knew their place, and neither did I. I managed to write most of the PowerPoint presentations before sending them to the other group members to let them decide how they could help. This was a group project of casual university acquaintances. There was no designated leader for the group, and no one wanted to take responsibility for the project we were assigned. Everyone was a bit at odds with each other about what needed to be done and who should be doing what. Ultimately, it was decided that because no one would take the lead, we would all do our own thing and just put everything together on the day the project was due. As one would expect, the outcome was unsuccessful and we suffered the consequences of our conflict. There was a critical code that came into the ER. At this time, members of our group were conflicted and stressed about who should do what. People were needed to take the patient’s blood pressure, put in the catheter, draw the blood, and perform CPR. Duties were not clearly decided beforehand, so there was a significant role conflict about who should do what. I felt very uneasy and stressed. When a critical patient arrives, not knowing what you are supposed to be doing is a very unsettling feeling. It was my first big project at work and it felt great not only being given a large amount of responsibility, but also knowing that they had confidence in me to complete it. Everyone did their job well and we were satisfied with the outcome. Afterward, my bosses recognized the work and it was such a great feeling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmonious project situation</th>
<th>Conflictual process situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| My work group had to complete a large landscaping project that was somewhat beyond the scope of our experience. The responsibilities, duties, resources, and capabilities all fell harmoniously into place, and the job was completed successfully. It started well and ended well too. We assigned each group member their tasks as equally as possible and according to each person’s skills. Each and every group member did superb work. We agreed upon any subsequent correction and editing. It was a smooth and democratic process to say the least. As a result, we all succeeded in achieving our objectives. Overall, there was a very good and satisfying feeling.

11.3.3. Creativity
A 2 (self) × 2 (process situation) ANOVA revealed that neither the main effect of process situation ($p > .10$) nor the main effect of self ($p > .10$) was significant. Central to our hypothesis, a conflictual process situation had a more positive effect on creativity ($M = 8.14, SD = 4.57$) than a harmonious process situation ($M = 8.04, SD = 4.44; p > .90$; Fig. 6), confirming H5.

11.3.4. Mediation
Cognitive persistence was positively related to creativity in the independent self condition ($B = 1.03, SE = .38, t = 2.70, p < .02$). Bootstrapping showed a significant indirect effect of a conflictual (vs. harmonious) process situation on creativity through cognitive persistence in the independent self condition, 95% CI = [.03, 2.41], thus supporting H6.

11.4. Discussion
Experiment 3 demonstrated that relationship-focused goal frustration (Experiments 1 and 2) was not the only factor that boosted cognitive persistence and creativity. This study showed that process conflict (frustration of an autonomy-focused goal) had beneficial effects on cognitive persistence and creativity when an independent self (an autonomy-focused goal) was activated. Creativity was affected only by a combination of process conflict and the independent self that generated cognitive persistence. By contrast, process conflict did not affect cognitive persistence and creativity when a relational self (a relationship-focused goal) was activated. Thus, Experiment 3 extended the findings of Experiments 1 and 2 by highlighting the enhancement of creativity resulting from cognitive persistence that occurs more generally when individuals experience frustration of a meaningful goal. Just as relationship conflict has a positive effect on creativity when the relational self is salient, process conflict has a positive effect on creativity when the independent self is salient. Both of these findings are explained by cognitive persistence. Thus goal frustration

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boosts the creativity of individuals for whom that goal is meaningful.

12. General discussion

Our central research question on whether relationship conflict can have positive effects on work outcomes counters conventional wisdom which states that relationship conflict is harmful. Departing from previous research, our study examined the effect of intragroup relationship conflict on individuals with a relationship-focused goal, or those who exemplified the relational self. A pilot study and three further experiments using different self-priming methods, multiple creativity measures, and culturally distinct samples (from the US and Korea) have provided compelling causal evidence to support our hypothesis that a combination of relationship conflict and the relational self enhances creativity through cognitive persistence (Experiments 1 and 2). Moreover, we have demonstrated that the underlying logic that goal frustration boosts cognitive persistence and creativity for those with that goal is generalizable to any linked goal and conflict. Just as relationship conflict (frustration of a relationship-focused goal) has positive effects on cognitive persistence and creativity when a relational self (a relationship-focused goal) is activated, process conflict (frustration of an autonomy-focused goal) has positive effects on cognitive persistence and creativity when an independent self (an autonomy-focused goal) is activated (Experiment 3). This study thus makes novel contributions to the literatures on intragroup conflict, creativity, and relational self theory.

12.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study extends the intragroup conflict literature by integrating two bodies of research—relationship conflict within organizational behavior scholarship and relational self theory within social psychology—to demonstrate the positive consequences of relationship conflict when a relational self is activated. The organizational literature theorizes the relational self as influencing interpersonal role relationships (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), social exchange (Flynn, 2005), and negotiation (Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O’Brien, 2006). However, to date, these two bodies of research have remained disconnected. Their integration within this study revealed novel findings. Previous studies have shown that intragroup conflict decreases productivity, because members spend more time and energy on relationships than on tasks (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Our findings suggest that focusing on relationships may counterintuitively facilitate performance of creative tasks if the concerned individuals’ relational selves are elicited. In a conflictual relationship situation, unpleasant aspects of the conflict affect work-related tasks, and performance suffers. Our results show that when a relational self is activated, it is this unpleasant state fostered by the unfulfilled relationship-focused goal that promotes creativity by prompting those with an activated relational self to think in greater depth and detail. Thus, our research challenges the conclusion that relationship conflict is harmful. It extends the conflict literature by explicating the surprisingly beneficial effects of relational conflict on creativity when a relational self is elicited.

Likewise, our study extends process conflict research by demonstrating a new (positive) consequence of such conflict on creativity when an independent self is activated. Previous research has shown negative outcomes of process conflict, including decline of group performance (Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, & Trochim, 2011; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), group coordination and member satisfaction (Behfar et al., 2011), and employee retention (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). However, we found that process conflict could have a positive effect on creativity when mediated by the increased cognitive persistence of a salient independent self.

Our findings also enable us to reinterpret previous group-level research findings in the conflict literature. For example, relational closeness among team members has been shown to dampen the negative effects of relationship conflict on group-level work behavior (Rispens et al., 2011). We can plausibly conjecture that relational closeness may activate a state-based relational self among team members which then attenuates the negative effects of relational conflict. Our work hints at a multi-level theoretical extension of the intragroup conflict literature, namely, a psychological mechanism entailing activation of individual members’ relational selves in a conflictual relationship situation. Moreover, our experimental approach extends existing conflict research that has mostly used survey data demonstrating links between intragroup conflict and group-level outcomes (e.g., Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn et al., 2010; Rispens et al., 2011). By manipulating conflict situations, our study enabled an examination of new causal effects of conflict on individual creativity and other work outcomes.

The study also extends the creativity literature by revealing a new set of relationships that predict creativity. The creativity literature takes an interactional approach that underscores both situational and personal predictors of creativity (George & Zhou, 2001; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). Our study illustrates new permutations of situational and personal determinants of creativity: combinations of relationship conflict with the relational self and of process conflict with the independent self. It highlights the underlying logic that goal frustration facilitates cognitive persistence and, subsequently, creativity for those with that goal, opening up multiple new inquiries that can unveil new sets of situational and personal antecedents of creativity.

The study further expands the boundaries of relational self theory. To date, the relational self has been examined in terms of social cognition, well-being, motivation, and emotion (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2000, 2011). By adopting an integrated approach to relational self theory and conflict research, we discovered an unexamined benefit of the relational self, namely, the enhancement of the conflictual relationship situation. By doing so, we have extended relational self theory by unpacking, for the first time, the cognitive underpinning (cognitive persistence) of the link between the relational self and creativity. Research has shown that collectivism, represented by the relational self in our study (Brewer & Chen, 2007), hinders creativity. This is because collectivists tend to conform to others’ behavior rather than dissenting in creative ways (Goncalo & Staw, 2006). Our results suggest that a harmonious relationship situation may facilitate this dynamic, whereas a conflictual relationship situation may rupture the negative link between collectivism and creativity found in previous studies.

12.2. Practical implications

Because our experiments manipulated conflict situations, they suggest clear areas for practical intervention. In particular, our simple manipulation of conflict caused variations in the creativity levels of full-time employed participants in Experiment 2, suggesting the application of such approaches to real world settings. Contrary to previous research suggesting that managers should avoid relationship conflict, we would advise managers to use employees’ recollections of their past relationship conflict (or at least an imagined conflict) to boost employees’ creativity. Our research does not necessarily involve actual group-level conflict; nor does it involve changes in actual group environments or systems. It, therefore, has wide implications.

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Specifically, in a team composed mostly of relational employees, managers should be wary of teamwork that is overly harmonious as this may hinder creativity. They should consider asking such employees to recall or imagine personality incompatibilities among team members to elicit perceptions of relationship conflict and to foster the employees’ cognitive persistence and creativity. In a team composed of mostly independent employees, managers may consider having such employees recall or imagine disagreements regarding scheduling, work division, and roles and responsibilities among team members to activate perceptions of process conflict and thus facilitate the employees’ cognitive persistence and creativity. Moreover, managers should educate employees regarding their differences related to the relational or independent self and specific conflict situations that can boost their creativity.

12.3. Limitations and future research

The most significant limitation of our research was the lack of field data to support our hypotheses. Although experiments are better suited to establishing causality (our research objective), field research is critical for generalizing results from experiments to the real workplace. Because the current study relied on an experimental design, we did not measure actual conflict or its perceptions. Instead, we simulated it by having participants recall a past instance of conflict, which may have had little to do with real time conflict. Moreover, relationship conflict may be viewed differently even among relational selves. Another shortcoming was the small sample size in Experiment 2. Thus, to further validate and extend our results, future research should use larger sample field studies that measure employees’ perceptions of conflict in their workgroup and managers’ or third-party’s ratings of the employees’ creative behavior.

Future studies could explore the link between the relational self and creativity in the context of a supportive team versus that of a supportive leader. The creativity literature includes numerous studies revealing the positive effects of supportive leadership on employee creativity (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). Relational selves may demonstrate higher creativity in a harmonious relationship situation with supportive leaders (consistent with previous studies) than in a harmonious relationship situation with teammates (our study). Future research could tease apart conditions under which supportive leadership or a supportive team boosts or hampers relational selves’ creativity, along with associated driving mechanisms. Moreover, it may be worth examining whether a conflictual leader–employee relationship situation promotes greater creativity, as does a conflictual intragroup relationship situation demonstrated in our study.

Our study emphasized the relationship (autonomy) focused goal of the relational (independent) self. These are intrinsic goals that relational (independent) selves naturally and voluntarily embrace. Future research could extend our findings by examining whether an extrinsic goal would be as motivating as an intrinsic goal. Previous research (Fishbach & Choi, 2012) has found that when individuals focus on how to pursue an extrinsic goal (secur- ing instrumental outcomes or benefits), this diminishes their motivation to pursue that goal. Thus, individuals—relational selves and independent selves—may not be as motivated to invest effort into thinking and thus become creative when they pursue an extrinsic goal in contrast to their intrinsic objective. Future research could elucidate when pursuing an intrinsic or extrinsic goal facilitates or hinders individual motivation, cognitive persistence, and creativity.

Finally, future studies could explore the interactional effects of conflict situation and the self on work outcomes other than creativity such as productivity or engagement. If future research demonstrates that relationship conflict has beneficial effects on work productivity or engagement through cognitive persistence when the relational self is salient, this would suggest more positive consequences of relationship conflict than we have revealed.

13. Conclusion

Our study shows that relationship conflict has a positive effect on creativity when a relational self is activated. Likewise, process conflict has a beneficial effect on creativity when an independent self is activated. For both selves, the underlying mechanism is the frustration of goals that are important to each of them in specific conflict situations. They think more persistently, and, thus, creatively, to resolve the problem interfering with their goal achievement. In sum, our study sheds light on conflict situations wherein frustration of a meaningful goal unexpectedly fosters more creativity within organizations.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.06.006.

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