Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder: How Asymmetric Perceptions Color our Experience

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Introduction

Recently there has been a surge of interest in the idea of asymmetry in negotiation experiences and within groups, whereby group members have varying perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and emotions related to negotiation and group processes (Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002; Gino & Moore, 2008; Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010). Most of the research on groups and teams in organizations assumes that because members share an experience by virtue of being together, they also possess shared properties—for example, all members perceive the same level of trust and conflict within a team (Dirks, 1999; Porter & Lilly, 1996; Simons & Peterson, 2000). However, we know that different group members may perceive, feel, and experience situations differently.

As educators and coaches for countless MBA teams, we have seen how experiences can be perceived differently. For example, in an MBA team that one of the guest editors coached, there were five team members. The final business plan was turned in late, and a discussion revealed clear asymmetries in perception. Two team members were furious, one member was upset but not surprised, one member was unaware, and one member did not care that the business plan had been turned in late. Our emotional discussion of this event lasted for 30 min. When asked about this meeting at a later point in time, three members perceived there to be high levels of conflict and were quite

uncomfortable. One member perceived moderate amounts of conflict. One member did not perceive any conflict whatsoever; in fact, he was surprised to hear that the other members had perceived this whole situation as a conflict at all. Although this group performed their task successfully (e.g., they were one of three teams selected to compete in a prestigious business plan competition), they self-destructed and disbanded thereby giving up their incredible opportunity. Because there was one member who did not perceive conflict, it was impossible for the group to resolve the conflict. The individual who did not perceive conflict continued to be stunned and surprised as events unfolded because his perception of the events differed drastically from those of other team members.

Group researchers interested in studying conflict like the example described above would generally be inclined to look at the mean level of conflict. However, in the MBA team example, it would be misleading to say that there is a high level of relationship conflict as one person perceived moderate amounts of conflict and one person perceived no conflict at all. Asymmetry on any dimension (e.g., perceptions of diversity, power, trust, justice, communication) may lead to increased problems and difficulties within organizational relationships. By exploring the asymmetry of perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and emotions within organizational relationships, researchers may be better able to explain negotiation and group processes, as well as individual and group-level performance, turnover, and morale than past models of negotiation and group processes.

Thus, this special issue on asymmetry is designed to encourage researchers to look at the structure of perceptions, beliefs, and experiences in the dyads and groups that they study. The idea of asymmetry has potential implications for many areas of research across multiple levels of the organization. In our call for papers, we identified potential areas for research on asymmetry. For example, we encouraged submissions that investigated the possible dimensions on which asymmetry can exist, antecedents to asymmetrical perceptions, theoretical mechanisms underlying asymmetry, the effect of asymmetry on group processes and outcomes (individual, group, organizational), the measurement of asymmetry, and managerial practices that might alleviate asymmetry.

The articles in this issue address the topics of trust, power, mediated conflicts, attribution biases as a result of group positioning, and functional diversity and the representational gaps therein (i.e., asymmetric perceptions of the group's task). This special issue celebrates the initiation of a broader discussion on topics of asymmetry. As a group of papers, these manuscripts provide some compelling theoretical arguments that should drive future research in this area. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the collection of papers in this special issue examines asymmetries in various contexts: cross-functional work teams, manager–employee relationships, mediated negotiations, and temporary workgroups. The variety of contexts in which we find asymmetry speaks to the broad application of the asymmetry construct.

These papers highlight another issue associated with doing research on asymmetry: the difficulty of measuring the construct. The manuscripts present diverse ways of measuring asymmetry and also reflect some of the problems inherent in trying to understand the systematic differences in perception that might exist within a situation. Because individual experiences within groups or negotiation settings are interdependent,

merely examining the difference in perceptions is not enough. Researchers must take into consideration that their observations are nested within units (i.e., groups, dyads) where there will likely be some shared aspects of experience when compared to other groups, as well as differences among members. Thus, the study of asymmetry inherently requires more sophisticated multilevel analysis approaches that consider the interdependence among observations. Some of you might already be familiar with some of the measurement and analysis difficulties that accompany this type of work. We hope that this collection of manuscripts provides you with inspiration to tackle these measurement issues so that we are able to address more complicated and interesting questions related to asymmetry.

Synopses of the Papers

The set of papers included in this special issue includes both conceptual papers designed to fuel future research interests and empirical papers demonstrating asymmetric phenomenon. Peter Coleman's paper draws on Deutsch's (1973) classic theory of conflict resolution to develop a revised model integrating the prevalence of unequal power, interdependence, and conflict perceptions among disputants in a conflict. Using exploratory empirics, Coleman builds a model of how managers and employees might respond differently to the same conflict situations dependent upon their relative power, type of interdependence with the other party (competitive, cooperative or mixed), and level of interdependence (high or low) with the other. A follow-up experimental study conducted online systematically tests the main hypotheses derived from the model. Coleman's work highlights the contradictions in the literature on the value of power asymmetry that might be partially attributable to lack of attention to the asymmetric experiences held by parties in a conflict. Coleman suggests that with more attention, these asymmetries can be well explained by closer examination of power and interdependence.

Laurie Weingart, Gergana Todorova, and Matt Cronin explore the concept of asymmetry in cross-functional groups with their examination of representational gaps (rGaps). *Representational gaps* (rGaps, see Cronin & Weingart, 2007) are the points of difference in task representations within a group that capture the asymmetries or incompatibilities in how members perceive the group's task. Weingart et al. examine both the degree of difference in a team (i.e., *size* of the rGap) and how the points of contention are distributed among group members (i.e., the *heterogeneity* of the rGaps). They show that these rGaps and the subsequent innovation of teams are influenced by the level of task conflict present in a group in combination with the conflict management approaches utilized (i.e., problem-solving and yielding) by team members. Thus far, researchers have argued that asymmetries are not positive for teams (Jehn et al., 2010), but Weingart et al. demonstrate that with the right conflict management strategy, asymmetries in cognition that result from diverse functional perspectives can be highly beneficial for the production of new products.

Karen Jehn, Joyce Rupert, Aukje Nauta, and Seth van den Bossche explore asymmetric conflict perceptions within the context of dyadic mediations. Building on recent research on asymmetric conflict perceptions and work on mediation, Jehn et al. examine

real-life mediations among individuals in the education sector within the Netherlands. This unique data set provides insight into differential perceptions of conflict among mediation pairs as well as their satisfaction levels. The authors argue and show that asymmetries in conflict perceptions arise more for relationship than for task conflict, that greater asymmetry in perceptions of conflict results in lower satisfaction and that perceptions of bias on the part of the mediator help explain the lack of satisfaction. Although there are clear data and analysis limitations owing to sample size, the results of the study lend insight into both dyadic and individual-level perceptions of conflict. Individuals who perceived more conflict were most willing to endorse mediation as a successful conflict resolution strategy. The work should fuel further research into the implications of asymmetry in mediation and other conflict resolution contexts.

Brice Corgnet and Brian Gunia explore the relationship between group members' physical positioning and asymmetry in perceived task contribution. By examining how one aspect of a group's structural feature—members' physical positioning—contributes to an asymmetry, Corgnet and Gunia explore one possible antecedent to asymmetric perceptions. Building off of attribution theories, the authors investigate the asymmetry in group members' (often excessive) claims of credit for collective tasks (''the self-serving attributional bias''). In a clever laboratory experiment, the authors find that consistent with the availability account of this bias, group members located in the middle of a group, with easy visual access to their partners' contributions, demonstrate less bias than outside members (who demonstrate bias consistent with prior research)—but no less satisfaction. In addition, Corgnet and Gunia find that the outcomes did in fact result from a bias reduction among members located in the middle, as they had more visual awareness of the contributions of other members. Their study shows that visual constraints bias group members resulting in asymmetric perceptions. This study reminds us of the importance of examining structural features of workgroups as there are multiple implications for both theoretical and empirical studies. From a conceptual standpoint, future researchers of asymmetry may wish to build off of attribution theory as attribution theory provides a solid grounding for perceptual differences. For example, the papers by Coleman and Jehn et al. (this special issue) reflect on conflict asymmetries derived from differences in power, status, and third parties. Attributions may play a large role in explaining the underlying mechanisms that created conflict asymmetry in these studies. From an empirical standpoint, future researchers may be interested in examining how teams with structural components that affect visibility of teamwork, such as teams with telecommuting members, virtual teams, and cross-functional workgroups, may experience asymmetric perceptions.

Jacqueline Bergman, Erica Small, Shawn Bergman, and Joan Rentsch examine asymmetry in perceptions of trustworthiness among members of temporary teams. This is the only study in the special issue to focus on issues related to trustworthiness, but trust asymmetry has important implications for dyads and for teams. The authors use social relations modeling (Kenny, 1994) to analyze the ratings and results. Despite the data and analysis limitations, the use of social relations modeling provides asymmetry researchers with a potential approach for analyzing multilevel asymmetric effects. Furthermore, the results of the study lend insight into both dyadic and individual-level perceptions of trust. Bergman et al. find that the majority of the variance in

trustworthiness ratings is attributable to the trustor and to the unique relationship between trustor and trustee. At the individual level, trustors high in the propensity to trust, extraversion, and emotional stability perceived others as more trustworthy than did trustors low in these characteristics, regardless of the characteristics of the trustee. Bergman et al. find that team-level asymmetry results in decreased team performance.

Summary

This special issue is a first step toward encouraging researchers to remember that beauty, or any perception, is in the eye of the beholder. When emotions, beliefs, or perceptions are asymmetric, there are potential consequences for interactions at the dyadic, group, and organizational levels. The collection of papers in this special issue speaks to the multilevel, multicontext nature of asymmetry, and we hope that these papers motivate you to tackle these issues in future research.

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