

# Crooked Conflicts: The Effects of Conflict Asymmetry in Mediation

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## Abstract

Our main research question is how will the asymmetry of conflict between two parties involved in mediation affect the outcomes of the mediation? Conflict asymmetry is the difference in perceptions of conflict among the parties; that is, one person experiences high levels of conflict whereas the other person perceives that there is little or no conflict. In this multimethod study of 54 individuals involved in matched-pair mediations in an organizational setting, we examine the effects of conflict asymmetry on satisfaction with the process and results of the mediation, as well as their recommendation of mediation to others. We find that when the two people involved in mediation have asymmetrical conflict perceptions, there is less satisfaction with the result and the process and this is partly owing to their view of the mediator being biased. In addition, we find that the person who experienced more conflict is more likely to recommend mediation as a successful process to coworkers. The results of this study should be taken cautiously and replicated in future studies because our real-life data has limitations. Therefore, the main contribution of this paper is that it provides a theoretical perspective for studying conflict asymmetry in mediations.

In this study, we examine conflict asymmetry in the context of organizational mediations. Conflict asymmetry is the difference in perceptions of conflict among the parties involved in the conflict (Jehn, Rupert, & Nauta, 2006; Kluwer & Mikula, 2002). This is important to consider in the context of mediation because mediation presupposes equal commitment of the parties involved, which may be seriously threatened in cases where

conflict is asymmetric (Jehn et al., 2006). For example, in the educational setting in which our study takes place a teacher who has his teaching plan rejected by another teaching team member may be much more emotionally involved (and perceive a higher level of conflict) than the member who rejected him. We propose that asymmetric conflicts are the rule rather than the exception; therefore, it is very important to systematically investigate the impact of the degree of conflict asymmetry upon the mediation process and outcomes. Our main research question is how does the asymmetry of conflict perceptions between the two parties involved in mediation influence the outcomes of the mediation?

Our study has three main contributions. First, we contribute to the research on mediation by empirically examining an assumed, but often ignored, aspect of conflict mediations; that is, that people perceive different levels of conflict. The second contribution of our article is that we advance the research on organizational conflict that often assumes that people perceive the same level of conflict (c.f., Jehn & Rispens, 2008; e.g., Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Pelled, 1996) by examining asymmetrical perceptions of conflict and how they affect outcomes in organizations. Third, we also investigate the direction of asymmetry—what are the different individual effects on the person who perceives more conflict versus the person who perceives less conflict? Asymmetric conflict may lead to asymmetric outcomes, with the person perceiving more conflict being more satisfied with the outcomes than the person who perceives less conflict. Because of these expected differences between the two parties involved in the conflict, it is interesting to study asymmetric conflict both at the dyadic level and at the individual level. Therefore, we use a multilevel approach in this study; that is, we examine both the individual effects of conflict perceptions and asymmetry, and the dyadic level of asymmetry with matched pairs (which the asymmetry research has yet to do; c.f., Jehn et al., 2006). In sum, we examine real-life conflicts and how they are differentially perceived by the two parties involved, and what effects this may have on the mediation process and satisfaction with the outcomes. The real-life setting of our study is both advantageous and disadvantageous: it generates insights into mediations that have really occurred, but these settings were not as much “under control” of the researchers as in laboratory settings. Specifically, the sample size was low (54 participants) and outcome measures were limited. Therefore, future research should replicate these findings with a more appropriate dataset. The main contribution of this study therefore is that it provides a theoretical perspective for thinking about conflict asymmetry in mediation.

## The Mediation Context and Asymmetry

Very few studies investigate perceptual differences between parties involved in mediation (e.g., Lind, Erickson, Friedland, & Dickenberger, 1978; Peirce, Pruitt, & Czaja, 1993; Shostowsky, 2004; Tyler, Huo, & Lind, 1999). These studies typically look at preferences for conflict resolution procedures and generally have found that so-called “plaintiffs” (or “complainants”) versus “defendants” (or “respondents”) differ in preferences for conflict resolution procedures. For example, Lind et al. (1978) and others (Shostowsky, 2004) find that plaintiffs are more likely to perceive high levels of conflict (thus

initiating the proceedings), and therefore prefer to maintain the struggle in a proactive way that allows them to win (Peirce et al., 1993). Defendants are less likely to take active roles and prefer slow-moving formal procedures that allow them control over a situation in which they prefer inaction (Lind et al., 1978; Peirce et al., 1993; Tyler, 1986; stalling, pleas, or even avoidance and withdrawal). In this research, we extend this past research by examining asymmetric perceptions of the conflict and how this influences individual and dyadic mediation outcomes. Such asymmetric perceptions can, but need not be, related to the formal role a party has in the mediation. The above-mentioned studies in a mediation context all distinguished between parties who had a formal complaint to which another party had to respond. However, we take the differential perceptions of two parties as a starting point, not their formal role in the conflict, and assume that this difference in perceptions of the conflict situation might explain why some conflicts are easier to mediate than others.

We look at three components of mediation outcomes: satisfaction with the process and the results of the mediation, and whether the person involved in mediation would recommend mediation to others. In essence, mediation satisfaction and recommendation of mediation to others comprises the subjective experience of parties that justice has been made and can be made by means of mediation; that is, that the process and outcomes of the mediation are perceived as fair and successful (c.f. Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005).

## **Asymmetrical Conflict and Conflict Types: Relationship and Task Conflict**

An important distinction revealed in past research on organizational conflict is the difference between relationship and task conflict (e.g., Amason, 1996; c.f. De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Relationship conflicts are disagreements and incompatibilities between two or more parties about personal issues, such as social events, gossip, and world news. Task conflicts are disagreements about the task being performed, for example about the strategy of an organization or about the type of data that should be included in a report. A review of task and relationship conflict (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) suggests that task conflict can produce positive outcomes under certain conditions (e.g., more creative ideas), whereas relationship conflict often has negative effects such as dissatisfaction and decreased performance (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995; Pelled, 1996).

However, this past research on conflict has largely ignored the fact that different parties are involved in a conflict, who may have different perceptions of the conflict. Specifically, they may perceive different levels and types of conflict which, according to Pruitt (1995), makes a conflict *asymmetrical*. The asymmetric aspect of conflict deserves more attention (c.f., Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Sanchez-Burks, Lee, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2007), especially in the mediation arena. The differential perceptions of conflict can have different effects on the individuals and the dyads mediating regarding commitment, cohesiveness, satisfaction, and individual and dyadic outcomes such as absenteeism and prolonged interactions (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2006).

We predict that there will be more asymmetry in relationship conflict than in task conflict for several reasons. First, research on emotion and cognition shows that perceptions are more dispersed across individuals in the same situation when a personal and emotional issue is concerned, compared to a rational and task-related issue (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). Second, as soon as a conflict at work arises, both disputants will rationally recognize that their interests diverge. But the emotional attachment to these interests is likely to differ between parties. The example described previously demonstrates why both the team member and the teacher may well perceive that their rational interests diverge in the same way and both will perceive task conflict (thus, task conflict symmetry) and why the teacher wants a different curriculum and the other teacher wants to maintain the status quo. But the emotional consequences of the conflict are more serious for the teacher wanting the change than for the other teacher. The first experiences that his new personally developed plans are blocked, whereas the other experiences no personal consequences (relationship conflict asymmetry).

Brett et al. (2007) refer to face theory (Goffman, 1967) to describe how a party may experience a loss of face prior to mediation, because the other party has continuously rejected his or her claim. This party will experience negative emotions and relationship conflict, whereas the other party will not because his or her face has not been threatened prior to mediation. Both parties may thus equally perceive that their task-related interests diverge, but they attach different levels of emotions to these interests. In sum, we propose the following:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* There will be more asymmetry regarding relationship conflict than task conflict in mediating dyads.

## **Asymmetry and Mediation Outcomes**

As can be drawn from the procedural justice literature, equity is an important criterion for people to feel justly treated (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1986). We argue that when one party believes there is conflict and the other does not, or to a lesser extent, more discomfort and inequity will exist between the parties. This can be illustrated by research on asymmetrical conflict in the field of close relationships. Kluwer and Mikula (2002) define an asymmetrical conflict structure as a situation in which one party wants to change the status quo, whereas the other party wants to keep it. Typical asymmetrical conflicts exist within the domain of close relationships of different-sex couples, where men and women often fight over the division of family work. Research in this setting suggests that cognitions of injustice cause more problems than actual injustice (Major, 1987; Thompson, 1991). This distributive justice framework states that feelings of injustice are caused by a comparison process, in which one party—usually the woman—is especially upset because of the indifference that the other party shows with regard to issues of household work and childcare. The unfairness that individuals feel can cause decreased motivation to invest in the relationship as well as increased depression and dissatisfaction with the relationship (see Kluwer & Mikula, 2002 for a review).

We argue that the perceived injustice stemming from conflict asymmetry decreases the likelihood that a conflict will be successfully mediated. A mediator helps disputants come to agreement without imposing a settlement on them by controlling how the parties interact (Bazerman & Neale, 1992; Elangovan, 1999; Gewurz, 2001). The mediator is (ideally) an impartial third party (Bush, 1996), who is trusted by both parties (Goldberg, 2005), and who facilitates communication and understanding to help the conflict parties find a solution that they can both agree upon (Gewurz, 2001). The success of mediation is usually measured by the perception of this success by the parties involved and their satisfaction with the settlement of the dispute (Lewicki, Weiss, & Lewin, 1992). The difficulty in mediating an asymmetrical conflict is that the mediator cannot pay equal attention to both parties, which is necessary to be perceived as an impartial, trustworthy party. The mediator has to spend more time and energy to the most-frustrated party, to let him or her vent emotions, thereby trying to make the conflict more symmetrical. But by doing so, the least-frustrated party may feel unjustly treated because he or she receives less attention. Thus, mediation is simply a more complicated and delicate task in an asymmetrical conflict situation, with a higher probability to lead to feelings of procedural and interactional injustice compared to an asymmetrical conflict. This may hinder successful mediation outcomes. We therefore propose the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Asymmetrical conflict in mediating dyads is negatively associated with satisfaction with the process and result of mediation.

## The Mediating Effect of Mediator Bias

To successfully reach a solution which is mutually acceptable for parties involved in mediation, parties must perceive the mediator to be unbiased (Bercovitch, 1996). We suggest that the effects of conflict asymmetry upon mediation outcomes are mediated through the extent to which the parties perceive the mediator to be biased toward one of both parties. By role definition (Bercovitch, 1996), mediators should not favor one party over the other.

Past research shows that perceptions of the mediator and their personal interests can affect the attitudes, motivation, and behaviors of the parties in the mediation (Conlon & Ross, 1993; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). In addition, group value theory addresses how people may perceive a third party involved in the mediation (Lind & Tyler, 1988). When parties involved in mediation trust the mediator and perceive them to be just, creating a neutral arena, they will be more committed to the process. This perception of fairness (of the mediator) will influence members' feelings about the mediation (Lind, 1995). Wittmer, Carnevale, and Walker (1991) found that conflicting dyads did not trust suggestions being made by a mediator that they felt was biased. Other research has found that conflict parties who perceive their mediator to favor the interests of one party over the other are less likely to follow the mediator's recommendations for settlement (Arnold, 2000; Conlon & Ross, 1993; Welton & Pruitt, 1987). Therefore, we suggest that asymmetric perceptions will increase mediator bias which will in turn decrease the likelihood of satisfaction with the mediation process and outcome.

*Hypothesis 3:* Mediator bias mediates the effect of asymmetrical conflict in mediating dyads on satisfaction with the process and result of mediation; that is, when there is asymmetry of perceptions regarding the conflict, it is more likely that the parties will perceive a bias on the part of the mediator which will lead to decreased satisfaction.

## **Directional Asymmetry: High and Low Perceivers of the Conflict Situation**

In reviews on mediation, authors typically do not pay much attention to the likely differences between conflict parties, with the exception of studies on power differences between parties (Davis & Salem, 1984; Gewurz, 2001; Kelly, 1995; Lang, 2004; Mayer, 1987; Wall, Stark, & Standifer, 2001; Wiseman & Poitras, 2002). For example, Wall et al. (2001) refer to research showing that parties may be less or more equal in power, with the latter having a higher probability of reaching agreement during mediation (Nickles & Hedgespeth, 1991). However, Wall et al. (2001) do not consider that the conflicts (or agreements) can be perceived differently by both parties, depending upon their position in the conflict. It is therefore relevant to study differences between the individual parties in an asymmetrical conflict situation: do high-conflict perceivers experience differential outcomes compared to the low-conflict perceivers? Answering this question adds to our understanding of why asymmetrical conflicts are difficult to mediate.

Former studies (e.g., Bingham & Pitts, 2002; Brett et al., 2007) often distinguish between complainants or plaintiffs on the one hand, who experience a serious dispute that needs to be mediated, and respondents or defendants who do or do not agree to be engaged in the mediation. This distinction between roles already demonstrates that mediated conflicts are often asymmetrical, with a complainant feeling more frustrated than the respondent. Moreover, these former studies typically report that the respondent party reports higher satisfaction with the mediation outcome than the complainant party. For example, Bingham and Pitts (2002) did an evaluation study of a large mediation program at the United States Postal Service (USPS) and found that respondents, who were all supervisors acting as representatives of their employer, were somewhat more satisfied with the mediation outcomes than the complainants, who were all employees who felt discriminated against. Moreover, complainants reported more often that they still perceived some conflict issues after mediation, whereas respondents more often reported that the entire conflict had been solved (Bingham & Pitts, 2002).

However, in these former studies, a clear distinction could be made between the structural roles of a complainant versus a defendant, which was also often linked to hierarchical position—complainants often had a lower (employee) position. Therefore, we expect that the mere structural (power) position might have explained why complainants are generally less satisfied with outcomes than respondents: complainants have less power to receive the outcomes they want; they are in a dependent position. In this study, we focus on asymmetry that stems from differences in perceptions of the conflict. In this type of asymmetry, not structural positions but psychological processes—such as preference for action and differential attention received from the mediator—will play a part. These two processes, as we will describe below, can explain why parties who

experience more conflict than their opponent will be more satisfied with the process and results of the mediation and will also be more likely to recommend mediation to others.

First, research on conflict resolution shows that the different perceptions and expectations around the conflict lead to different desired outcomes. For example, Lind et al. (1978) examined differences in preferences for conflict resolution procedures between high- and low-conflict perceivers, where a high-conflict perceiver (“plaintiff”) accuses the other party of having harmed him. Peirce et al. (1993) also studied differential preferences for conflict resolution procedures between “complainants” and “respondents” and showed that complainants (high-conflict perceivers) liked struggle and mediation more, and inaction less, than defendants did. In other words, those who perceive more conflict prefer active contending and resolution strategies such as mediation.

Second, as argued earlier, the complexity of a mediator’s job stems especially from the party perceiving the most conflict. The mediator has to spend more effort to give this party opportunity to vent his or her anger and frustration and to restore his or her face (c.f. Brett et al., 2007; Goffman, 1967) vis-à-vis the other party (thus the perceptions of mediator bias we mentioned earlier). We therefore propose that the high perceiver will be more satisfied with the process and effort put in by the mediator to resolve the conflict and the effort made to give face to the high perceiver. On the other hand, the party perceiving the least conflict will be somewhat less committed to, and dependent on the mediation. He or she also experiences less loss of face than the high perceiver (Brett et al., 2007). The mediator will likely focus on providing face for the high-conflict perceiver, for example, by encouraging the other party to give face to the high-conflict perceiver, thereby equalizing power. In doing so, the high-conflict perceiver may gain power during mediation, whereas the other party may lose power. This process is likely to decrease the low perceiver’s satisfaction with the process and outcome of the mediation, as well as his or her willingness to recommend mediation to others in the organization. If the low perceiver does not feel the mediator was helpful to him/her, there is no reason to recommend to others this cumbersome, time-consuming process.

*Hypothesis 4 (H4):* An employee involved in mediation who perceives more conflict than the other party will report higher levels of satisfaction with the process and result of mediation and is more likely to recommend mediation to others compared to the party who perceives less conflict.

## Method

### Sample

This study was part of the last phase of an evaluation study conducted by the Dutch Institute for Conflict in Public Services and Employment Relations (NICOA) and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). These two institutes started a mediation pilot to introduce mediation in the education sector and evaluated the

success of mediation in the last phase of the pilot. All participants gave written permission to be approached for research purposes. Evaluation surveys were sent to 110 conflict parties, all working in the education sector within the Netherlands. A total of 90 conflict parties responded (84%), from which 36 conflict parties were excluded from the analyses because they were incomplete (only one party responded) or they were part of conflict group with three or more conflict parties involved and therefore did not meet our definition of a dyadic pair. Our final sample consisted of 27 matched pairs of conflict parties (54 individuals). The conflict parties equally represented the subsectors of primary education, secondary education, senior secondary vocational education, and university education and all had experienced a conflict at work for which they became involved in mediation. The mean age of the participants was 53 years and 46% were women. In the database, no reference was made to any formal role of the conflict parties, such as the role of complainant/plaintiff versus respondent/defendant as often distinguished in former (American) mediation studies (e.g., Bingham & Pitts, 2002).

## Procedure

The data collection consisted of evaluation surveys that conflict parties in the educational sector were asked to complete regarding the mediation. This evaluation survey was part of an applied TNO research project (TNO Work and Employment is a Dutch research institute that conducts applied research in organizations and the public sector) in which the goal was to evaluate how successful the introduction of mediation in the educational sectors was. The large-scale mediation program was implemented by the Dutch Ministry of Education so that employees were given the opportunity to consult a mediator if they experienced a severe conflict at work that they were not able to solve themselves. The implementation of the project consisted of three phases. In phase 1, employees were informed about mediation and the program initiatives. Mediators were assigned to various schools, where human resource personnel were trained to refer conflict parties to mediation. In phase 2, the actual mediations took place. This study examines data collected during phase 3 of the TNO project, in which mediation outcomes were evaluated. Conflict parties were asked to fill out a mediation evaluation survey, consisting of open-ended, as well as Likert scale questions, in which they were asked about the sort of conflict they experienced and how satisfied they were with the mediation procedure and outcome.

## Measures

### *Asymmetry of Conflict*

In the survey, there was an open-ended question in which parties had to describe what the subject of the conflict was when the mediation started. We had two independent coders, blind to the hypotheses, code the descriptions from each individual conflict party into task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995), using a 1–5 Likert scale. Before the coders started to rate the answers to the open-ended



question, we gave them definitions of task and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) with examples of low and high levels of conflict. We defined relationship conflict as frictions at the interpersonal level, which are often associated with tension, irritations, and hostility between parties. An example of a low level of relationship conflict would be a slight personal misunderstanding because of the miscommunication, whereas a high level of relationship conflict would be a crisis of confidence between parties and/or parties discriminating each other. Task conflict was defined as disagreements regarding the content of the work. An example of a low level of task conflict would be a misinterpretation of what should have been addressed during a certain lesson, whereas a high level of task conflict would be the structural dysfunctioning of a teacher who has a different opinion of what should be taught. The raters were trained in multiple rounds to ensure their coherence with the theoretical constructs in the model and the rating levels (Jehn & Shah, 1997). Examples of relationship conflict that were coded high (which means a 4 or 5 on the 1–5 Likert scale) were “I did not trust my other colleague, there was no mutual respect”; “I did not feel accepted and valued for who I am”; “My colleagues felt that I attacked them, but there was just lack of leadership from the management of the school”. Examples of task conflicts that were coded high were: “I feel I am underpaid given my qualities and functioning, but my teamleader doesn’t think so”; “We had a different vision about teaching and the mission of the institute”. The inter-rater agreement was 98%. Following past asymmetry research (Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010; Jehn et al., 2006), we calculated difference scores (with values ranging from 0 to 4) between the conflict scores of the individual conflict parties within the dyad, which indicated the level of asymmetry represented in the dyad. We calculated asymmetry scores for both task conflicts and relationship conflicts. A high score on asymmetry meant that conflict parties disagreed about the level of conflict (e.g., party 1 : “In my opinion there was not really a conflict”; party 2: “Conflicts originated as a result of an unsafe work atmosphere that our new director created”).

### ***Mediation Satisfaction***

Mediation satisfaction was measured on three dimensions; satisfaction with the process of the mediation, satisfaction with the mediation outcome, and whether or not the parties would recommend mediation to others in their organization. Participants were asked to indicate on a 1–4 Likert scale (ranging from not satisfied at all to very satisfied) to what extent they were satisfied with the process of the mediation and whether they were satisfied with the outcome of the mediation. We measured whether the parties involved would recommend mediation to other people in their organization by asking if the participant would recommend that other people solve a conflict by participating in mediation. The participants were asked to answer this question with “yes/no”.

### ***Mediator Bias***

Participant were asked to rate to what extent they found the mediator impartial on a scale from 1 to 4 (1 = not biased at all to 4 = very biased). In our analyses, we also controlled for the general levels of task conflict and relationship conflict to show that

asymmetry explains mediation satisfaction above and beyond the basic level of conflict in the dyad. This was assessed based on the coding described earlier.

## Results

### Correlations and Associations Among Variables

In Table 1, the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables in our study are displayed. Given that one of our dependent variables is dichotomous (mediation recommendation), we are required to perform different tests of association for the various combinations of continuous and categorical variables with this dependent variable. To examine the associations between our continuous variables (age, task and relationship conflict, task and relationship conflict asymmetry, satisfaction with the mediation process and satisfaction with the mediation outcome) and the dichotomous dependent variable, mediation recommendation, we performed analyses of variance (Field, 2005). We found a positive marginal association between satisfaction with the mediation process and mediation recommendation [ $F(3, 49) = 3.22, p < .05$ ], showing that the more conflict parties were satisfied with the mediation process, the more likely it was they would recommend mediation to others. We did not find any significant associations between the other continuous variables and mediation recommendation. The association between gender and mediation recommendation, which we tested using a chi-squared cross-tabulation test, was also not significant. Men and women did not differ in their intention to recommend mediation to others.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among the Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(1) Gender	1.46	0.50	–								
(2) Age	53.41	7.5	.19	–							
(3) Task conflict	1.53	1.09	-.20	-.26†	–						
(4) Relationship conflict	3.45	1.60	.20	.18	-.52***	–					
(5) Asymmetry of task conflict	0.72	1.15	-.34**	-.26†	.52***	-.23†	–				
(6) Asymmetry of relationship conflict	1.35	1.31	-.24	-.03	-.03	-.18	.25†	–			
(7) Mediator bias	1.66	0.68	-.10	-.06	-.06	-.04	.19	.35**	–		
(8) Satisfaction mediation process	3.04	0.51	.11	.04	.06	-.17	-.19	-.26†	-.56***	–	
(9) Satisfaction mediation result	2.94	0.51	.16	.15	.02	-.02	-.26†	-.26†	-.40***	-.76***	–

Note: *N* = 54.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; †*p* < .10.

### Hypothesis Testing

Our first hypothesis proposes that there will be more asymmetry regarding relationship conflict than task conflict. Our data showed that 10 of 27 pairs had asymmetrical perceptions of task conflict, while twice as many (20 of 27 pairs) had asymmetrical perceptions of relationship conflict. We conducted a *t*-test to examine whether conflict parties perceived more asymmetry in relationship conflict than in task conflict. In a paired-sample *t*-test, we compared the means of the asymmetry scores on task and relationship conflict (which is the difference score between the parties on the different conflict types). The results show that there is a significant difference between asymmetry in relationship conflict ( $M = 1.35, SD = 1.32$ ) and asymmetry of task conflict ( $M = 0.72, SD = 1.16$ ) [ $t(26) = -2.15, p < .05$ ], indicating that the asymmetry of parties' perceptions of relationship conflict is higher than the asymmetry of parties' perceptions of task conflict, providing support for Hypothesis 1.

We conducted regression analyses to test our second hypothesis in which we proposed that asymmetrical conflict in mediating dyads is negatively associated with mediation outcomes (.e., satisfaction with the mediation process and result; see Table 2). We found a significant negative relationship between asymmetry of relationship conflict and satisfaction with the mediation process ( $\beta = -.31, p < .05$ ) and the result of mediation ( $\beta = -.28, p < .05$ ). We also found a significant negative effect of asymmetry of task conflict on satisfaction with the mediation result ( $\beta = -.36, p < .05$ ), and a marginal negative effect on the mediation process ( $\beta = -.29, p = .07$ ). We found these effects after controlling for the general level of task and relationship conflict within the dyad. These findings give partial support for our hypothesis, showing that asymmetry of task and relationship conflict has a negative impact on satisfaction with mediation, above and beyond the main effects of task and relationship conflict.

In Hypothesis 3, we proposed that the degree to which the parties perceive the mediator to be biased will mediate the effect of conflict asymmetry on mediation outcomes.

Table 2  
Regression Analyses of Asymmetry of Task and Relationship Conflict on Satisfaction with Mediation

	Satisfaction process		Satisfaction result	
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Step 1				
Relationship conflict	-.26	-.17	-.09	-.01
Task conflict	-.08	.12†	-.04	.20
Step 2				
Asymmetry of relationship conflict	-.31*		-.28*	
Asymmetry of task conflict		-.29†		-.36*
<i>F</i>	2.18†	1.66	1.35	1.74
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.12*	.09†	.08*	.10*

Note:  $N = 54$ .

\* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

We tested this mediation effect according to the procedure described by Baron and Kenny (1986) and adopted in other field studies (e.g., Nauta, De Dreu, & Van der Vaart, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Following this procedure, four conditions must be met. The first two conditions are that there must be a correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variable and between the independent variable and the mediator. Third, there should be an association between the mediator and the dependent variables. Finally, when including the mediator in the regression model, the significant relationship between the independent and the dependent variables should decrease substantially or disappear (in case of full mediation). As our testing of Hypothesis 2 showed, our regression analyses showed a significant relationship between asymmetry of relationship conflict and satisfaction with the mediation process and result (see Table 2). We also found a significant relationship between asymmetry of task conflict and the mediation result and a marginal relationship with the mediation process (see Table 2). So the first conditions are met for satisfaction of the mediation result and partly met for satisfaction with the mediation process. To test the second mediation step, we regressed asymmetry of relationship and task conflict on mediator bias, again after controlling for the general levels of task and relationship conflict. We found a significant relationship between asymmetry of relationship conflict and mediator bias ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ), after controlling for general levels of task and relationship conflict. The overall model was marginal significant [ $F(3, 50) = 2.42, p = .08, R^2 = .13$ ]. The relationship between asymmetry of task conflict and mediator bias was only marginally significant ( $\beta = .27, p = .10$ ), after controlling for task and relationship conflict. Therefore, we only continued the mediation analyses for asymmetry of relationship conflict. To test the third mediation step, we regressed mediator bias on satisfaction with the mediation process and result, controlling for the general levels of task and relationship conflict. We found a significant negative relationship between the extent to which the mediator was biased and the level of satisfaction with the mediation process ( $\beta = -.47, p < .001$ ) and result ( $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ), giving support for the third mediation step. To test the fourth condition, we conducted two regression analyses in which we regressed asymmetry of relationship conflict and mediator bias on satisfaction with the mediation *process* and *result*. The regression model for satisfaction with the *result* of mediation was significant [ $F(2, 52) = 5.26, p < .05, R^2 = .17$ ], which was attributed to a significant effect of mediator bias ( $\beta = -.35, p < .05$ ) on satisfaction with the mediation result. Asymmetry of relationship conflict became nonsignificant ( $\beta = -.14, p = ns$ ). The Sobel-test for this mediation was marginal ( $z = -1.83, p = .07$ ). The regression model for satisfaction with the mediation *process* was significant [ $F(2, 51) = 11.58, p < .001, R^2 = .32$ ], which was attributed to a significant effect of mediator bias ( $\beta = -.54, p < .001$ ) on satisfaction with the mediation process. Asymmetry of relationship conflict became nonsignificant ( $\beta = -.07, p = ns$ ). The Sobel-test for mediation (Sobel, 1982) was significant ( $z = -2.26, p < .05$ ). Thus, we found support for Hypothesis 3 that mediator bias mediated the relationship between asymmetry of relationship conflict and satisfaction with the mediation process and result.

<sup>1</sup>Although testing mediation using Structural Equation Modeling would be preferable (James, Mulaik, & Brett, 2006), we were not able to follow this procedure given the small sample size.

In Hypothesis 4, we proposed that an employee involved in mediation who perceives more conflict than the other party will report higher levels of mediation satisfaction and is more likely to recommend mediation to others in the organization than a member who perceives less conflict compared to the other party. For each asymmetrical pair, we determined who the high and low perceiver was of the pair. Based on this, we created two groups, one with high perceivers and one with low perceivers. We performed *t*-tests comparing the high and low perceivers on satisfaction with the process, outcomes, and the intention to recommend mediation to others. We found a significant difference between the group of high task conflict perceivers and low task conflict perceivers on the intention to recommend mediation to others. The group of high task conflict perceivers was more likely to recommend mediation to others ( $M = 1.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ) than the group of low perceivers [ $M = 0.60$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ;  $t(18) = -2.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. Cross-tabs showed that *all* high task conflict perceivers recommended mediation to others, while  $< 40\%$  of low-conflict perceivers did). We did not find differences between high and low perceivers of relationship conflict on this outcome variable. Thus, parties in mediation who perceived more task conflict than the other party were *more* likely to recommend mediation to others than parties who perceived less conflict than the other party.

## Discussion

In this study of 54 individuals involved in matched-pair mediations in an organizational setting, we utilized survey and qualitative data to examine the effects of conflict asymmetry on mediation satisfaction with the process of the mediation, satisfaction with the results of the mediation, and the parties' recommendation of mediation to others. The results of the study as presented here should be taken cautiously given the low sample size (54 participants) and limited outcome measures. The main contribution of this study is that we offer a theoretical perspective for thinking about conflict asymmetry between parties in a mediation situation, which were tested on matching conflict dyads in a real-life setting. To test the robustness and generalizability of the findings, these hypotheses should be replicated with a more appropriate dataset and also in an experimental setting in which factors can be controlled.

In general, we found that conflict asymmetry (one party perceiving more conflict than the other) was more the norm, especially regarding relationship conflict issues, than was symmetrical views of conflict. We also found that this asymmetry of conflict perceptions was negatively associated with mediation satisfaction; that is, when mediating pairs experienced different levels of conflict (e.g., one party perceiving a high level of conflict and the other perceiving no or little conflict), they were less satisfied with the mediation result, as well as being less satisfied with the mediation process.

This negative effect of conflict asymmetry regarding relationship conflicts on mediation satisfaction was mediated by the amount to which the parties felt the mediator in the process was biased. Conflict parties who were asymmetrical in relationship conflict were more likely to perceive that the mediator favored one party over another and the overall evaluation of the mediation indicated a low level of satisfaction with the process and the outcome as a result. We were not able to report on which of the two parties felt

biased: the party who perceived the most conflict, the least conflict, or both. Future research should address this question. Nevertheless, the finding that mediator bias mediates between conflict asymmetry and mediation outcomes has important implications for the training of mediators. If the mediation and the mediator involved are not perceived as being fair, the mediation process may do more harm than good. Mediators should be made aware that there is a high probability of unequal levels of conflict as perceived by both parties, and that this asymmetry increases the likelihood of mediator bias and, hence, less positive outcomes.

A first contribution of this line of research, and consideration for re-evaluating past research on conflict in dyads in groups, is that it challenges the assumption of much past research that people involved in the same conflict perceive it in the same way (e.g., Jehn, 1995; c.f., Jehn & Rispens, 2008). In our research, we found that if the parties involved in the conflict experience different levels of conflict, the mediation experience is less likely to have a satisfactory outcome. We also contribute to the research on conflict, mediation, and asymmetric perceptions by investigating an aspect of conflict asymmetry that past research has often ignored (e.g., Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2006), the direction of the asymmetry; that is, whether there are different effects on those individuals who perceive high levels of conflict versus those who perceive low levels of conflict. This is especially relevant in the mediation context, where the goal is to have the conflict parties reach a common understanding of the situation and continue working together in the future in an effective manner (e.g., Pruitt, Rubin, & Kim, 2003). We found that the individuals who perceive the most conflict are the most likely to recommend mediation to others within their organization. These individuals are the ones who seemed to most appreciate the mediation by having their expectations met for conflict resolution using mediation. However, more research is needed to replicate this finding. It may also be likely that the party that perceives the *most* conflict will be less likely to profit from the mediation because it is more difficult for this party to gain from the mediation because of his or her greater frustration. Thus, future research should examine the role that emotions and perceptions play in determining the likelihood of whether an employee will recommend mediation to others.

## Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations of the present research. First, this study had a small sample size ( $N = 54$  individuals). These individuals are nested in dyads and therefore should be treated as interdependent. This is a particularly difficult problem to solve (Newsom, 2002), especially given the small sample size in this study that does not allow us to do dyadic analyses. However, it has an advantage over past research on asymmetric perceptions in mediation (Jehn et al., 2006) by having both parties involved in the mediation respond to the survey and provide qualitative data. This allowed us to directly assess the effects of asymmetries of perceptions of conflict reported by the two parties involved in the conflict and to examine high versus low perceivers in a dyad. The use of multiple methods also prevents common method bias common to much survey research.

A second limitation of this data is that it is cross-sectional. While the actual mediation program did occur over time (three distinct phases), we were only allowed to collect data during the evaluation of the mediation, which occurred after completion of the mediation. We suggest that future research conduct longitudinal studies to assess the causal effects of asymmetry on the processes involved in mediation, the mediator's involvement (and potential bias), and the outcomes of mediation. In addition, some of the survey items were designed by the organization that implemented the mediation practices. In this early implementation phase, the researchers were not yet involved and therefore were not able to design and implement valid measures of variables relevant for the mediation. For example, the concept of recommendation of mediation to others was measured with one item only that had only two categories (yes/no) instead of a five-point Likert scale. Also, our measures of mediator bias and mediation satisfaction were measured on a 4-point Likert scale, which have scaling problems; that is, the difference between choice points is not the same psychometrically. Therefore, future research should use established 1–5 or 1–7 Likert scales and use more items in a scale to determine reliability.

A third limitation is that the number and type of outcome measures were limited. We only measured satisfaction with the mediation process and results, as well as whether people would recommend mediation to others. Unfortunately, we had incomplete data on mediation settlements and did not have data to assess other relevant concepts, such as fairness, absenteeism, and probability of future conflicts. Because these concepts are key elements for successful mediation, they should be included in future research.

A fourth limitation is that we did not measure the formal role that the conflict parties may have played within the conflict, such as the role of complainant/plaintiff versus the role of respondent/defendant. In future research, all parties should be asked whether they have a formal role, or perceive their role informally, as the role of either complainant or defendant, as to be able to relate ones formal role to differences in conflict perceptions. In doing so, researchers will be able to study the consequences of role differences, perception differences, and their possible interaction effect.

The last limitation worth mentioning is that, although we found that asymmetry in relationship conflict was significantly higher than asymmetry in task conflict, we cannot conclude with confidence that the dyads in this study actually perceived more asymmetry in relationship conflict than in task conflict. This is because the difference may be attributable to the measurement errors, such as error variance or scaling bias that may be stronger for relationship conflict asymmetry compared to task conflict asymmetry. In future research, we therefore recommend that several distinct measures of asymmetry for both types of conflict are used, such as self-report and observer measures. If an examination with all these different types of measures supports our hypothesis, then it can be concluded with greater confidence that the probability to have asymmetry in relationship conflict is greater than the probability to have asymmetry in task conflict.

An important area for future research on asymmetry and mediation includes the investigation into the status of the participating parties, in combination with the role of the mediator in assessing the status and influence of the parties involved. For example, Shestowsky (2004) examined the effects of social status (equal versus different status of

both conflict parties) and role (defendant versus plaintiff). She found that lower status disputants found the process option in which they would present information about their own position to a neutral third party somewhat less attractive compared to equal-status participants, showing that they have less confidence that they will be able to defend themselves successfully, compared to equal-status disputants. The results on role and status differences were marginally significant, however, making further research necessary.

Our research findings suggest that a mediator has a more complex job if involved in an asymmetrical conflict compared to a symmetrical one, because he or she first has to invest in the asymmetry, restoring balance, and making the conflict more symmetrical. For example, Shestowsky (2004) wrote that in cases of power imbalance, disputants need a highly skilled and perceptive mediator to deal with the power imbalance. He or she can, for example, invite the lower status party to speak first and to guide communication in a certain way, thereby giving face to both parties (Goffman, 1967); however, as our results show, the perception that the mediator is biased in such a way may influence the outcomes of the mediation in a negative way. Mediation is simply a more complex job to perform in cases of asymmetrical rather than symmetrical conflict, especially where status differences and other structural differences (e.g., roles, reward structures) may be involved. Future research warrants a closer examination of the role of the mediator in asymmetric conflict situations to provide more specific guidance to mediators and mediator trainers in how to successfully manage these situations. Specifically, future research could examine how a mediator deals with face saving issues (Goffman, 1967), because recent research has shown that dispute resolution is more difficult when parties have experienced attacks on their face, because of the expression of negative emotions and commands by the other party (Brett et al., 2007). An interesting proposition would be that complainants experience more face loss than defendants prior to mediation, and that a mediator thus has to give more face to complainants than to defendants, for example by asking for causal explanations to the defendant.

## **Practical Implications for Mediators and Organizations**

Although the results of this study must be taken cautiously because of data limitations, some of the implications might be important for mediators in organizations. The findings in this study suggest that mediators in organizations should be more aware that the parties involved in the conflict have different perceptions about the level of conflict. Just as Davis and Salem (1984) suggest that power imbalance should be addressed in every mediation (see also Wiseman & Poitras, 2002), we also recommend that conflict asymmetry should be noticed and addressed by mediators, because when left unnoticed, it may impede successful mediation just as power imbalance does. Unfortunately, past research has paid little attention to the asymmetrical aspects of conflicts that can hinder mediation and satisfactory outcomes. We recommend that mediators, the parties involved in mediation, as well as those training mediators acknowledge that asymmetries of perception exist and can directly influence the process and outcome of mediation. For example, it may be necessary for mediators to allow the person perceiving higher



levels of conflict to vent their anger to allow the content issues to arise, but also to allow the other party the opportunity to see the different point of view (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). However, our findings show that mediator bias is a critical source of mediation failure and therefore the impartiality of the mediator is important for the mediation to succeed. Thus, mediators need to balance their asymmetrical attention by also allowing the view that there really is no conflict, as the appearance of bias toward one party can defeat the main purpose of the mediator—a successful common understanding and resolution of the situation. Organizations considering offering mediation (and mediation training) must assess the potential benefits of mediation, as well as these potential harms and revise their training and mediation strategies accordingly.

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