Not So Bad After All: How Relational Closeness Buffers the Association Between Relationship Conflict and Helpful and Deviant Group Behaviors

Sonja Rispens,[1] Lindred Greer,[2] Karen A. Jehn[3] and Sherry M. B. Thatcher[4]

1 Department of Industrial Engineering and Innovation Sciences, Human Performance Management Group, Work and Organizational Psychology at the Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, the Netherlands
2 Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
3 Organization Behavior at Melbourne Business School, Carlton, Victoria, Australia
4 College of Business, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, U.S.A.

Keywords
interpersonal conflict, groups, organizational conflict.

Correspondence
Sonja Rispens, Department of Industrial Engineering and Innovation Sciences - Human Performance Management Group, PO Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, the Netherlands; e-mail: s.rispens@tue.nl.

Abstract

Past research has left unanswered the question of how to reduce the negative effects of relationship conflict in work groups. This study investigates whether relational closeness in work groups buffers the negative association between relationship conflict and two important group behaviors that are often overlooked in conflict research: group-level helping behavior and counterproductive work behavior. The results of this field study show that the degree of relational closeness in work groups indeed buffers the negative affiliation between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior and the positive association between relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive work behavior. Specifically, the results suggest that relationship conflicts are only harmful in relationally distant work groups in which members do not know each other well personally and do not feel close to each other. Theoretical implications and suggestions for organizational practice are discussed.

Conflicts are inevitable whenever people work together (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995; De Dreu, 2006). Past research has shown that task conflicts, or conflicts about the content of work, potentially benefit group functioning when the task is nonroutine and there are high levels of trust (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995; Simons &

Volume 4, Number 4, Pages 277–296

Peterson, 2000). Relationship conflicts, in contrast, have generally been shown to disrupt groups' effective functioning (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995). Relationship conflict is defined as the perception of incompatibilities and disagreements among group members regarding personal issues that are not task related, for instance, political beliefs, norms and values, or gossip (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn & Rispens, 2008). The disruptive effect of relationship conflicts on work group functioning found in past research has inspired many researchers to advise organizations and their employees to avoid this type of conflict (cf. Edmondson & McLain Smith, 2006). However, this is difficult, if not impossible, given that work group members are interdependent and that coworkers are likely to differ in their personal values and opinions.

The current study aims to contribute to our understanding of relationship conflict in work groups; specifically, we aim to identify circumstances under which relationship conflict is not necessarily detrimental for work group functioning. By identifying conditions that may minimize the negative effects of relationship conflict, we provide insights for researchers and practitioners that are more attainable than to simply avoid the occurrence of relationship conflicts. In this article, we introduce the construct of relational closeness, which is defined as the degree to which work group members personally know each other and feel close to each other (e.g., Cross & Morris, 2003; Miller & Thomas, 2005). Thus, a relationally close work group is characterized by close and personal relationships among its members, whereas in a relationally distant work group, members do not know each other very well on a personal level and do not feel close. We argue that relational closeness is instrumental in buffering the negative association between relationship conflict and work group functioning. The better work group members know each other personally, and the closer they feel to each other, the more likely it is that the group will not be negatively affected by relationship conflicts.

We examine the interactive effect of relationship conflict and relational closeness on two crucial aspects of group functioning: helping behavior and deviant or counterproductive work behavior. Group level helping behavior is defined as the overall level of group members' discretionary behavior that contributes to the work group (Choi & Sy, 2010; Ng & Van Dyne, 2005; Organ, 1988; Williams & Anderson, 1991). An example of this behavior is when groups engage in helping members who have been absent. In contrast, counterproductive work behaviors are defined as the overall level of group members' acts that hinder the effective functioning of the work group (based on the study by Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006). Examples of this type of behavior are when work groups take excessive breaks or leave early without regard for group goals and deadlines. The association between relationship conflict and these two aspects of group functioning has not been examined extensively in past research on workgroup conflict (e.g., Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Gladstein, 1984; Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003), which is unfortunate since both group behaviors can have far reaching consequences. Citizenship or helping behavior is widely associated with higher levels of performance and effectiveness (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000) and may be an important distinguishing factor between effective and less effective workgroups (Ng & Van Dyne, 2005). In addition, counterproductive

behaviors may have very negative consequences, such as an increase in production costs and overhead costs (e.g., Marcus, Schuler, Quell, & Hümpfner, 2002).

In sum, in this article, we investigate how relationship conflicts in workgroups are associated with group-level helping behavior and counterproductive work behavior. We aim to make two contributions to the literature. First, while much research has investigated the association of intragroup relationship conflict with group performance (see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003 for a meta-analysis of this literature), not much attention has been paid to how relationship conflicts may relate to group-level helping and counterproductive behaviors. From a theoretical standpoint, this is surprising as relationship conflicts can certainly shape how group members behave toward one another. Furthermore, these group-level behaviors are important for distinguishing effective work groups from less effective work groups (Ng & Van Dyne, 2005). Our second contribution to the conflict literature lays in our examination of an aspect of the work group environment that could buffer the negative effect of relationship conflict in groups, specifically, relational closeness. Despite a plethora of work that has identified potential moderators of the effects of task conflict, research has seldom focused specifically on identifying conditions in which relationship conflicts may not necessarily negatively relate to work group functioning. We particularly focus on the role of relational closeness as a moderator that can decrease the negative association between relationship conflict and group behaviors. In this way, we can help determine ways to alleviate the negative effect of relationship conflict in groups.

Relationship Conflict in Work Groups

According to the conflict literature, relationship conflict in work groups is associated with negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction and decreased performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) as well as decreased helping behavior (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Ehrhart, Bliese, & Thomas, 2006). Relationship conflicts are detrimental to group functioning for two main reasons. First, relationship conflicts are related to negative emotions. Many people experience frustration when confronted with a relationship conflict (Ross, 1989), and this type of conflict is often accompanied with outbursts of negative emotions such as yelling or slamming fists (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Second, relationship conflicts in work groups interfere with constructive group processes. For example, relationship conflicts are detrimental for intragroup trust (e.g., Langfred, 2004; Rispens, Greer, & Jehn, 2007), which, in turn, may impair a work group's functioning.

Assuming relationship conflicts cannot be prevented, and given the empirical evidence of the negative impact on group functioning even at relatively low levels of relationship conflict (e.g., De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001), not all empirical studies report significant negative associations between relationship conflict and work group outcomes. Several articles listed in the meta-analysis of De Dreu and Weingart, for example, reported a nonsignificant and sometimes a positive correlation between relationship conflict and group outcomes (see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, p. 743; for similar recent findings, see also the studies by Barsade, Ward, Turner, & Sonnenfeld, 2000; De Dreu, 2006; Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008). Furthermore, Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, and Trochim (2008) found that even high performing groups may experience relationship conflict.

This may indicate that the effect of relationship conflict on helpful and deviant group behavior is contingent upon certain conditions.

In the negotiation and conflict resolution research tradition, past research has found that relationship conflict had less detrimental effects in work groups consisting of friends (Shah & Jehn, 1993). Recent theoretical work also suggests that relationship conflicts do not necessarily end a relationship. Ren and Gray (2009) eloquently describe a theoretical framework explaining the repair process conflicting parties may go through in the aftermath of a relationship conflict. Relatedly, damaged trust relationships can also be repaired (Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004), cooperation can be restored (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002), forgiveness can be granted, and relationships distorted by conflict can be repaired (e.g., Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Wallace, Exline, & Baumeister, 2008). This suggests that relationship conflicts are not always destructive and that some relationships can survive and may even benefit from this type of conflict.

Another reason to suspect that the effects of relationship conflict are dependent upon situational conditions is provided by Coser (1956). Coser theorized, based on the work by Georg Simmel (1903), that relationship conflicts may serve constructive purposes, such as an emotional release of frustration. As such, relationship conflict may help to create and maintain relationship boundaries. Relationship conflicts may allow parties in a relationship to air and discuss their frustrations with each other, which can allow for eventual improvement of the relationship through an increased understanding of the issues and others' perspectives on them (Bernstein, Clarke-Stewart, Roy, & Wickens, 1997; Edmondson & McLain Smith, 2006). Thus, this past research and theorizing suggests that there are contingent conditions surrounding relationship conflict in work groups that may determine the type of effect relationship conflict has on group outcomes such as group-level helping and counterproductive behaviors. Our study is designed to test one possible contingent condition, relational closeness.

The Buffering Role of Relational Closeness

Relational closeness is an indicator of the quality of intragroup relationships and is defined as the degree to which work group members personally know and feel close to each other (e.g., Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Cross & Morris, 2003; Miller & Thomas, 2005). Past research has shown that relationship conflicts do occur within close relationships (e.g., Adams & Laursen, 2001; Gottman, 1993; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, & Takai, 2000). However, the more group members feel close to each other, the better these groups are able to handle conflict (Shah, Dirks, & Chervany, 2006) even if the conflict deals with personal issues. In work groups with a high degree of relational closeness, the intragroup relationships may be solid enough to make the best out of interpersonal conflicts (cf. Coser, 1956). Indeed, past research suggests that conflict between individuals who feel close to each other triggers maintenance behaviors (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) to sustain or continue the relationship. Furthermore, individuals who are close to each other feel a sense of psychological safety (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009). When individuals are psychologically safe,

they are more likely to be open to differences in opinion and be able to separate information from emotions when experiencing conflict (Edmondson, 1999). We therefore expect different outcomes from relationship conflicts, depending on the degree of relational closeness in this work group.

Group-level Helping Behavior

Relationship conflict in work groups has been shown to be negatively related to cooperative behavior (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Ehrhart et al., 2006), presumably because of decreased constructive group processes (e.g., trust, Rispens et al., 2007) and heightened negative emotions (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). We suggest that relational closeness moderates this relationship. Specifically, we expect that for work groups that are not relationally close (i.e., relationally distant), the negative association between relationship conflict and helping behavior will be strengthened. For relationally close work groups, we expect that the negative association between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior will be weakened.

Research on work group conflict indicates that the negative association between conflict and group functioning is less negative when groups are able to openly discuss the problem (Brett, 1991; Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009; Tjosvold, Dann, & Wong, 1992), such as in work groups consisting of friends (Shah et al., 2006). We suggest that relational closeness can encourage open conflict norms and an effective use of conflict management styles in work groups, which can mitigate or neutralize the negative association between relationship conflict and helping behavior. Additionally, relational closeness motivates individuals to minimize the damage caused by conflict (Bippus & Rollin, 2003). Therefore, when work groups have high relational closeness, the occurrence of a conflict (even if it is personal) is unlikely to result in behaviors that may escalate the conflict such as withholding helping behavior.

In contrast, in work groups that lack relational closeness, relationship conflicts are more likely to be negatively associated with group-level helping behavior. In relationally distant work groups, members are more likely to experience negative emotions in reaction to relationship conflict as they are less willing or motivated to invest in the relationship or give other members with whom they are in conflict the benefit of the doubt. These negative emotions may fuel conflict escalation, and members are likely to make negative attributions about one another (e.g., ''He is such a bully!''). This may imply that work group members are less likely to help each other. Additionally, groups that lack relational closeness are unlikely to feel psychological safe (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009), a key mechanism enabling group members to engage in interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). In work groups lacking psychological safety, the perception of relationship conflict is likely to foster behaviors that are self-protective rather than helping. Therefore, we expect relational closeness to buffer the negative association between relationship conflicts and helping behavior (see also Figure 1). We propose:

H1: Relational closeness in work groups moderates the negative association between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior such that the negative association is weaker in relationally close work groups.

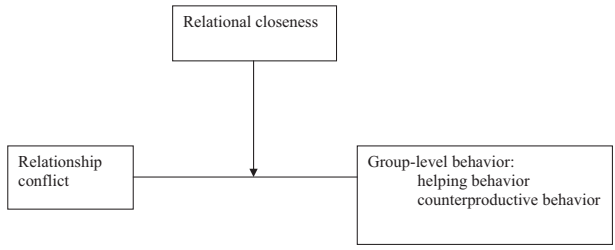

Figure 1. The proposed research model.

Group-Level Counterproductive Work Behavior

We theorize that the positive association between relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive behavior will be stronger in relationally distant work groups than in relationally close work groups. Relational closeness, or the lack thereof, determines how work group members experience and deal with personal disputes. When work groups lack relational closeness, relationship conflicts may foster competitive and self-protective behaviors. These counterproductive behaviors (e.g., Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001) can harm the group task such as, for example, sabotaging the input of other group members, or withholding effort. The motivation to engage in these destructive behaviors stems from a desire to retaliate or to ''get even'', which can escalate the conflict, and thereby, the intensity of the conflict and the severity of strategies used in pursuing it (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Wall & Callister, 1995).

Relationship conflicts are unlikely to be associated with counterproductivity in relationally close work groups, because those groups are encouraged to display relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) rather than deviant group behavior. Rather, a high level of relational closeness encourages group members to manage the conflict, for instance, by having a constructive debate (Tjosvold, Poon, & Yu, 2005) or searching for the source of the conflict. In addition, work groups with a high level of relational closeness are likely to feel psychologically safe enabling critical thought and suspension of judgment (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009). Accordingly, group members experiencing relational closeness will be inclined to focus on solving the root of the conflict rather than engaging in counterproductive group behavior. Indeed, previous research suggested that employees display less counterproductivity when they have control over the cause of the negative affect or frustration (Allen & Greenberger, 1980; Storms & Spector, 1987). Hence, we expect relational closeness to buffer the association between relationship conflict and counterproductivity such that retaliation and hurting the workgroup will be less likely in relationally close work groups (see also figure 1). Therefore:

H2: Relational closeness moderates the positive association between relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive work behavior such that the positive association is stronger in relationally distant work groups.

Method

Data and Sample

The data for this study were collected from a telecommunications company in the Netherlands. Our sample consisted of 26 workgroups (117 individuals). A workgroup is defined as a group of two or more individuals who are collectively responsible for the accomplishment of one or more tasks (DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Gladstein, 1984); that is, members must rely on each others' contributions and efforts to complete their work (Wageman, 1995). The average number of people in a workgroup was 4.5, and the mean level of task interdependence was 5.06 indicating a medium to high level of task interdependence,[1] implying that the workgroups we investigated fit the classic definition of groups. All workgroups in our study were in the business unit responsible for sales and services of telephone, internet, and television service to private and business customers, both nationally and abroad. Customers could ask for professional assistance from these workgroups for all types of problems with their computer, printer, modem, or software. Services offered ranged from data services to the complete administration of commissioned ICT services.

Surveys were distributed to the workgroup respondents during working hours and were returned directly to the research group. Individuals that were sick or elsewhere at the time the surveys were distributed returned their surveys via e-mail, resulting in a 100% response rate per work group. Survey items were translated into Dutch and back translated into English to assure correct translations. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured anonymity.

The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 61 years, with an average of 41.1 years. Of the respondents, 78.6% were men and 19% were not originally from the Netherlands (e.g., Morocco, Surinam, and Turkey). The average tenure with the organization was 11.6 years, and respondents' average tenure with the workgroup was 3.3 years. Additionally, in line with past research (e.g., Kidwell, Mossholder, & Bennett, 1997), we distributed questionnaires to the supervisors of these workgroups, to measure our dependent variables: group-level helping behavior and group-level counterproductive work behavior.

Measures

Independent Variable

Relationship conflict was measured using four items based on the intragroup conflict scale by Jehn (1995). A sample item is ''How much conflict over personal issues is there in this group?'' Responses were on a seven-point scale ranging from ''not at all'' to ''a lot.'' The reliability check showed the scale to have a Cronbach's alpha of .76.

[1]Task interdepence was measured with five items (e.g., ''I need to work closely with my coworkers to perform my task'') and respondents answered on a 1 ''Not at all'' to 7 ''Very much'' scale.

Moderator Variable

Our measure of relational closeness was based on the definition of relational closeness as given in the literatures on personal and romantic relationships (see for example, the study by Berscheid et al., 1989). We used two items to measure the degree of relational closeness in work groups: ''How well do group members know each other on a personal level?'' and ''How close are the interpersonal relationships in this work group?'' Responses were on a seven-point scale ranging from ''not at all'' to ''very well/very close.'' A high score on the scale indicated a high degree of relational closeness in the work group. The two items were highly correlated, $r = .68$, $p < .001$, and the responses on this scale ranged from 2.33 to 6.17.

Dependent Variables

We measured helping behavior, the most used dimension of citizenship behavior, with four items based on the interpersonal organizational citizenship behavior scale by Williams and Anderson (1991). We changed the wording of the items, so that the scale was appropriate for group-level evaluation by supervisors (cf. Choi & Sy, 2010). A sample item is ''The work group members help others who have been absent.'' Respondents answered on a seven-point scale whereby a high score indicated a high level of helping behavior. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .89 and responses ranged between 2.8 and 7.

We also asked the supervisors to indicate the group-level of counterproductive behavior. We used and slightly changed the 15 items of the original self-reporting scale (Robinson & Bennet, 1995) such that the supervisor answered questions reflecting the frequency with which the group s/he was supervising engaged in the different types of counterproductive behavior. Sample items are ''Have members of this work group occasionally skipped work?'', ''Have members of this work group avoided unpleasant tasks?'', ''Have members of this work group read the newspaper or played computer games instead of working?'', and ''Have members of this work group intentionally worked slowly?''. Supervisors answered on a seven-point scale from ''Never'' to ''Very often.'' The Cronbach's alpha level of this scale was .94, and the level of reported counterproductive work behavior ranged from 1.21 to 4.50.

Control Variables

We controlled in our analyses for task conflict, the proportion of women in work groups, and group tenure. Previous research suggested that gender differences may predict counterproductive behavior (Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004). In addition, we controlled for the level of task conflict within work groups to ensure that our results are not a consequence of the task conflict-relationship conflict association (Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). The task conflict measure was based on the intragroup conflict scale (Jehn, 1995), contained five items, and showed high reliability ($\alpha = .90$). A sample item is ''We fought about task matters.''

To test whether the three scales included in our study (relationship conflict, task conflict, and relational closeness) represent distinguishable constructs, we conducted a

confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the individual responses. A three-factor model provided a better fit ($\chi^2 = 46.62$, $p = .17$, normed fit index [NFI] = 0.94., comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.99, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.04) than a one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 391.55$, $p = .00$, NFI = 0.46, CFI = 0.57, RMSEA = 0.25) or a two-factor model ($\chi^2 = 332.42$, $p = .00$, NFI = 0.54, CFI = 0.64, RMSEA = 0.23). We also performed a chi-square difference test to assess the significance of increased fit comparing the one-factor model with the two-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2$ (2) = 282.80, $p < .001$, and three-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2$ (3) = 341.93, $p < .001$. Thus, these results confirm that the three constructs are distinguishable.

Analysis

Consistent with our theoretical level of analysis, we aggregated responses to the work group level. To assess whether aggregation to the group-level of analysis was justified, we calculated the intraclass coefficients and mean levels of within-group agreement to see whether aggregation to the group level was justified (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). The ICC[1] for relationship conflict was .24 ($F[116] = 2.43$, $p < .01$) and the ICC[2] value was .50. For relational closeness, the ICC[1] was .36 ($F[117] = 3.59$, $p < .01$) and the ICC[2] value was .72. The ICC[1] value for task conflict was .34 ($F[117] = 3.35$, $p < .01$) and the ICC[2] value was .70. The Rwg*(j)* values were .80 for relationship conflict, .75 for task conflict, and .80 for relational closeness. Both the intraclass coefficient values and the mean values of within-group agreement justify the aggregation of the individual responses to the group level (Bliese, 2000; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; LeBreton & Senter, 2008). In further analyses, we used hierarchical regression analyses to test the hypotheses and centered the variables to minimize multicollinearity problems (Aiken & West, 1991).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 1. The correlation between task and relationship conflict in work groups was positive and significant ($r = .78$; $p < .01$), which is in line with past research (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003;

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
Gender proportion	0.22	.28					
Task conflict	3.32	.83	.16				
Relationship conflict	2.14	.58	.05	.72***			
Relational closeness	4.63	.82	−.01	−0.38*	−.24		
Helping behavior	5.40	1.06	−.36*	−.17	−.22	.44**	
Counterproductive work behavior	2.40	1.05	.38*	.23	.37*	−.15	−.63***

Note. $N = 26$ groups.
*$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

Table 2
Results of Regression Analysis for Group-level Helping Behavior and Counterproductive Work Behavior

	Helping behavior			Counterproductive work behavior		
Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender proportion	−.34*	−.35**	−.42**	.35*	.34*	.41**
Task conflict	−.12	.25	.38	.17	−0.06	−0.21
Relationship conflict		−.28	−.18		.29	.17
Relational closeness		.44**	.77***		−.08	−.46*
Relationship conflict × relational closeness			.49**			−.56**
ΔR^2		.22*	.14**		.05	.18**
R^2	.14	.36	.50	.17	.22	.40
F	1.86	2.81*	3.74***	2.31	1.42	2.50*

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are reported.
*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

Jehn, 1995). This confirms our decision to include task conflict as a control variable in all subsequent analyses. Initial regressions showed similar results when including group tenure as a control variable; however, given the small sample size and related power issues, we decided not to include this variable in the subsequent analyses.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the negative association between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior is moderated by relational closeness such that the negative association between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior is weaker in relationally close work groups. This was confirmed; Table 2 shows a statistically significant interaction effect of relationship conflict and relational closeness on group-level helping behavior ($\beta = .49$, $p < .05$). The interaction term added significantly to the explained variance of the model $\Delta R^2 = .14$, $p < .05$.[2] Plotting the interaction (see Figure 2) revealed that when there is relationship conflict, group-level helping behavior is lower in relationally distant work groups than in relationally close work groups. Simple slope tests showed that relationship conflict was significantly negatively associated with group-level helping behavior in relationally distant work groups ($B = -0.72$, $t[22] = -2.16$, $p < .05$) but not in relationally close work groups ($B = 0.36$, $t[22] = 0.58$, $p < .57$). This finding supports Hypothesis 1 that relational closeness buffers the negative association between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior.

[2]Because of the significant intercorrelations among our constructs, one could suspect a multicollinearity problem. Therefore, we inspected the variance inflation factors and the tolerance values. All variance inflation factors were well below the critical value of 10. All tolerance values were well above the threshold of 0.2, indicating no potential problems (Menard, 1995). In addition, we reran regressions again without task conflict as a control variable. One could argue that task conflict is an ''impotent'' control variable (Becker, 2005). The results remained largely the same.

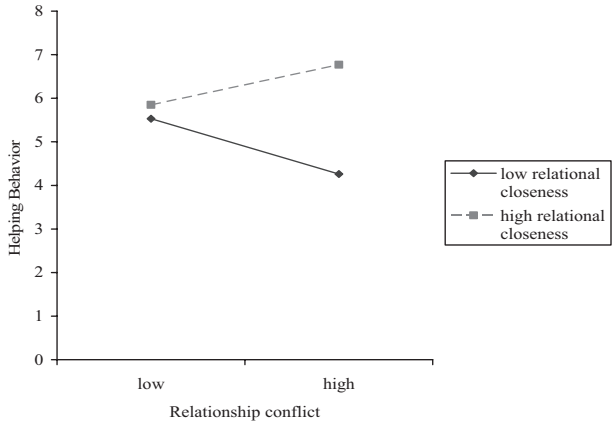

Figure 2. Moderating effect of the degree of relational closeness on the relationship conflict-group-level helping behavior link.

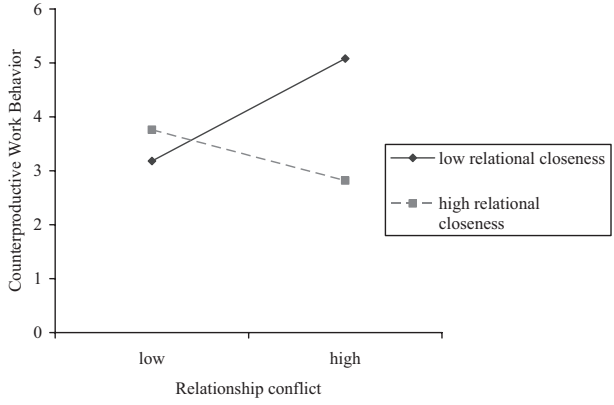

Figure 3. Moderating effect of the degree of relational closeness on the relationship conflict-group-level counterproductive work behavior link.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that the positive association between relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive work behavior is moderated by relational closeness such that the positive association is weaker for relationally close work groups. This hypothesis was confirmed ($\beta = -.56$, $p < .05$; see also Table 2). Adding the interaction term between relationship conflict and relational closeness significantly contributed to the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .18$, $p < .05$). The graph displayed in Figure 3 shows that when there is relationship conflict, group-level counterproductive behavior is lower in relationally close work groups than in relationally distant work groups. Consistent with our hypothesis, relationship conflict was positively associated with counterproductive work behavior in relationally distant work groups ($B = 1.24$, $t[22] = 2.36$, $p < .05$),

but this association between relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive behavior was not present in relationally close work groups ($B = -0.28$, $t[22] = -0.45$, $p < .66$).[3]

Discussion

Relationship conflicts within work groups cannot easily be prevented and are often detrimental to work group functioning (cf. De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Past research, however, has not paid much attention to how the negative relationship between relationship conflict and work group functioning can be reduced. The current study was conducted to fill this gap and to examine whether this negative relationship can be mitigated. The results of this study show that the degree of relational closeness in work groups buffers the association between relationship conflict and group-level helping and counterproductive work behavior. Specifically, we found that the negative association between relationship conflict and group-level helping behavior became nonsignificant when work groups were relationally close. Rather, relationship conflict was only negatively related to group-level helping behavior in relationally distant work groups. This means that when work groups experience relationship conflicts, members still help each other when they are relationally close, in contrast to relationally distant work groups where members refuse to help other members during relationship conflicts.

In addition, we also found, as we predicted, that relational closeness buffered the positive association between relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive behavior. That is, relationship conflict was not associated with group-level counterproductive behavior when work groups were relationally close. Relationship conflict and group-level counterproductive behavior were only positively affiliated when work groups were relationally distant. This implies that relationship conflicts are more likely to be related to sabotaging behaviors that hurt group functioning when work group members do not know each other well on a personal level and do not feel close. Together, these findings suggest that relationship conflict is not always associated with negative group behaviors; rather, this is only likely in relationally distant work groups. Relational closeness can help work groups guard themselves from the disruptions of personal disputes.

Another contribution of the current study is that we investigated the association between relationship conflict and two group behaviors that are seldom investigated in conjunction with workgroup conflict and yet are important for distinguishing effective work groups from less effective groups (Ng & Van Dyne, 2005). This study suggests that relationship conflicts in relationally distant work groups are negatively related to group-level helping behaviors and positively related to group-level counterproductivity. Cooperative processes in work groups get undermined by personal disputes when there is no relational closeness. Relationship conflicts are thus a much bigger problem for relationally distant work groups than for relationally close work groups.

[3]We also analyzed whether relational closeness would moderate the relationships between task conflict and work group helping behavior or counterproductive work behavior. We found no significant results supporting such a model.

In line with past research, we found relational closeness to be positively related to helping behavior (Bowler & Brass, 2006; Van der Vegt, Bunderson, & Oosterhof, 2006). This makes intuitive sense because people may want to help those they like. However, our finding surpasses the possibility of the common method bias as we have supervisory ratings of group-level helping behavior and we do not rely on work group members' own perceptions of helping. In addition, we believe that our main contribution is to show that work groups help those they feel close to, even when there is a personal conflict. And, when members do not feel close, they are not only unhelpful to their fellow work group members, but are also actively engaged in behaviors that are counterproductive.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study is a first step in recognizing the circumstances under which the detrimental consequences of relationship conflicts in work groups are weakened. As was the case in the current study, other studies have found a lack of a significant relationships between relationship conflict and group level outcomes (e.g., Jehn et al., 2008). We believe that the lack of significant main effects may be due to the moderating effect of relational closeness. Our results indicate that relationally distant work groups suffer from relationship conflict, and perhaps most organizational workgroups that were investigated in the aforementioned past studies were relationally close work groups.

We specifically focused on group-level behaviors that "depart from the norm" (Packer, 2008; Warren, 2003); however, knowledge about how other group behaviors and outcomes, such as objective performance or learning, are affected by both relationship conflict and relational closeness is necessary. Regarding the current outcomes, it may be useful to explore other sources of information about work group helping and work group counterproductive behavior. Specifically, research has indicated that supervisors are likely to balance the scores on these two behaviors (cf. Dalal, 2005; Sackett, Berry, Wiemann, & Laczo, 2006) and to view these behaviors as opposites (i.e., a high score on helping and a high score on counterproductive behavior is unlikely and did not occur in our data). For future research, it is also necessary to pursue a longitudinal research design to determine the causal effects of relationship conflicts in work groups. Another potential limitation may be the relatively small sample size of 26 work groups. In small samples, the sampling error may be larger than in bigger samples, and one can question whether the findings will hold in larger samples. Relatedly, our sample is restricted to the workgroups of one organizational unit of a Dutch telecommunications organization. Characteristics of this specific sample may limit the generalizability of the findings. Organizational culture as well as national culture may have had an influence on the direction and strength of the reported relationships (Gelfand, Leslie, & Keller, 2008).

Clearly, more research is needed to broaden our understanding of the mechanisms by which relationship conflict relates to work group functioning and effectiveness under different conditions. We used the argument, but were not able to test, that relationally close work groups are better able to manage their personal conflicts because of psychological safety. Therefore, future studies could include psychological safety, and

also conflict resolution techniques, to test this line of reasoning. In addition, exploring whether relationship conflicts within relationally close work groups actually improve the intragroup relationships, as the work by Coser (1956) and Cronin and Bezrukova (2006) suggests, would also be interesting. Given the findings presented here, it seems plausible that relationally close work groups are better able to separate information from emotions during personal fights and to put conflict behavior in context (i.e., rationalizing why members are fighting) than work groups that are relationally distant. Additionally, relationship conflict in relationally close work groups may be about different things. Personal fights in relationally close groups may be occasional blips (e.g., lashing out because you are in bad mood) and not so much about important or ''hot'' issues (Coser, 1956; Edmondson & McLain Smith, 2006). We think future research should try to explore the possible different dimensions of relationship conflicts to be able to measure the distinction between releasing tension and the conflicts that convey deeper information (e.g., I want to be treated differently).

The sole focus of relational closeness on the quality of the intragroup relationships is what distinguishes this construct from related concepts as work group cohesion and integration. Past research has indicated that both cohesiveness and social integration are multidimensional constructs (e.g., Chang & Bordia, 2001; Hogg, 1993) and operationalizations used in past studies show overlap with the goals and tasks of work groups. Therefore, we urge future research to explore relational closeness and its distinction to related concepts more thoroughly. In addition, although we demonstrated relational closeness and relationship conflict are clearly distinguishable constructs, the construct validity of the relational closeness measure cannot be established with one study. Greater confidence in the construct validity of the relational closeness measure would be justified if subsequent analyses reveal numerous predictions involving diverse, theoretically related variables. Furthermore, although research suggests that knowing someone well on a personal level does enhance the feeling of closeness (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997), we agree that it is a limitation to have a two-item measure and do advise others to build upon this measure to enhance its construct validity.

As a final note, in the current study, we focused on the closeness of work group relationships; however, this construct offers the possibility of conceptualizing and operationalizing at the interpersonal level as well as at the intergroup level of analysis (cf. Miller & Thomas, 2005). We recommend researchers in the field to use methods of inquiry that can integrate relationships among coworkers at dyadic, intragroup, and intergroup levels, for example, by applying a social network methodology. Such an approach would allow researchers to thoroughly grasp the dynamic nature of intragroup and even intergroup relationships.

Practical Implications

In this study, we have shown that relationship conflicts are not necessarily as detrimental for work group functioning as past research seems to indicate. This current study suggests that managers of relationally close work groups should be reassured that relationship conflicts are unlikely to negatively relate to positive and cooperative group

behaviors (i.e., helping behavior) or show a positive association with group-level counterproductive behavior. It is more likely that personal fights will relate to negative work group functioning when work groups do not have relational closeness. There are several possible ways for managers or supervisors to deal with work groups that fall into the latter category. First of all, although supervisors cannot force relational closeness among their work group members, they are able to *facilitate* the formation of such relationships. Managers may consider stimulating group members to develop close and valuable intragroup relationships, for example, by organizing relational meetings in which members can meaningfully interact (cf. Baker & Dutton, 2006). In addition, managers can set norms about how work group members should air their feelings and frustrations, and that these feelings matter. Past research has indicated that open and honest communication about conflict as well as confrontation may encourage group effectiveness (Brett, 1984; Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980). Perhaps we should revisit the lessons learned from T-groups (cf. McLeod & Kettner-Polley, 2004), so that group leaders are able to train their work groups to become relationally close. Meta-analytic studies have shown that T-groups are effective in accomplishing behavioral change (e.g., Faith, Wong, & Carpenter, 1995) and in establishing group members' understanding of the conditions that negatively affect group functioning as well as diagnosing and solving those issues. Recent empirical research in the area of positive psychology and psychological safety also underlines the importance of relational closeness among coworkers (e.g., Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Carmeli & Gittel, 2009). Setting norms and providing training will help work groups to become relationally close and provide them with protection against the negative consequences of personal disputes.

In sum, we believe relational closeness is an important feature for organizations utilizing work groups as we show that relational closeness can buffer the negative association between relationship conflict and work group behavioral outcomes. The more relationally close work groups are, the better they are equipped to deal with relationship conflict. In fact, relationship conflict does not always have to be as negative as previously assumed!

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Lindred Greer is an Assistant Professor in Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include conflict, power, and diversity in teams.

Karen A. Jehn is a Professor of Organization Behavior at Melbourne Business School. Her research focuses on intragroup conflict, group composition and performance, and lying in organizations. Her two most recent research interests are in asymmetry of perceptions and member entitlement in workgroups.

Sonja Rispens is an Assistant Professor in Work and Organizational Psychology at the Eindhoven University of Technology. Her research focuses on conflict, individual and team effectiveness, and leadership in organizations.

Sherry M. B. Thatcher is an Associate Professor at the University of Louisville. Her research revolves around teams and includes creativity, diversity faultlines, identity recognition, the social effects of computer communication technologies, and team conflict.