Research Report

When Should We Disagree? The Effect of Relationship Conflict on Team Identity in East Asian and North American Teams

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Abstract

Along with recent research uncovering distinctly Asian approaches to conflict management, we examine the experience and effect of relationship conflict on team identity in culturally homogeneous North American versus East Asian teams. In a longitudinal field experiment with student teams, we found that East Asian teams, compared to North American teams, experienced more relationship conflict at later stages of team tenure. We further found that, while relationship conflict undermined team identity in North American teams, relationship conflict did not influence team identity in East Asian teams. Our study counterintuitively finds that East Asian teams may be less influenced by relationship conflict than North American teams, despite their relationship maintenance orientation. We present several possible future avenues to unpack the psychological mechanisms underlying the distinct temporal patterns and outcome effects of relationship conflict in East Asian teams and implications for cross-cultural East Asian and North American teams.

Teamwork is the norm in various domains of our social life such as in classrooms, business organizations, juries, support groups, and boards of directors (Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Werner & Lester, 2001). Yet, the effectiveness of teamwork is oftentimes plagued by intragroup conflict, with relationship conflict (i.e., conflict based in personal issues such as members' dislike and feelings of annoyance; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) being most disruptive for team functioning (for reviews, see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). However, our conceptual understanding of relationship conflict in teams is limited by researchers' prior focus on the likelihood of conflict in demographically homogenous versus heterogeneous teams (e.g., Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010). Recent research stressing unique approaches to conflict management in East Asia (Chen, 2002, 2008) suggests that the approach, expression, and effects of conflict may be quite different in culturally homogeneous teams comprised of distinct nationalities. Hence, we examine

the experience and the effect of relationship conflict on an important team outcome, team identity, in two types of culturally homogeneous teams: North American and East Asian teams. Drawing on the literature on dialecticism, we offer counterintuitive propositions that despite focusing on relational harmony, East Asian teams, compared with North American teams, may actually be more likely to experience relationship conflict and that relationship conflict should be less detrimental for their team identity.

Although for many years conflict management researchers reported a tendency for East Asians to *avoid* conflict (e.g., Friedman, Chi, & Liu, 2006; Leung, 1988), more recently researchers have recognized that conflict management in East Asia is characterized by many different approaches, including avoidance, confrontation, and cooperation, that often function interdependently within a single conflict episode (Chen, 2008). Likewise ambicultural approaches to conflict management bridge Eastern and Western styles, promoting the acceptance of seeming paradoxes, such as the coexistence of cooperation and competition, instead of an either-or approach (Chen & Miller, 2010; Keller, Loewenstein, & Yan, 2010). One tenant of ambicultural conflict management is Eastern dialecticism, which accepts and embraces duality in life. East Asians are more likely than North Americans to use dialectical thinking, a system of thoughts and beliefs characterized by the expectation of contradictions and change (Choi, Koo, & An Choi, 2007; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010b).

East Asians are more likely than North Americans to see both the good and bad in themselves and others and consequently have a greater negativity toward a wide range of stimuli, including their own team members. Furthermore, past research shows that East Asians are more critical of their in-group members than North Americans (Ma-Kellams, Spencer-Rodgers, & Peng, 2011). Based on this research, we suggest that East Asian teams, compared to North American teams, may be more likely to experience relationship conflict, as they are more likely to perceive both the good and bad in their team members. Moreover, we expect this effect to be more pronounced after the initial encounter when team members get to know each other better. In line with the research on group development stages (Tuckman, 1965), we expect that at the beginning of team tenure both East Asian and North American teams may experience relationship conflict because people are not yet familiar with each other and team norms are not yet established. But for East Asian teams, characterized by dialectical thinking, we expect relationship conflict to continue even beyond early stages and the development of group norms. That is, because dialecticism accepts that teams will embrace cooperation and competition simultaneously, East Asian teams will continue to experience relatively high levels of relationship conflict, compared to North American teams, even beyond the initial stages of team development where relationship conflict is ubiquitous.

We further suggest that the experience of relationship conflict should not be detrimental for East Asian teams, as it has been found for North American teams. Past research has shown that relationship conflict is particularly detrimental for more proximal outcomes that determine group viability, such as team identity (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012). Team identity is part of an individual's self-concept derived from one's team membership; when team members have a stronger team identity their goals and values are aligned (Jehn & Bezrukova, 2010). However, when conflict erupts, especially if it is relational in nature, prior research suggests team members are more likely to divert attention to taking sides instead of working toward a common goal, thus impeding the development of a cohesive team identity.

We suggest that this negative relation between relationship conflict and team identity may be buffered in East Asian teams. Given their dialectical thinking tendencies, East Asians are more tolerant and comfortable with inconsistencies in their environment (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, & Wang, 2010a; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010b). Consequently, when East Asian teams experience relationship conflict, which may seem inconsistent and contradictory to a strong team identity, they may accept that both relationship conflict and high team identity can coexist simultaneously. Further, they may also see relationship conflict as good and bad at the same time, making relationship conflict less influential for team identity in East Asian teams. In line with this notion that two seemingly incompatible

ideas can coexist, Keller et al. (2010) found that Chinese were more likely than U.S. Americans to perceive two seemingly contradictory actions, competition and cooperation, as compatible, due to their experiences of dialecticism.

We propose that this buffering of the negative relation between relationship conflict and team identity in East Asian teams will occur at later stages of team existence, because team identity evolves over time through group member contact and communication (Meeussen, Delvaux, & Phalet, 2014). As such, we test that relation at later stages of team development when enough time has passed to allow for formation of team identity. In a longitudinal field experiment with student teams, we examine whether in East Asian teams, compared to North American teams, (a) the experience of relationship conflict is higher at later stages of group existence, that is, after the initial encounter (*Hypothesis 1*); and (b) relationship conflict is less likely to influence team identity at later stages of team existence (*Hypothesis 2*).

Method

Participants

One hundred and eighty-four undergraduate students participated in our study, but six individuals from different teams who did not complete one or more measures were excluded. Our final sample comprised 178 students (38% males) enrolled in an organizational psychology course at a large North American university, forming 46 three- or four-person North American or East Asian teams.

Procedure

The study was conducted as a part of an in-class team learning experience over one academic semester. At the beginning of the semester, students were informed that they would be assigned to three- or four-person teams and that they would engage in weekly team activities and complete questionnaires reflecting on their team experiences.

The first questionnaire assessed students' demographics and cultural background. Following past research (Adair, Hideg, & Spence, 2013), we measured cultural background with self-reports of birth country, citizenship, national culture most identified with, and ethnicity. Based on this information, students were assigned to either homogenous North American teams or homogeneous East Asian teams. Homogeneous North American teams consisted of North American participants who were born and raised in a North American country (i.e., Canada, U.S.), who were Caucasians, and who identified with a North American culture only. Homogeneous East Asian teams consisted of participants who were born and raised in an East Asian country (e.g., China, South Korea, Japan), who identified themselves as an East Asian, who lived in North America less than 10 years, and who identified only with an East Asian culture. In total, there were 29 homogeneous North American and 17 homogeneous East Asian teams. Students who did not identify as either North American or East Asian were placed in other multicultural groups that were not part of this study or included in any analyses.

In the fourth week of the semester, students met their group members for the first time. They rated relationship conflict in their team five times during the semester: week five (Time 2), week seven (Time 3), week eight (Time 4), week ten (Time 5), and week eleven (Time 6). They rated their team identity at Time 6 (end of semester). We used Jehn's (1995) three-item scale to assess relationship conflict (e.g., "How much relationship tension is there in your group?"; average α across all times = .85) and Earley and Mosakowski's (2000) three-item scale to assess team identity (e.g., "Our group acts as a single cohesive team"; α = .91). Participants responded to scales using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Because relationship conflict and team identity measures were collected at the individual level, we aggregated data to the group level (i.e., group means) to test our hypotheses. Before aggregating to the group level, we computed James, Demaree, and Wolf's (1993) index of within-group agreement $r_{WG(j)}$ for relationship conflict and team identity for each of the 46 teams in our analyses. The average $r_{WG(j)}$ index for relationship conflict across Times 2–6 was .93; the average $r_{WG(j)}$ index for team identity was .84. Given that we had strong within-group agreement (e.g., Bliese, 2000), aggregation of the above measures to group level is justified.

Hypotheses Testing

We conducted a mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the team type as a between-subject factor and relationship conflict at Times 2–6 as a within-subject factor to test for differences in East Asian and North American teams' experience of relationship conflict throughout team tenure (Hypothesis 1). There was no main effect of group type, $F(1, 38) = 2.56$, *n.s.* ($\eta^2 = .06$). There was, however, a main effect of time, $F(4, 152) = 63.33$, $p < .01$ ($\eta^2 = .63$). Planned contrasts revealed that relationship conflict at Time 2 ($M = 3.01$, $SD = .98$) was higher than at any other time, that is, Time 3 ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .40$), $F(1, 38) = 119.71$, $p < .001$; Time 4 ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .53$), $F(1, 38) = 84.75$, $p < .001$; Time 5 ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 38) = 73.47$, $p < .001$; and Time 6 ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .49$), $F(1, 38) = 88.76$, $p < .001$. This main effect was, as expected, qualified by a significant interaction between team type and relationship conflict over time, $F(4, 152) = 2.56$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .06$) (see Figure 1).

Follow-up tests revealed that East Asian teams experienced a significantly higher level of relationship conflict than North American teams at Time 3 ($M_{East\ Asian} = 1.73$, $SD_{East\ Asian} = .50$; $M_{North\ American} = 1.31$; $SD_{North\ American} = .33$), $t(44) = -3.17$, $p < .05$ ($d = 0.79$), and a marginally higher level at Time 6 ($M_{East\ Asian} = 1.75$, $SD_{East\ Asian} = .49$; $M_{North\ American} = 1.44$, $SD_{North\ American} = .49$), $t(44) = -1.89$, $p = .07$ ($d = 0.45$). At Times 4 and 5, although means were in the expected direction (East Asian > North American), the differences in the experience of relationship conflict between North American and East Asian teams were not significant. Thus, these results offer some evidence that East Asian teams experienced more relationship conflict than North American teams once team members were more familiar with each other (Time 3) and even after stages when group norms are typically established (Time 6).
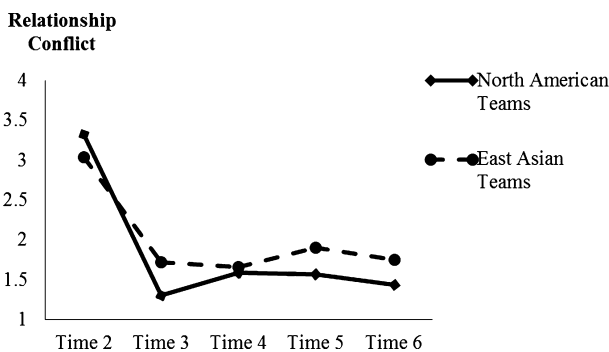

Figure 1. Relationship conflict in North American and East Asian teams throughout team tenure.

We next conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test whether team type would moderate the relation between relationship conflict and team identity at Time 6 (Hypothesis 2). We mean-centered our predictor variable, relationship conflict, and created an interaction term from the cross-product of the centered continuous variable and a dichotomous variable, team type (North American teams coded as 0 and East Asian teams coded as 1).

There was no main effect of group type, $b = .26$, $n.s.$; but there was a main effect of relationship conflict, $b = -1.91$, $p < .001$, suggesting that relationship conflict was undermining team identity. However, that main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between relationship conflict and team type in predicting team identity, $b = .93$, $p < .05$, ($f^2 = 0.70$). As expected, a simple slopes analysis showed that as relationship conflict became higher, North American teams experienced significantly lower team identity compared to when relationship conflict was lower, $t(42) = -5.07$, $p < .001$, whereas relationship conflict did not influence team identity for East Asian teams, $t(42) = -.22$, $p = n.s.$ (see Figure 2).

Discussion

We proposed and tested unique temporal dynamics and effects of relationship conflict on team identity in culturally homogeneous North American and East Asian teams. Our results offer evidence that East Asian teams, compared to North American teams, experience more relationship conflict in later stages of the group existence, yet that relationship conflict is not detrimental to their team identity. That is, while relationship conflict led to lower team identity in North American teams, it did not influence team identity in East Asian teams.

These findings may appear counter to previous research suggesting that North Americans prefer direct confrontation, whereas East Asians prefer relationship maintenance (Morris et al., 1998), and thus, it could be expected that East Asians would experience less relationship conflict and yet be more influenced by it. The temporal component of our research design allowed us to demonstrate that not only do East Asian teams engage in relationship conflict at early team stages, but they continue to experience relationship conflict in later stages when team members are acquainted and team norms are established. Our results are consistent with prior research showing that East Asians embrace duality and can experience positive and negative emotion simultaneously (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010a). Indeed, in a team setting, East Asians may be more comfortable with relationship conflict than North Americans, as they can experience relationship conflict without it negatively impacting their team identity.

As an initial investigation of the experience and consequences of team conflict in culturally homogeneous teams, our research suggests an important agenda for future research on cross-cultural differences
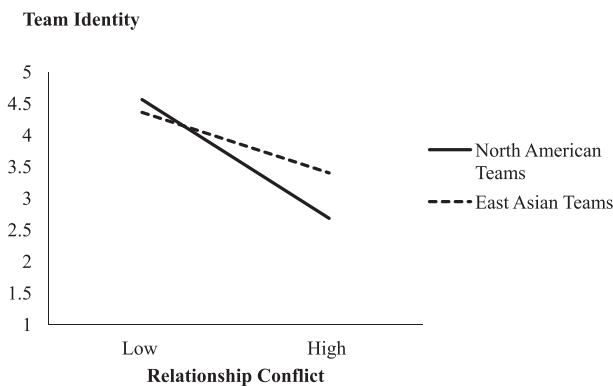

Figure 2. Team type moderates the relation between relationship conflict and team identity.

in team conflict. First, our research provides initial empirical evidence that the experience and effects of relationship conflict are different for North American and East Asian teams, and we suggest that such differences are due to Eastern dialectical thinking. However, one limitation of our current study is that we did not measure dialectical thinking, and future research is needed to empirically establish its role as a mediator. Future research can unpack our predictions even further, specifying (a) additional mediating mechanisms, (b) distinct temporal patterns and effects for other forms of conflict (e.g., task, process), and (c) the role of conflict in culturally homogeneous teams from other geographical regions as well as multicultural teams.

In addition to dialecticism and the acceptance of contradiction, another mechanism potentially underlying the buffering effect on relationship conflict we found in East Asian teams is the East Asian interdependent orientation. The interdependent self-construal and collectivist values that are hallmarks of East Asian cultures stress in-group and relationship harmony (Morris et al., 1998; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994). It could be a combination of relational harmony motivation and dialecticism that allows for conflict within a cohesive group. Indeed, in discussing our findings, two Chinese conflict management scholars confirmed that when the in-group is strong, such as in a family setting, Chinese often confront conflict very directly and passionately.[1] Thus, another possible mechanism stemming from our findings on temporal dynamics is psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Perhaps East Asian teams must first establish a strong group identity, which then provides a safe environment to engage in conflict without threatening the team identity. It would thus be important for future research to examine how different cultural values and team factors interact or act in synergy to influence the experience and consequences of team conflict.

While our study focused on relationship conflict, there are several other forms of team conflict well established in the group's literature. Both task conflict, which involves disagreements over the task definition (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), and process conflict, which involves disagreements over task procedures such as duties and resource delegation (Jehn, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), may evolve differently and have a distinct impact on outcomes depending on a team's cultural composition. While a meta-analysis revealed all three types of conflict negatively impact team performance in a sample of studies conducted in North America and Western Europe (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), we may find some forms of conflict positively relate to outcomes in Eastern cultures, where conflict can occur within the context of cooperation (e.g., Chen, 2008), or in Latin cultures, where lively debate and passionate persuasion are common in all interpersonal encounters (Hall, 1973).

Moreover, to deepen our understanding of cross-cultural differences in conflict experiences, future research should examine different cultural groups, and in particular cultural groups that are nondialectical but are still interdependent, such as Mexico (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010a, 2010b). This would help to isolate potential mechanisms and provide more definite conclusions while at the same time expanding our understanding of team conflict across many cultures, countries, and geographical regions. Once we have a clear understanding of cultural variation in the experience and effect of team conflict and the underlying mechanisms, then researchers can begin to model conflict in multicultural teams from a stronger theoretical and empirical foundation than we currently have (Stahl et al., 2010).

In conclusion, our study has started uncovering complex and counterintuitive effects of relationship conflict in different types of culturally homogenous teams, suggesting that cultural influences on the experience and effect of intragroup conflict may be very potent. As such, our study suggests an innovative future research agenda and hopes to stimulate more research on cross-cultural differences in team conflict.

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[1]Personal conversations with Dr. Kwok Leung and Dr. Leigh Anne Liu, 2012 International Association for Chinese Management Research Annual Meetings, Hong Kong.

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