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Is task conflict truly good for everyone? Examining the interaction between task conflict instigation and gender on employee outcomes

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Abstract

Task conflict, defined as disagreements among co-workers about the content of the tasks being performed, is a critical process for solving complex problems. However, little is known about how individuals who instigate such conflict are perceived by others. Drawing on the agency-communion paradigm and research on gender stereotypes, we propose that women and men who instigate task conflict are perceived differently along two fundamental dimensions of person perception: agency and communion. These perceptions, in turn, shape co-workers' interactions with the instigator and influence judgments about their promotion potential. We tested our hypotheses in two studies: a laboratory experiment with undergraduate business students (Study 1) and a field survey with working professionals (Study 2). Across both studies, task conflict instigation appeared to benefit men more than women. Specifically, women were rated lower on communion (Study 1), while men were rated higher on agency (Study 2). Although the patterns of moderation by gender varied, a consistent finding emerged: women who frequently instigated task conflict were perceived less favorably than men who engaged in the same behavior. These findings offer new insight into the subtle barriers women face in attaining leadership roles and have implications for research on conflict and gender in the workplace.

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When individuals are assembled into groups, complex social processes take place that often result in conflict (Tjosvold, 1986). Therefore, it is important for academics and practitioners alike to understand how to optimize different types of conflict that can actually help teams reach their goals. Two types of intra-team conflict that have been extensively studied in the literature, are task conflict, defined as "disagreements among group members, including about the content of the tasks being performed, such as differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions" (Jehn, 1995, p. 258), and relationship conflict, defined as "interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group" (Jehn, 1995, p. 258). Whereas a large body of research supports the assertion that relationship conflict is detrimental for teams whenever it occurs and thus should be minimized as much as possible to encourage healthy teamwork (Bear et al., 2014; Jehn, 1995), task conflict can be a critical process for teams to engage in to solve complex problems (De Dreu, 2006; O'Neill et al., 2018).

Engaging in task conflict involves challenging others' opinions and intentionally introducing disagreements into the conversation, which can encourage information sharing and innovative ideas (O'Neill et al., 2018). As such, task conflict within teams is often initiated by an individual group member who is the first to raise different viewpoints, ideas, or opinions. Previous research

has shown that task conflict impacts team-level processes and outcomes in a largely positive way (Farh et al., 2010; O'Neill et al., 2018). Given that moderate levels of task conflict appear to be a healthy form of intra-team conflict (O'Neill et al., 2013), does this mean that people who regularly initiate and engage in task conflict are viewed favorably by other team members? Indeed, we know little about what it means for task conflict instigators who regularly express disagreements when working on a team or with a co-worker (Farh et al., 2010; Park et al., 2020; Weingart et al., 2015). Thus, this research focuses on the individuals who initiate task conflict, studying the positive and negative ways they can be perceived by others and how they may manage conflict to mitigate negative perceptions.

Drawing on the agency-communion paradigm (Fiske et al., 2007; Powell & Butterfield, 1979), we propose that there are both positive and negative ways task conflict instigators may be perceived by their coworkers. According to the agency-communion paradigm, we contend that instigating task conflict is an agentic behavior which displays the instigator's agentic characteristics such as confidence and dominance that are important for goal attainment (Abele et al., 2016). Thus, instigating task conflict could lead to coworkers' positive perceptions of agency and of wanting to have this person on their team or to work with them in the future. On the other hand, instigating task conflict can be at odds with communal behaviors which display characteristics that are important for building and maintaining relationships (Abele et al., 2016). Therefore, initiating task conflict may result in the other people on the team viewing the instigator as a nuisance and as inhibiting progress. Thus, they may not want to work with that person in the future if given the opportunity. It is important to study both agentic and communal perceptions toward task conflict instigators because these perceptions can impact others' intentions to interact and work with the task conflict instigators, which has implications for more distal and impactful career outcomes (Hentschel et al., 2018; Hideg et al., 2018). Thus, the first purpose of this research is to focus on the individuals who regularly initiate task conflict and examine how instigating task conflict impacts others' agency and communion perceptions of these individuals, as well as others' intentions to work with these individuals.

Given that the agency-communion paradigm is associated with widespread and pervasive gender stereotypes (Kite et al., 2008), we also consider how the perceptions of task conflict instigators vary depending on the gender of the instigator. Indeed, when studying initial perceptions of others, demographic variables like gender are important to consider because it is often one of the first cues people use to make inferences about others in social situations because it is often visible (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Fiske et al., 1991). Further, we possess many social schemas about expectations of gendered behavior to draw upon to decrease our cognitive load when processing new situations (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). This type of information is particularly salient in the absence of richer contextual information like working style (when making judgments about others in the workplace) that becomes more readily available after team members get to know each other over a longer period of time (van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

Specifically, drawing on the research on social role theory and prescriptive stereotypes (Eagly & Kite, 1987; Koenig, 2018), we propose that instigating task conflict has less positive and more negative consequences for women than men, as challenging others' opinions and expressing different viewpoints are incongruent with how women should act as defined by the prescriptive stereotypes toward women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Studying such gender differences are important for understanding gender inequity in the workplace, especially given that engaging in task conflict is often encouraged and even required of teams working on complex problems (O'Neill et al., 2013). That is, if women are perceived negatively for engaging in this behavior,

they may not be assigned to challenging tasks or may not be promoted as quickly. Finally, their co-workers may not want to interact with them as much due to the counter-stereotypical behavior. Therefore, the second purpose of this research is to investigate whether there are differential perceptions of women compared to men when they instigate task conflict in the workplace.

We aim to make two main contributions. First, we aim to contribute to the workplace conflict and gender equity literature by demonstrating that engaging in task conflict can have differential outcomes for the instigator depending on their gender, particularly that women may be subject to more negative perceptions compared to men.[1] Second, we integrate theory on workplace conflict and gender stereotypes to show that the negative perceptions experienced by women who engage in task conflict have a compounding negative effect on workplace outcomes like co-worker interaction intentions and promotion potential, offering a new perspective on how women are perceived at work that may have implications for the existing gender gap in leadership positions.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Agency-Communion Paradigm and Perceptions of Task Conflict Instigators

The agency-communion paradigm is based on the premise that all individuals and groups are evaluated on the extent to which they are perceived as agentic and communal. Agency refers to "qualities relevant for goal-attainment" and individuals perceived as highly agentic are likely to be seen as competent, achievement oriented, ambitious, assertive, and independent (Abele et al., 2016, p. 2; Fiske et al., 2002). Communion (or communality) refers to "qualities relevant for the establishment and maintenance of social relationships," and individuals perceived as highly communal are likely to be seen as warm, caring, and cooperative (Abele et al., 2016, p. 2; Fiske et al., 2002). These dimensions operate on two different continuums, that is, one can be high on both agency and communality, low on both, or have a high vs. low combination of the two. This paradigm is useful for studying social perceptions because judgments about one's agency and communality can predict many useful outcomes that are related to society more generally (e.g., Is someone friendly? Are they capable of carrying out their intentions?) and the workplace (e.g., Will this person be a team player? Can they complete this complex task?).

There is extensive empirical evidence suggesting that agency and communality are important mechanisms for understanding how social perceptions are formed. Common antecedents of agency and communality include demographic characteristics that are easily observable like gender, race/ethnicity, and age (Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske et al., 2007), individual attributes that are less readily observable such as employee accent (e.g., Hideg et al., 2023) and personality traits (e.g., Gebauer et al., 2012), as well as personal choices like whether to take parental/maternity leave (e.g., Hideg et al., 2018; Krstic & Hideg, 2019). Further, agency and communality have also been linked to important workplace outcomes like hiring recommendations (e.g., Madera et al., 2009) and leadership suitability (e.g., Hentschel et al., 2018).

We argue that regularly instigating task conflict by challenging others' opinions can prompt judgments about how agentic and communal a person is. As instigating task conflict involves challenging others' ideas and sharing one's own ideas, this may reflect task conflict instigators'

[1] Specifically, the common theme between the two studies is that instigating task conflict is beneficial for men (but not women) as shown by lower communality ratings for women (Study 1) and higher agency ratings for men (Study 2).

concern about the quality of the team's task performance, their competence and confidence in their ability to achieve their objectives, and their ability to be assertive (Jehn, 1997). The process of instigating task conflict is very much in line with agentic characteristics such as leadership and assertiveness and may, in fact, lead to higher agency perceptions for the conflict instigator (Gabriel et al., 2018). Thus, employees who regularly instigate task conflict may tend to be perceived as more agentic, compared to those who rarely instigate task conflict.

While instigating task conflict differs from relationship conflict in how it is approached (i.e., from the perspective of the task itself, not a personal attack on individual team members), it can also threaten social relationships (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; DeChurch & Marks, 2001). This is because engaging in active debate and presentation of different ideas can represent a disturbance in the "harmony" of the group dynamic (De Dreu, 2006). Indeed, empirical studies have provided evidence that higher levels of task conflict relate to the perception of increased relationship conflict (e.g., de Wit et al., 2013). Therefore, frequently instigating task conflict may be perceived as an indicator of the instigator's lack of concern for maintaining harmonious social relationships and collaboration, leading to lower communality perceptions toward the task conflict instigator (vs. an employee who rarely instigates task conflict). Therefore, we propose:

H1. Instigating task conflict will lead to higher agency perceptions for the conflict instigator.

H2. Instigating task conflict will lead to lower communality perceptions for the conflict instigator.

Perceptions of agency and communality further influence important workplace outcomes, such as, co-worker interaction intentions, defined as the extent to which the co-worker is looking forward to working with the conflict instigator. Co-worker interaction intention is an important proximal (rather than distal) outcome to examine in the context of task conflict because it gives immediate information based on recent interactions between co-workers about whether or not the conflict instigator is someone a person would wish to spend time working with in the near future. Co-worker interactions can be influenced by factors such as how much one person likes the other and behavioral style similarity (Glaman et al., 1996) as well as factors like violation of group norms (Feldman, 1984).

Agency signals competence, an aptitude for problem-solving, and intelligence, characteristics that are highly desired in team members (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). Having a highly agentic co-worker may help facilitate efficient and effective accomplishment of work tasks, even when the tasks are challenging and non-routine (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). Their goal-oriented characteristics can help people stay focused and motivated. They can also be the source of help for task-related problems. As such, people may like to work with agentic co-workers as they can benefit task performance and goal attainment (Sia & Duari, 2018). Communality signals cooperation and concern for others, characteristics that are also important to have in a team member (Blatt, 2009). Due to their high levels of concern for others, highly communal co-workers often provide emotional and social support, which is particularly beneficial when faced with high levels of stress (Collins et al., 2016). Having a warm and caring co-worker can also help others feel better understood and more connected in the workplace, which contributes to high levels of job satisfaction (Küçük, 2022). As such, high communality perceptions of a co-worker are expected to positively impact people's intention to work and interact with them. Taken together with Hypotheses 1-2, we propose:

H3a. Instigating task conflict will have a positive indirect effect on co-worker interaction intentions via agency perceptions of the conflict instigator.

H4a. Instigating task conflict will have a negative indirect effect on co-worker interaction intentions via communality perceptions of the conflict instigator.

In addition to influencing interactions with the co-worker, perceptions of a co-worker's agency and communality are also expected to predict more distal outcomes with concrete career implications, such as promotion potential. Promotion potential is a particularly important consequence of perceived agency: women who are seen as more agentic tend to be rated as less promotable (Livingston et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2022), whereas women who are seen as more communal tend to be rated as more promotable (Rudman & Glick, 1999). Therefore, we propose:

H3b. Instigating task conflict will have a positive indirect effect on promotion potential via agency perceptions of the conflict instigator.

H4b. Instigating task conflict will have a negative indirect effect on promotion potential via communality perceptions of the conflict instigator.

Social Role Theory and Gender Stereotypes

Social role theory posits that "sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that in turn represent people's perceptions of men's and women's social roles in the society in which they live," (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 459). Eagly & Wood (2012) argue that these social roles are a result of physical sex differences in our evolutionary history. In the past, the physical prowess of men had led them to assume more dominant positions in the social hierarchy, a position that is not easy to give up. As our society evolved, many of these once purely physical differences became irrelevant, but the legacy of these social roles remains strong and difficult to dismantle despite being outdated. While it may have been beneficial to society at one point to divide labor in a way that resulted in women holding positions of lower power, this is no longer necessary for the survival of our species and only serves to maintain inequality. These differences give rise to gendered expectations, or prescriptive stereotypes.

Prescriptive stereotypes describe how society believes that people who belong to a certain group should behave (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). For example, women are traditionally expected to fulfill roles that involve caregiving and are thus expected to embody characteristics associated with that role (e.g., warm, cooperative, caring), which leads women to be stereotyped as highly communal (Rudman & Glick, 2001). On the other hand, men are traditionally expected to occupy roles that involve providing, achieving, and leading and are thus expected to embody characteristics associated with that role (e.g., assertive, competitive, dominant), which leads men to be stereotyped as highly agentic (Rudman & Glick, 2001). According to social role theory, people compare their perceptions of a person to the traditional roles that person is expected to fulfill in society, according to that person's gender (i.e., prescriptive stereotypes; Eagly & Wood, 2012). These prescriptive stereotypes designate behaviors that are more desirable for one gender to display than the other, and previous research has shown that violating prescriptive stereotypes leads to negative outcomes for the deviating party (Eagly & Kite, 1987, Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Empirical findings provide evidence for gender-based prescriptive stereotypes both in everyday life and in the workplace. Prior research has shown that women can be perceived differently for engaging in the same behavior as their male counterparts (e.g., Heilman & Chen, 2005; Kulik & Olekalns, 2012). For example, Kulik and Olekalns (2012) reported that when women and men engaged in agentic negotiation behavior—which conflicts with the prescriptive stereotypes about women—the behavior had negative consequences for women but not for men. Similarly, Heilman

and Chen (2005) found that when men and women engaged in altruistic citizenship behavior—which is expected from women but not from men based on traditional gender roles—men received more favorable evaluations and recommendations than women. Conversely, when both men and women withheld altruistic citizenship behavior, women were more likely to be punished than men.

Integrating the work on prescriptive stereotypes with social role theory allows predictions to be made about how task conflict instigation will be perceived depending on the gender of the conflict instigator. Specifically, we propose that when women regularly instigate task conflict, they will be perceived to violate the prescriptive stereotypes toward women that include being a caregiver and a follower in a team setting (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This undermines communality perceptions which are expected to be high among women. Yet, because men are not expected to be communal, the lack of communality demonstrated by task conflict instigation is less likely to have a negative impact on perceptions of men in a workplace setting (McClean et al., 2022).

Further, while attending to the violation of communality expectations, people may ignore the agentic nature of women's behavior of instigating task conflict. That is, when a woman expresses disagreements with other group members and raises novel opinions about the content of the tasks being performed, other co-workers may not associate such behaviors with working in the group's best interest or with leadership potential because of the degree of dominance and assertiveness required to engage effectively in task conflict (Ma et al., 2022). On the contrary, when men regularly instigate task conflict, they are confirming the prescriptive stereotypes toward men of being assertive and demonstrating leadership potential (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, we argue that it is easier for people to recognize the agentic nature of men's behavior of instigating task conflict and give them credit for doing so.

Altogether, we expect that the positive effect of instigating task conflict on agency perceptions is weaker, and its negative effect on communality perceptions is stronger, when the co-worker is female (vs. male). Since perceptions often influence intended or actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we make further predictions that the indirect effect of instigating task conflict on co-worker interaction intention and promotion potential via agency and communality perceptions also varies depending on the gender of the task conflict instigator.

H5. Gender moderates the positive effect of task conflict instigation on agency perceptions such that the effect will be weaker when the conflict instigator is female (vs. male).

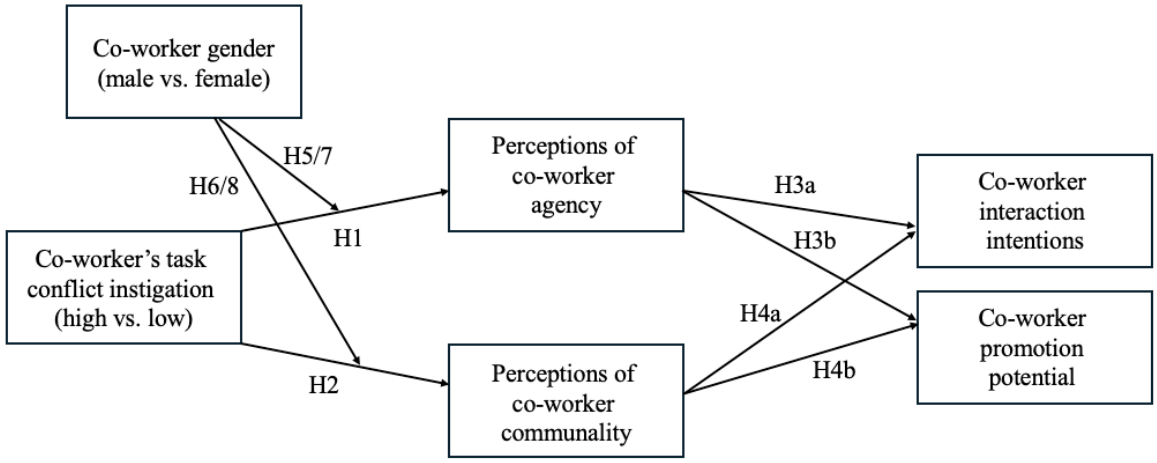
H6. Gender moderates the negative effect of task conflict instigation on communality perceptions such that the effect will be stronger when the conflict instigator is female (vs. male).

H7. Gender moderates the positive indirect effect of task conflict instigation on (a) co-worker interaction intentions and (b) promotion potential via agency perceptions such that these effects will be weaker when the conflict instigator is female (vs. male).

H8. Gender moderates the negative indirect effect of task conflict instigation on (a) co-worker interaction intentions and (b) promotion potential via communality perceptions such that these effects will be stronger when the conflict instigator is female (vs. male).

See **Figure 1** for a visual representation of our theoretical model detailing all hypotheses. To test our hypotheses, we conducted two studies. Study 1 utilized an experimental design to identify whether women were perceived differently from men when they engaged in task conflict and tested an important workplace outcome (i.e., co-worker interaction intention) that could have implications for women's long-term career trajectory. Study 2 involved a field survey of working adults to help establish generalizability for the findings from the lab study.

Figure 1 Theoretical Model and Hypotheses



Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were undergraduate business students from a Canadian university. We aimed for 75 participants per cell, totaling 300 across four cells in a 2 (co-worker gender: male vs. female) x 2 (task conflict: high vs. low) between-subjects design, following recommendations by Simmons et al. (2013). To account for inattentiveness, we recruited approximately 500 participants, with a final sample of 482. Participants received course credit for their participation.

Of the 482 participants, we excluded 85. Fifteen declined to provide secondary consent after debriefing due to study concealment. Sixty-one failed the gender manipulation check, a key factor in the study. Twelve were excluded for failing both careless responding questions (Meade & Craig, 2012). Our final sample consisted of 397 students: 170 men, 223 women, 1 transgender woman, 2 non-binary, and 1 who preferred not to answer. The mean age was 19.76 years (SD = 1.35). Two hundred and two participants (51%) identified as white, 180 as Asian, 10 as Arab, 8 as Black, 7 as Latin American, 7 preferred not to say, and 6 chose 'other'.[2]

Participants were informed that the study focused on perceptions of a prospective co-worker based on a 360-degree feedback form. They received basic details (i.e., name, job title, and tenure) and read a short excerpt from the feedback. Using a between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions varying by co-worker gender (male vs. female) and

[2] Participants were permitted to "select all that apply" when identifying their ethnicity, thus, the total is more than the current sample (i.e., 420 compared to 397). This applies to all ethnicity questions in all studies.

task conflict frequency (high vs. low). After reviewing the feedback, they completed a survey about their perceptions of the co-worker and their willingness to work with them in the future.

Materials

Participants were asked to imagine they were working on a new project with a peer they did not know well. They were told that both had received select information from recent 360-degree performance appraisals to get acquainted. The co-worker was named either Claire or Steven Smith, held the title "Associate Consultant" and had 2 years of tenure. Participants then viewed two peer feedback comments. The first, consistent across conditions, described the co-worker as bringing useful skills to teams and served to ensure that task conflict was not the sole focus of the feedback. The second comment introduced the task conflict manipulation. Afterward, participants rated their perceptions and future interaction intentions with the co-worker.

This study used a 2 x 2 between-subjects design, manipulating task conflict (low vs. high) and co-worker gender (male vs. female). Gender was manipulated through names (i.e., Claire Smith for female, Steven Smith for male) and pronouns, based on names known for clear gender recognition (Milkman et al., 2015). Task conflict manipulations were developed using scales from Jehn & Mannix (2001) and Behfar and colleagues (2011). We framed the study in the context of a 360-degree performance evaluation to enhance face validity, as such evaluations can serve both developmental and evaluative purposes within organizations (London & Beatty, 1993). In this case, the information was intended to help team members familiarize themselves with someone they had not worked with before. In the high task conflict condition, the co-worker frequently disagreed and raised alternative viewpoints. In the low task conflict condition, the co-worker typically agreed and did not challenge ideas (for full materials see Appendix A).

Measures

Manipulation Checks. To verify that our gender manipulation was perceived as intended, we asked participants "What was the gender of your co-worker?" Participants were asked to select one of the following response options: male, female, non-binary/third gender, and I don't know/I'm not sure. To ensure our task conflict instigation manipulation was perceived as intended, we adapted items from Behfar et al.'s (2011) three-item task conflict scale. The items were "my co-worker argues the pros and cons of opinions," "my co-worker discusses evidence for alternative viewpoints," and "my co-worker engages in debate about different opinions or ideas." These items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), $\alpha = .97$.

Mediators. To assess perceptions of the co-worker's agency, we used a 15-item scale from Hentschel et al. (2019). Participants were asked to rate characteristics such as: competent, achievement-oriented, dominant, and assertive on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a very high extent), $\alpha = .87$. To assess perceptions of the co-worker's communality, we used an 11-item scale from Hentschel et al. (2019). Participants were asked to rate characteristics such as: understanding, kind, compassionate, sympathetic, and communicative on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a very high extent), $\alpha = .88$.

Dependent variable. To assess behavioral intentions of whether participants could see themselves interacting with this co-worker in the future, we used two items created for the purposes of this study. The items were "I look forward to the opportunity to interact with my co-worker" and "I can't wait to start working with my co-worker." These items were rated on a 7-point Likert-

type scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a large extent), α = .88.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Supporting the effectiveness of our task conflict manipulation, we found a significant difference in perceived task conflict instigation by the co-worker between the high versus low task conflict conditions, $F(1, 395) = 1393.19$, $p < .001$, where participants in the high task conflict condition reported higher levels of perceived task conflict instigated by the co-worker ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.04$) compared to those in the low task conflict condition ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.03$). See **Table 1** for means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. See **Table 2** for means and standard deviations for each condition.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	Mean (*SD*)	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Task Conflict Instigation	.51 (0.50)				
2. Co-worker gender	.49 (0.50)	.00			
3. Communality	3.94 (1.08)	-.55**	.13**		
4. Agency	4.50 (0.99)	.58**	.04	-.14**	
5. Co-worker interaction intention	3.98 (1.34)	-.50**	.10*	.66**	-.04

Note. N = 397. Task conflict instigation coded: 0 = low, 1 = high. Co-worker gender coded: 0 = male, 1 = female. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations by Condition for Each Dependent Variable

Dependent Variable	Low Task Conflict Instigation		High Task Conflict Instigation	
	Male ($n = 98$)	Female ($n = 95$)	Male ($n = 103$)	Female ($n = 101$)
Communality				
M	4.28_a	4.82_b	3.34_c	3.38_c
SD	0.88	0.93	0.85	0.90
Agency				
M	3.83_a	4.00_a	5.06_b	5.05_b
SD	0.81	0.80	0.77	0.85
Co-worker Interaction Intention				
M	4.43_a	4.95_b	3.35_c	3.39_c
SD	1.12	0.97	1.23	1.23

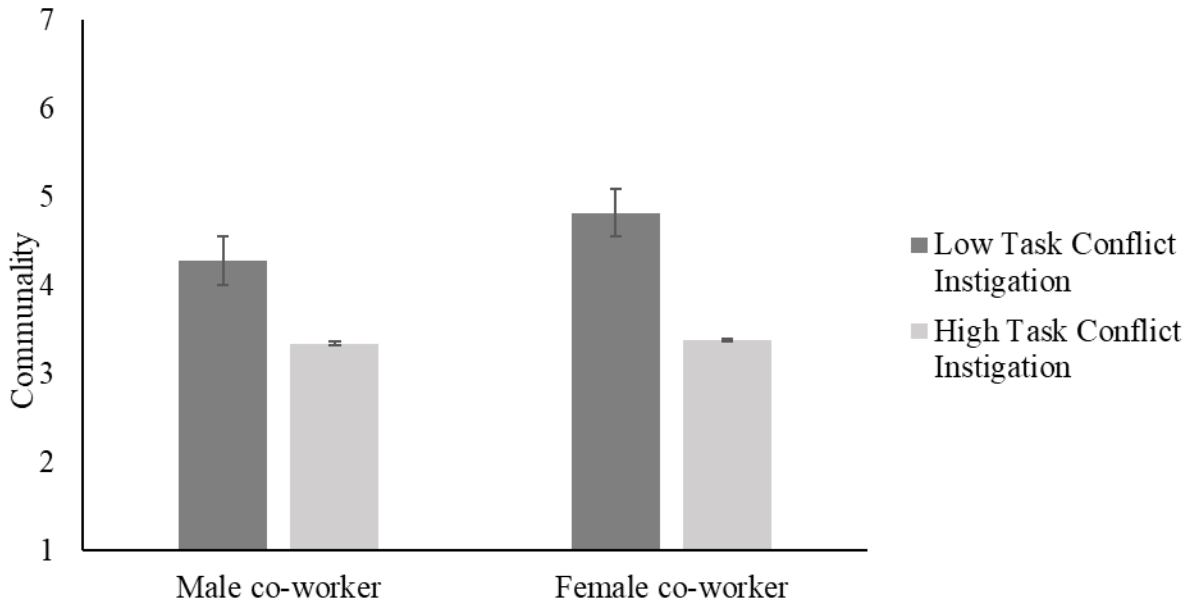
Note. In each row, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Hypotheses Testing

We first conducted a factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test Hypotheses 1, 2, 5a, and 6a. In support of Hypothesis 1, we found a main effect of task conflict on agency perceptions, $F(1, 396) = 198.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$, such that the conflict instigator was rated as more agentic when they engaged in high (vs. low) levels of task conflict (high task conflict condition: $M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.81$; low task conflict condition: $M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.81$). In support of Hypothesis 2, we found a main effect of task conflict on communality perceptions, $F(1, 396) = 175.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$, such that the co-worker was rated as more communal when they engaged in low (vs. high) levels of task conflict (high task conflict condition: $M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.88$; low task conflict condition: $M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.94$).

Further, we found a significant interaction between task conflict and conflict instigator gender that predicted communality perceptions, $F(1, 396) = 7.86$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .02$ (see **Figure 2**). The results of the simple effects tests indicated that task conflict instigation significantly decreased communality perceptions for both the male task conflict instigator ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.85$ in the high task conflict condition; $M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.88$ in the low task conflict condition; $F(1, 396) = 55.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$) and the female task conflict instigator ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.90$ in the high task conflict condition; $M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.93$ in the low task conflict condition; $F(1, 396) = 101.16$, $p < .001$ $\eta^2 = .25$). In fact, while women were generally rated as more communal as evidenced by our data in the low task conflict condition, with high levels of task conflict, the gender difference in communality perceptions disappeared ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.90$ for male; $M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.90$ for female). That is, supporting Hypothesis 6, high task conflict reduced the communality perceptions toward the conflict instigator to a greater extent when the conflict instigator was female vs. male. Unfortunately, Hypothesis 5 was not supported, because the interaction between task conflict and conflict instigator gender did not predict agency perceptions, $F(1, 396) = 1.32$, $p = .25$.

Figure 2 Interaction of Co-worker Gender and Task Conflict Predicting Communality Perceptions



Note: Co-worker gender coded: 0 = male, 1 = female. Task conflict coded: low = 0, high = 1.

To test Hypotheses 3a and 4a regarding the indirect effect of co-worker task conflict instigation, we used Hayes' (2014) PROCESS Macro (Model 4 with 10,000 bootstrapping samples). According to the results, agency (b = .31, SE = .06, p < .001) and communality perceptions (b = .60, SE = .05, p < .001) were positively related to co-worker interaction intentions. Further, co-worker task conflict instigation had a significant positive indirect effect on co-worker interaction intentions via agency perceptions (indirect effect = .36, SE = .08, 95% CI [.206, .528]) and a significant negative indirect effect on co-worker interaction intentions via communality perceptions (indirect effect = -.71, SE = .08, 95% CI [-.868, -.553]), supporting Hypotheses 3a and 4a.

Further, to analyze Hypotheses 7a and 8a we used Hayes' (2014) PROCESS Macro (Model 7 with 10,000 bootstrapping samples). Results showed that communality (index of moderated mediation = -.30, SE = .12, 95% CI: [-.523, -.089]), but not agency (index of moderated mediation = -.06, SE = .05, 95% CI: [-.177, .038]) demonstrated evidence of moderated mediation. Specifically, communality perceptions mediated the relationship between task conflict and co-worker interaction intention for women (Indirect Effect = -0.86, SE = .11, 95% CI: [-1.073, -.658]), and for men (Indirect Effect = -0.56, SE = .09, 95% CI: [-.739, -.393]), where the effects were stronger for women. Thus, the results supported Hypothesis 8a but not Hypothesis 7a. See **Table 3** for coefficient estimates for the moderated mediation model.

Table 3 Coefficient Estimates for the Moderated Mediation Model

	Mediator Variables				Dependent Variable	
	Communality		Agency		Future Interaction Intentions	
Variable	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Task Conflict Instigation	-.94**	.13	1.24**	.11	-.96**	.14
Co-worker Gender	.54**	.13	.17	.11		
Task Conflict Instigation X Co-worker Gender	-.50**	.18	-.19	.16		
Communality					.60**	.05
Agency					.31**	.06
Intercept	4.28**	.09	3.83**	.09	.74*	.30
R^2	.33**		.34**		.49**	

Note. Co-worker gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. * p < .05; ** p < .01.

Discussion

Using an experimental design, we provide initial evidence that co-workers who frequently (vs. rarely) expressed disagreements and shared different viewpoints and opinions about the content of the tasks being performed were perceived as higher in agency and lower in communality, and that this behavior reduced communality perceptions more for women than for men. The reduced

communality perceptions led to lower intentions to work with the hypothetical co-worker in the future. This result adds nuance to our understanding of task conflict. When organizations are informed that task conflict can benefit their teams, they may also need to be cautioned about the potential negative impacts on perceptions of the team member initiating these conflicts. This finding is also important in terms of gender equity in the workplace because task conflict is a common teamwork behavior that teams are encouraged to engage in to solve complex problems (O'Neill et al., 2013). If women are perceived more negatively for engaging in this critical team process, this could have a cumulative negative effect on their careers, such as being passed over for promotion. In Study 2, we test this by measuring promotion potential as an additional outcome variable, and examine our hypotheses using a correlational design with a field sample.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 400 working adults from Canada, recruited via Prolific for a two-part study over two time points separated by two weeks to reduce common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Spector, 2019). In part 1, they recalled a co-worker (i.e., either a peer or a subordinate) who had initiated a past task conflict,[3] wrote a short description of the conflict, and provided the co-worker's initials to ensure vivid recall. Then, they rated how frequently the co-worker instigated task conflicts. In part 2, two weeks later, 379 participants completed the mediator and dependent variable measures for the same co-worker from part 1. They confirmed this by logging in with their Prolific ID and entering the same initials for the co-worker. All successfully verified the co-worker and proceeded. Participants were paid £1.50 for part 1 and £2.00 for part 2. The final sample was 294 after excluding 18 participants who rated a supervisor instead of a peer or subordinate, and 67 who did not pass at least 3 of 4 careless responding checks. The final sample included 156 women, 134 men, 1 transgender woman, and 3 gender fluid individuals, with an average age of 35.92 years (SD = 9.32). Participants were 60.5% White, 17.3% East Asian, and the rest from various other ethnicities. They also reported on their co-worker's demographics: 154 women, 139 men, and 1 unspecified. Co-worker's age groups ranged from 25 to 65 or older, with most between 25-44 years old. Co-workers were 64.3% White, 9.2% South Asian and the remainder from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Measures

Independent variables. To measure task conflict, participants were asked to rate the frequency the co-worker engaged in task conflict using Behfar and colleagues' (2011) task conflict measure

[3] Participants were asked to: "Please recall a time when a co-worker (e.g., a peer or subordinate, but NOT a supervisor) initiated a task conflict with you or other workers in your work unit, that is, when a co-worker disagrees with you or other workers about the content of the tasks being. performed, such as differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions about the tasks you were working on. This co-worker should be someone you work with frequently and have contact with on at least a weekly basis."

from Study 1 (α = .80) and the task conflict scale modified from Jehn and Mannix (2001; α = .89). The Jehn and Mannix scale contained three items: "How much conflict of ideas does the co-worker[4] initiate?" "How frequently does the co-worker initiate disagreements about the tasks you are working on?" and "How often does the co-worker have conflicting opinions about the tasks you are working on?" Rated on a scale from 1 (none at all) to 5 (a great deal). These are commonly used measures of workplace conflict and we included both to triangulate our findings. However, we found different results depending on which measure was used in our analyses. To be transparent, we present two separate sets of results.

Mediators. Communality (α = .92) and overall agency (α = .93) were measured with the same items from Study 1.

Dependent variables. Interaction frequency was measured with three items from McAllister (1995; α = .79). Participants were asked to rate "how frequently do you … initiate work interactions with your co-worker," "…interact with this co-worker at work," and "…interact with this co-worker informally or socially at work," on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot). To assess perceptions of promotion potential we used four items adapted from Caleo (2016; α = .93), rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), a sample item is "this co-worker is likely to be promoted in the near future."

Control Variables. We measured the co-worker's task performance, perceived relationship conflict, and months that the participant and the co-worker had worked together as control variables. We controlled for task performance because it has been found to influence how task conflict affects perceptions of competence, which could confound results related to agency and promotion potential (e.g., Pelled et al., 1999). Task performance was measured with six items rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) modified from Williams & Anderson (1991; α = .91). A sample item is "my co-worker performs tasks that are expected of him/her." We controlled for relationship conflict to ensure that the effects of task conflict were not influenced by interpersonal friction, as previous research has found that relationship conflict can affect how task conflict is perceived (e.g., de Wit et al., 2013). Relationship conflict was measured with four items (e.g., "my co-worker creates friction between team members") rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) modified from Behfar et al. (2011; α = .95) and three items (e.g., "how much relationship tension does your co-worker initiate") rated on a scale from 1 (none at all) to 5 (a great deal) from Jehn and Mannix (2001; α = .89). We controlled for the number of months that participants had worked with their co-worker because familiarity with co-workers could influence how they perceive each other. Research by Harrison et al. (1998) found that over time, surface-level diversity characteristics (e.g., gender and age) matter less, while deep-level diversity characteristics (e.g., attitudes and values) become more influential. Participants reported how many months they had worked with their co-worker with an average of 3.50 months (SD = 3.4).

Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in **Table 4**. **Table 5** and **Table 6** present an overview of the coefficient estimates for the moderated mediation models for the Behfar scale and the Jehn scale, respectively.

[4] The text "the co-worker" was replaced with the unique initials of each co-worker listed by the participants in the survey by using the piped-text function in Qualtrics.

Table 4 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	Mean (*SD*)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Relationship Conflict (Behfar)	4.58 (1.66)										
2. Relationship Conflict (Jehn)	2.64 (1.08)	.81**									
3. Task Performance	3.76 (0.92)	-.44**	-.45**								
4. Months working with co-worker	3.54 (3.40)	.10	.18**	.09							
5. Task Conflict Instigation (Behfar)	4.12 (1.44)	-.37**	-.33**	.32**	.02						
6. Task Conflict Instigation (Jehn)	3.05 (0.91)	.67**	.73**	-.36**	.11	-.24**					
7. Co-worker Gender	.055 (0.50)	.11	.11	.04	-.09	-.02	.08				
8. Communality	4.15 (1.22)	-.57**	-.54**	.48**	-.03	.38**	-.44**	.07			
9. Agency	4.52 (1.15)	-.26**	-.28**	.65**	.05	.36**	-.13*	.08	.48**		
10. Interaction Frequency	2.64 (0.90)	-.32**	-.23**	.25**	.05	.32**	-.21**	.00	.51**	.27**	
11. Promotion Potential	3.82 (0.90)	-.49**	-.47**	.60**	-.06	.38**	-.35**	-.02	.57**	.75**	.41**

Note. N = 294. Co-worker gender coded: 0 = male, 1 = female. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 5 Coefficient Estimates for the Moderated Mediation Model (Behfar's Task Conflict Scale)

	Mediator Variables				Dependent Variables			
	Communality		Agency		Interaction Frequency		Promotion Potential	
Variable	Estimate	*SE*	Estimate	*SE*	Estimate	*SE*	Estimate	*SE*
Relationship Conflict	-.31**	.04	.06	.04	-.01	.04	-.22**	.04
Task Performance	.31**	.07	.78**	.06	-.04	.07	.11	.09
Months	.00	.02	-.01	.02	.02	.01	-.03†	.02
Task Conflict Instigation	.19**	.06	.24**	.05	.09	.04	.02	.04
Co-worker Gender	.27*	.11	.10	.10				
Task Conflict Instigation X Co-worker Gender	-.14†	.08	-.17*	.07				
Communality					.34**	.05	.17**	.06
Agency					.02	.05	.84**	.07
Intercept	4.08**	.10	4.53**	.09	1.08**	.29	-.54	.36
R^2	.43**		.47**		.29**		.67**	

Note. Co-worker gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01.

Table 6 Coefficient Estimates for the Moderated Mediation Model (Jehn's Task Conflict Scale)

	Mediator Variables				Dependent Variables			
	Communality		Agency		Interaction Frequency		Promotion Potential	
Variable	Estimate	*SE*	Estimate	*SE*	Estimate	*SE*	Estimate	*SE*
Relationship Conflict	-.41	.08	-.16	.04	.06	.07	-.16†	.08
Task Performance	.36**	.07	.83**	.06	-.01	.07	.12	.09
Months	.01	.02	.00	.02	.02	.01	-.03	.02
Task Conflict Instigation	-.07	.12	.27*	.10	-.03	.08	-.17†	.09
Co-worker Gender	.28†	.12	.12	.10				
Task Conflict Instigation X Co-worker Gender	-.08	.13	.00	.11				
Communality					.39**	.05	.22**	.06
Agency					.03	.06	.85**	.07
Intercept	4.03**	.10	4.50**	.10	.80**	.28	-.77†	.35
R^2	.38**		.45**		.27**		.66**	

Note. Co-worker gender coded as 0 = male, 1 = female. † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Behfar Scale of Task Conflict Instigation

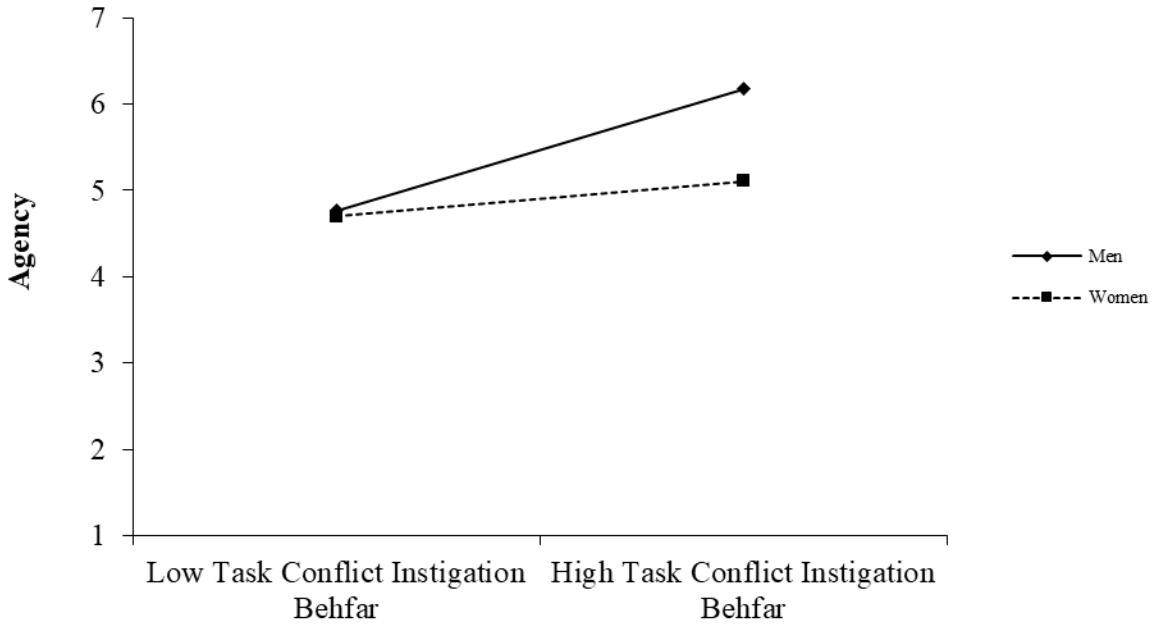
We conducted multiple regression analysis to test Hypotheses 1-4 using Hayes's PROCESS Macro Model 4. Results supported Hypothesis 1 such that task conflict instigation led to higher agency perceptions for the conflict instigator (b = .15, SE = .04, p < .001, 95% CI [.080, .229]). Contrary to Hypothesis 2, results showed that higher levels of task conflict predicted higher levels of communality (b = .12, SE = .04, p = .003, 95% CI [.043, .207]).

Regarding the indirect effect of task conflict instigation on co-worker interaction frequency and promotion potential, results showed that the indirect effect of task conflict instigation was significant via agency perceptions when predicting promotion potential. That is, task conflict instigation had a positive indirect effect on promotion potential (indirect effect = .13, SE = .03, 95% CI [.066, .196]) via increased agency perceptions. Yet, the indirect effect of task conflict instigation on co-worker interaction frequency via agency was not significant (indirect effect = .00, SE = .01, 95% CI [-.017, .022]). Also, results showed that the indirect effect was significant via communality perceptions, but in the opposite direction as hypothesized. That is, task conflict had a positive indirect effect on co-worker interaction frequency (indirect effect = .04, SE = .02, 95% CI [.012, .080]) and promotion potential (indirect effect = .02, SE = .04, 95% CI [.003, .054]) via increased communality perceptions.

To test Hypotheses 5-8, we used Hayes's PROCESS Macro Model 7. In predicting agency perceptions, results showed that there was a significant interaction between task conflict instigation and gender of the conflict instigator (b = -.17, SE = .07, p = .016). Supporting Hypothesis 5, a simple slopes analysis indicated that the relationship between task conflict instigation and agency was stronger for men (b = .24, p < .001, 95% CI [.136, .334]), such that men were rated as more agentic when they engaged in high levels of task conflict compared to low, while there were no differences for women (b = .07, p = .189, 95% CI [-.034, .170]), see **Figure 3**). Hypothesis 6 was not supported, because the interaction between task conflict instigation and conflict instigator gender predicting communality (b = -.14, SE = .08, p = .059) was not significant.

Finally, Hypotheses 7 and 8 investigated the role of conflict instigator gender as a moderator of the indirect effect of task conflict instigation on outcomes. Results showed that gender significantly moderated the indirect effect of task conflict instigation on promotion potential (index of moderated mediation = -.14, SE = .06, 95% CI [-.261, -.028]) via agency perceptions, such that the indirect beneficial effect of task conflict was more positive for the male (vs. female) task conflict instigators (indirect effect = .20, SE = .04, 95% CI [.117, .286]; indirect effect = .06, SE = .05, 95% CI [-.032, .150], respectively). With co-worker interaction frequency as the outcome variable, gender did not moderate the indirect effect of task conflict via agency (index of moderated mediation = .00, SE = .01, 95% CI: [-.029, .018]). In addition, gender did not moderate the indirect effect of task conflict instigation on any outcome variable via communality perceptions (when predicting co-worker interaction frequency, index of moderated mediation = -.05, SE = .03, 95% CI: [-.109, .005]; when predicting co-worker promotion potential, index of moderated mediation = -.02, SE = .02, 95% CI: [-.069, .002]).

Figure 3 Interaction Between Task Conflict (Behfar) and Co-worker Gender Predicting Agency Perceptions



Jehn Scale of Task Conflict Instigation

Results again supported Hypothesis 1 such that task conflict instigation led to higher agency perceptions for the task conflict instigator (b = .27, SE = .08, p = .001, 95% CI [.110, .428]). Task conflict instigation was not significantly related to communality perceptions (b = -.11, SE = .09, p = .218, 95% CI [-.294, .067]), therefore Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Further, consistent with the results of the Behfar scale, the mediation model was supported for agency as a mediator when predicting promotion potential (indirect effect = .23, SE = .07, 95% CI [.093, .373]), but the indirect effect of task conflict was not significant when predicting co-worker interaction frequency via agency (indirect effect = .01, SE = .02 95% CI [-.024, .044]). Also, the indirect effect of task conflict instigation via communality was not significant when predicting co-worker interaction frequency (indirect effect = -.04, SE = .04, 95% CI [-.135, .037]) or promotion potential (indirect effect = -.02, SE = .03, 95% CI [-.085, .023]).

We did not find any support for the proposed moderation of task conflict instigator gender with the Jehn scale. Specifically, gender did not moderate the relationship between task conflict instigation and agency perceptions (b = -.00, SE = .11, p = .988) or the relationship between task conflict instigation and communality perceptions (b = -.08, SE = .13, p = .514). In line with these results, co-worker gender did not moderate any indirect effect of task conflict on the outcome variables via either agency or communality perceptions. Hypotheses 5-8 were not supported. See

Table 7 for a summary of results across both studies.[56]

Based on the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, we also checked whether controlling for the type of relationship between the task conflict instigator and the co-worker influenced the results. We re-ran all analyses with the sub-sample of 232 participants who rated a peer (vs. 62 who rated a subordinate) and this did not influence the results, thus we do not control for this in the main analysis in order to follow the principle of parsimony that recommends the use of the simplest model possible to explain the proposed effects.[7]

Table 7 Summary of Results for Study 1 and Study 2

	Hypothesis Supported?		
	Study 1	Study 2	
Hypothesis		Behfar scale	Jehn scale
H1	Yes	Yes	Yes
H2	Yes	No	No
H3a	Yes	No	No
H4a	Yes	No	No
H3b	n/a	Yes	Yes
H4b	n/a	No	No
H5	No	Yes	No
H6	Yes	No	No
H7a	No	Yes	No
H8a	Yes	No	No
H7b	n/a	No	No
H8b	n/a	No	No

Exploratory Analysis

We conducted exploratory analysis by using a different outcome variable, avoidance intentions, which was measured in part 2 of Study 2 to try to better understand the inconsistent results. Specifically, avoidance intentions were measured with three items rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) modified from Aquino et al. (2006; $\alpha = .96$), a sample item is "I intend to avoid my co-worker." With the same analytic strategy, the results remain largely consistent with the prediction of interaction frequency. This suggests that the inconsistent results

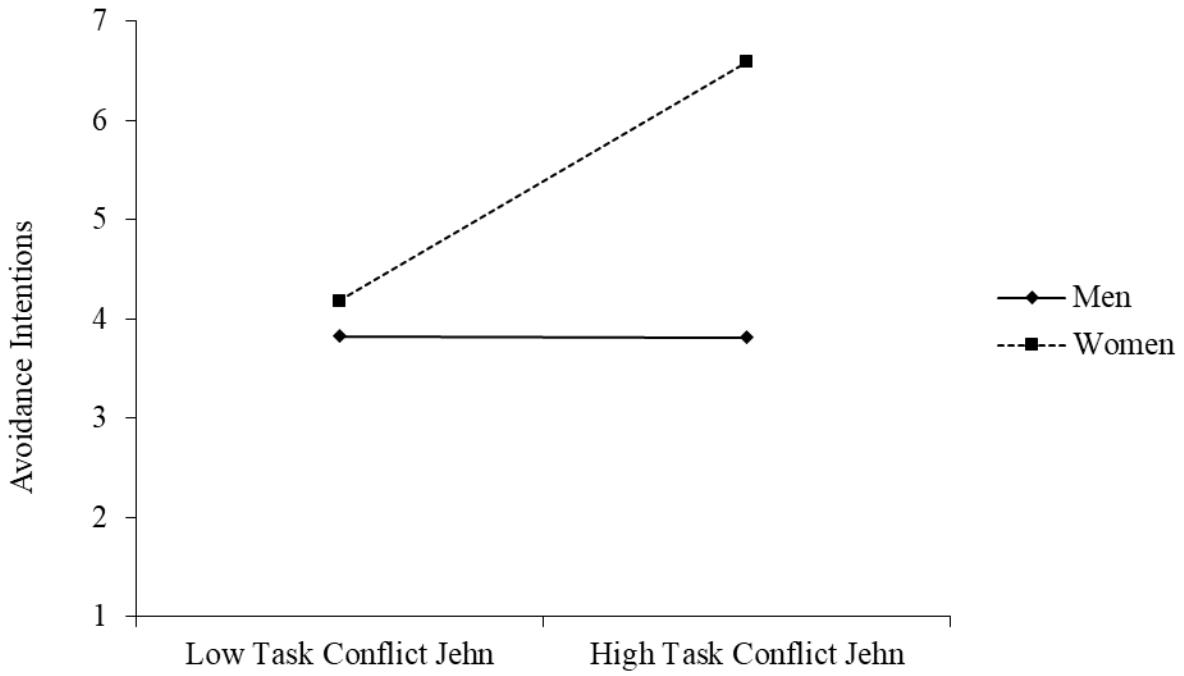
[5] Based on the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, we coded whether or not the task conflict descriptions provided by participants were indeed task conflicts. We found that 23 out of 294 did not match our definition of task conflict. We conducted all analyses removing these participants and the results did not change.

[6] Based on the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, we investigated our hypotheses utilizing the sub-scales of agency as outlined in Hentschel et al., (2019). These results are reported in a supplementary file for interested readers.

[7] Based on the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, we re-ran the analysis using the relationship variable (i.e., peer vs. subordinate) as a moderator to our hypothesized effects (i.e., the effect of task conflict instigation in predicting agency/communality perceptions, and the moderating effect of co-worker gender). These results are reported in the supplementary file.

across the two studies were likely not due to the different outcome measures (i.e., interaction intentions in Study 1 and interaction frequency in Study 2). However, we observed a marginally significant interaction (b = .40, SE = .21, p = .054, R^2 = .33) between the Jehn scale of task conflict instigation and co-worker gender when predicting avoidance intentions. Simple slopes analysis showed that the relationship between task conflict instigation and co-worker gender predicting avoidance intentions was significant for women, but not for men (b = .40, p = .033 and b = -.00, p = 0.995, respectively, see **Figure 4**). That is, when women engaged in high levels of task conflict, co-worker avoidance intentions increased significantly, whereas there were no differences in avoidance intentions of men who engaged in task conflict. This, again, suggests that women (vs. men) are more likely to be penalized for instigating task conflict.

Figure 4 Interaction Between Task Conflict (Jehn) and Co-worker Gender Predicting Avoidance Intentions



Discussion

Overall, results regarding agency perceptions as a mediator in the relationship between task conflict instigation and co-worker promotion potential were largely in support of our hypotheses and consistent between the two sets of analyses. That is, task conflict instigation positively related to agency perceptions, and co-workers who frequently instigated task conflict were rated higher on promotion potential because of higher agency perceptions. When the Behfar scale was used, we also found support for the moderating role of conflict instigator gender, such that the benefit of frequent task conflict instigation on the perceptions of the conflict instigator's agency and promotion potential was more pronounced when the conflict instigator was male (vs. female).

We did not find the hypothesized negative relationship between task conflict instigation and communality perceptions, and we did not find support for the moderating effect of gender using either scale. Yet, when using the Behfar scale, we found an unexpected positive effect of task conflict instigation on communality perceptions. By examining the items, it appears that the Behfar scale was more positively valanced compared to the Jehn scale, perhaps contributing to this unexpected finding in the field sample. The results suggest that the scale with which task conflict is measured has important implications for the results. We return to this point in the General Discussion.

General Discussion

Over two studies we presented evidence that perceptions of an individual's task conflict instigation have important implications for workplace outcomes such as future interaction intentions and promotion potential. Specifically, the common theme between the two studies is that instigating task conflict is beneficial for men (but not for women) as shown by lower communality ratings for women (Study 1) and higher agency ratings for men (Study 2). Below, we highlight the main theoretical implications, discuss how the results impact managers and employees in practice, and review limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the theoretical development of the literature on conflict, women in leadership, and stereotypes. First, we present some evidence that instigating task conflict may have differential outcomes for the instigator depending on their gender. There has been an underlying assumption in the conflict literature that task conflict is perceived in largely the same way by each member on a team regardless of the characteristics of the person who instigates it (Krueger et al., 2022). However, in this research, we find preliminary evidence that women can be subject to more negative perceptions compared to men when engaging in the same task conflict behavior. As shown in Study 1, women, who are expected to be high in communality, were penalized with a deduction in their communality ratings when instigating high levels of task conflict. While men's communality ratings were also lower when instigating high levels of task conflict, the deduction was not as pronounced. Also, being perceived as less communal may not be as hurtful for men (vs. women) as communality is often seen as important when selecting women, but less so for men, for leadership positions (Vial & Napier, 2018). As shown in Study 2, instigating task conflict increased agency perceptions to a greater extent when the conflict instigator was male (vs. female).

Thus, although the results across both studies were not consistently supportive of the two perceptual mechanisms, the results generally show that women (vs. men) are perceived less positively when engaging in task conflict. In particular, it seems that frequently instigating task conflict can sometimes diminish the communality perceptions of women, but can further boost the high agency perceptions of men, making it potentially riskier for women in the workplace to raise disagreements or express novel ideas. As instigating task conflict can be considered a type of agentic behavior that employees can engage in, our findings join the recent research examining the impact of gender on evaluations of agentic behaviors at work such as voice (Brykman & Raver, 2021) and proactive work behavior (Bohlmann & Zacher, 2021). Our research contributes to the theory building underlying how evaluations of agentic behaviors vary depending on the gender of the actor. We acknowledge that the inconsistency of the findings between the two studies means

that further research is needed to fully explore these effects; however, this initial evidence does provide some support for the notion that task conflict perceptions may be influenced (at least in part) by the gender of the instigator.

Second, we integrate theory on workplace conflict with the literature on social role theory and gender stereotypes to show that the negative perceptions experienced by women who instigated task conflict have a compounding negative effect on workplace outcomes like co-worker interaction intentions and promotion potential. Specifically, in Study 1, women who instigated high levels of task conflict were rated lower on future interaction intentions compared to men. This has important implications for women's career progression because if co-workers are less excited about working with female colleagues, they may be less likely to be assigned to challenging projects and put forward for promotion, all of which are critical steps for advancing in the workplace (Zenger & Folkman, 2019). Though this finding did not directly replicate in Study 2, we still believe that the potential downstream outcomes are worth noting, with the caveat that future research attempt to replicate our findings. In Study 2, a field study with real employees who reported about their experience with a co-worker, women who engaged in high levels of task conflict were actually rated as more communal, but importantly, so were men. However, men actually benefitted more from engaging in task conflict compared to women, and received higher ratings of promotion potential. Further, it is important to note that in the context of task conflict instigation, the advantage was such that in comparison to other women who did not engage in high levels of task conflict, men were still rated higher on subsequent workplace outcomes. This finding is important for our understanding of the barriers women face when pursuing leadership positions because it highlights a potential missing link in uncovering the reasons why women are still underrepresented in leadership roles. These findings join previous research that has found that women can be perceived and evaluated differently for engaging in the same behaviors as men in the workplace (e.g., Heilman & Chen, 2005; Kulik & Olekalns, 2012).

Finally, we observed inconsistent results depending on the use of the Behfar task conflict scale or the Jehn task conflict scale. If the scales are indeed measuring the same underlying construct, then their relationship with subsequent variables of interest should be similar, not opposite, as was found for some relationships in Study 2. As discussed earlier, items from the Behfar task conflict scale (e.g., "argue the pros and cons of opinions", "discuss evidence for alternative viewpoints", and "engage in debate about different opinions or ideas") appear to assess how a person brings about conflicting opinions, while items from the Jehn scale (e.g., "initiate conflict of ideas", "initiate disagreements about the tasks you are working on", and "have conflicting opinions about the tasks you are working on") appear to assess the action itself where a person initiates conflicting opinions. As a result, the Behfar scale is positively correlated with many favorable perceptual and behavioral outcomes. Indeed, prior research identifying the positive effects of engaging in task conflict on team processes and outcomes (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2018) has largely utilized this scale. However, upon including the Jehn task conflict scale in Study 2, it was noted that some opposite relationships emerged. Most notably, the Behfar scale was positively correlated with both communality and agency perceptions, while the Jehn scale was positively correlated with agency but negatively correlated with communality perceptions.[8]

[8] Based on the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer, when we included both measures simultaneously in the model, the results stayed the same. Specifically, both measures had positive main effects predicting agency, meaning that each measure accounted for a unique proportion of the variance in agency perceptions. This supports the notion that the two measures

These conceptualization issues clearly have important implications not only for the results of this research, but for the understanding of task conflict more broadly. If we are to truly understand the effects of task conflict on individual workplace outcomes, it is critical to first clarify the conceptualization of task conflict and ensure the conceptualization-measurement alignment when empirically testing any research hypotheses. Different ways of conceptualizing task conflict open up opportunities for future theoretical development regarding the impact of task conflict. Related to this issue is the discussion around the directness and intensity of conflict episodes as explained by Weingart and colleagues (2015). Based on the content of the items, it appears that the Behfar scale would skew lower on both intensity and directness of conflict because it does not explicitly mention conflict in the items, whereas the Jehn scale does mention conflict outright. Thus, we speculate there may be less of a concern regarding social desirability when using the Behfar scale compared to the Jehn scale because of the lack of explicit mention of conflict, so we suggest that future research may include a social desirability scale in order to test whether this may be one reason for the differences between the two scales.

Overall, the results of the two studies provide preliminary evidence that task conflict may not be perceived as uniformly positive at the individual level, compared to much prior research that promotes its effectiveness at the team-level (e.g., Behfar et al., 2011; O'Neill et al., 2018). There is growing research showing that consensus among team-level constructs is the exception rather than the rule (Schmidt et al., 2023), therefore understanding the importance of individual ratings of co-workers' level of team process variables is increasingly important (Krueger et al., 2022).

Practical Implications

This research also has several practical implications for managers and people who work together closely within organizations. First, managers should be aware that when people are assigned to teams, or to work together as a dyad, that perceptions of conflict incidents have implications for how their co-workers may feel about working together in the future, even if the conflict is productive for solving workplace problems and generating creative ideas. Gender stereotypes are deep-rooted and can have insidious implications for women's career outcomes if not managed appropriately (Hideg et al., 2023; Lawson et al., 2022). For example, in industries that are historically male dominated, like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, where project teams are commonly used, women who are assigned to a team where they are the minority and are encouraged to engage in processes like task conflict in order to develop new and creative ideas may be at a disadvantage depending on how strongly the other team members endorse stereotypical gender role expectations (Casad et al., 2021).

Second, the results of the two studies showed that generally, women who engage in task conflict are perceived as less communal, and can sometimes be perceived as less promotable, while men do not experience similar penalties, and in fact may benefit from more positive agency perceptions. This information is important to have so that employees can be informed of the potential biases they face, and managers can be aware of another potential barrier that women may experience when instigating task conflict. Overall, this raises the question of what managers can do to promote gender equity when it comes to different perceptions of the same agentic behavior? Ideally, the

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are capturing different nuances of task conflict. When predicting communality, only the Behfar scale had a main effect. The interaction between task conflict instigation and co-worker gender for the Behfar scale predicting communality was still marginally significant ($p = .05$).

burden should not be put on women to manage the perceptions of others, so managers should take a proactive approach of being aware that the behaviors they recommend and encourage may have different implications for different people on their teams. Being an engaged manager who is well-versed in understanding stereotypes and unconscious bias will be an important skill in any workplace going forward in order to be a part of meaningful change.

Limitations and Future Research

First, while we aimed to cross-validate the findings across two studies utilizing different research methods, we failed to observe consistent results across the experimental and the field study. We acknowledge that the use of a concrete vignette in Study 1 to introduce a fictitious co-worker where participants provided ratings of this fictitious co-worker provided a very different setting from Study 2 where participants rated their real-life co-workers. People's perceptions of their real-life co-workers may be shaped by a wide range of factors. To partial out some of these factors, in the field study, we controlled for the effects of relationship conflict because previous research has found that task and relationship conflict are highly correlated and under certain conditions, task conflict can lead to relationship conflict (e.g., Guenter et al., 2016). We also controlled for task performance and the length of time that the participant and the identified co-worker had worked together. These different research settings across the experimental study and the field study might contribute to the inconsistent findings. The use of different research methods in Study 1 and Study 2 also led us to measure different outcome variables. Specifically, because there was no actual interaction between the participant and the fictitious co-worker in Study 1, we measured future interaction intentions; and because participants were in contact with the co-worker in Study 2, we measured interaction frequency. While a strength of the experiment is that we were able to test the causal effect of task conflict instigation by controlling exactly what information participants received about the co-worker, Study 1 lacked external validity. That is, in a real employment setting, people will inevitably have more information about the conflict instigator than just the extent to which they instigate task conflict. We speculate that the different research settings and different outcome variables were primary reasons why we did not see a direct replication of the effects of Study 1 in Study 2. Since the results of the two studies are not directly comparable, we urge caution in interpreting the current findings and recommend that future research use consistent outcome variables across different study designs to more effectively triangulate the proposed effects.

Second, we exclusively relied on self-report, which might have resulted in potential overestimation of some effects particularly in Study 2. In future studies, task conflict instigated by a focal employee can be measured based on the aggregation of multiple co-workers' ratings.

Third, there may be contextual factors that shape the evaluations of task conflict instigation. For example, past research has shown that the presence of relationship conflict during task conflict can be detrimental to team decision-making (de Wit et al., 2013). Studying how task conflict instigation is perceived if it is preceded by relationship conflict may be a particularly useful question. If someone frequently contributes to the level of relationship conflict in a team, are their efforts to subsequently engage in task conflict less appreciated than if they had only engaged in task conflict exclusively? Does this relationship differ for men vs. women? To address such questions, future research can investigate the effects of task conflict instigation over time using repeated instances, potentially involving dyads who will report on each other's level and effectiveness at engaging in different types of conflict. This would help to focus on the specific

behaviors related to the act of instigating task conflict that may be perceived differently depending on the gender of the instigator. A second contextual variable that our research did not address, but should be included in future research is the level of task interdependency.[9] When task interdependency is higher co-workers may not be able to choose whether or not to interact with conflict instigators in the future and the relationships with communality and agency may be strengthened or weakened depending on the gender of the conflict instigator. In addition, there may be other potential mechanisms underlying the impact of task conflict instigation on employee outcomes beyond the two fundamental dimensions of social perception. For example, attributions for instigating the task conflict may provide a mechanism for the positive or negative perception of the instigators. If a co-worker's task conflict instigation is attributed to their need to gain something personally from the situation compared to doing it for the good of the group, then the outcomes may be very different.

Fourth, growing evidence has shown that communality and agency are broad factors made up of narrower facets (e.g., Hentschel et al., 2019, Ma et al., 2022). For example, one conceptualization of agency is that it is composed of four dimensions: instrumental competence, leadership competence, assertiveness, and independence (Hentschel et al., 2019). Assertiveness is typically the dimension that when violated, is perceived to be the most egregious, compared to competence, where women have made gains in terms of being perceived equally as competent as men (Eagly et al., 2020). Therefore, an interesting question for future research involves investigating the specific effects of the facets of agency and communality suspected to invoke the greatest penalty for violation of their associated prescriptive stereotypes.[10]

Finally, it may be that how one instigates task conflict may influence how it is perceived, and this may be different depending on one's gender. For instance, if women were to instigate task conflict using a dominating conflict management style (i.e., forcing their opinions on how the task should be accomplished; Rahim, 1983), that may be perceived very differently (i.e., negatively) compared to men who use the same style. Whereas, if women were to use an integrating conflict management style, this may help attenuate the loss of communality because of the communal nature of the integrating style (i.e., incorporating ideas from all stakeholders to reach a common goal; Rahim, 1983). We encourage future research to explore these possibilities.

Conclusion

This research focused on how task conflict instigators are perceived, highlighting preliminary gender differences between men and women. Across two studies, we found a general pattern that engaging in task conflict can be beneficial for men (but not for women) as shown by lower communality ratings for women (Study 1) and higher agency ratings for men (Study 2). These findings have important implications for the gender gap in leadership, as differing evaluations of the same behavior reinforce existing gender biases.

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[9] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

[10] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that we test our hypotheses using the different facets of agency defined in Henschel et al., (2019). Briefly, in Study 1 the agency results appear to be driven by three facets (assertiveness, leadership competence, and independence), while in Study 2 all four facets appear to drive the main effect of task conflict but only assertiveness and leadership competence are driving the interaction. See the supplemental file for the full report of these results.

Author Note

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. The authors would like to thank Greg Irving, Chet Robie, and Jana Raver for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript as well as the two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their insightful comments and suggestions. This research was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Graduate Scholarship – Doctoral, held by the first author.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Study 1 Materials

Background
You work at a consulting firm and have just been assigned to a new project with another co-worker (i.e., a peer at the same level as you in the organization) that you don't know very well. You have each received some select information from your latest 360-degree performance appraisals to help you get familiar with each other.

Name: [Insert Female or Male Name]
First Names: Claire, Steven
Last Name: Smith

Job title: Associate Consultant

Tenure in current role: 2 years

Qualitative Feedback Section

Peer Feedback Comments

[Name] brings several useful skills to teams [he/she] is a part of. For example, [he/she] has strong analytical skills, is detail oriented, and has relevant prior work experience.

AND (one of the following 2 conditions will be presented as a second paragraph of peer feedback comments)

Task Conflict (high)

When working in a group, [name] often has disagreements about the task we are working on, likes to raise different/alternative viewpoints or conflicting opinions about the project and discuss evidence for them, and engages in debate about the tasks the team is working on. [NAME] seems to have created a lot of conflict of opinions and ideas pertaining to the task at hand.

Task Conflict (low)

When working in a group, [NAME] often agrees with the majority about the task we are working on, he/she does not often raise different/alternative viewpoints or conflicting opinions about the project, and he/she rarely engages in debate about the tasks the team is working on. [NAME] seems to rarely have created conflict of opinions and ideas pertaining to the task at hand.