Task Conflict Asymmetries:

Effects on Expectations and Performance

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of asymmetric perceptions of task conflict (i.e. one person experiencing more conflict than the other) on the anticipated relationship with the partner, as well as subjective and objective performance.

Findings - Results show that when individuals realize that they have asymmetric task conflict perceptions they have lower expectations about having a positive relationship with their partner and perform worse compared to when they have symmetric task perceptions (i.e. both experiencing either low or high levels of conflict).

Originality/value - Past research on conflict has not often taken into account that individuals involved in a conflict can experience different amounts of conflict. By conducting an experimental study, in contrast to past research on conflict asymmetry, we can better understand the causal relationship between (a)symmetry of conflict and outcomes. We also provide insight into the mediating chain that examines how conflict asymmetry interferes with work processes and leads to negative work outcomes.

Keywords – Task conflict, conflict asymmetry, relationship expectations, subjective and objective performance outcomes.

Paper type – Empirical paper

Conflict Asymmetries:

Effects on Expectations and Performance

Past research on interpersonal conflict often approaches individuals jointly interacting on a work task as if they perceive and experience the same amount of conflict (Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Pelled, 1996; Jehn & Rispens, 2008). Similarly, research on interpersonal relationships and organizational groups in general often examines processes as a function of *shared* team properties or experiences (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; Mason, 2006), rather than *configural* team properties, or properties that reflect the differences in attitudes and perceptions among individuals working together (Chan, 1998; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). This approach does not take into account the possibility that the parties involved in a conflict may perceive different levels of conflict. For example, one person in a work interaction may perceive that there is a high level of conflict, while another may perceive that there is actually little or no conflict. We argue that it is critical to take into account these differences in individuals' perceptions of conflict to accurately predict the effects of conflict occurring between work partners.

There is an ongoing debate over whether conflict can ever be beneficial in task settings. A meta-analysis by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) indicates that task conflict (as well as relationship conflict) among group members generally tends to be negatively associated with performance. Task conflicts are disagreements focused on the job that the group is attempting to accomplish, while relationship conflicts are non-task-related and of a more personal nature (e.g., gossip, fashion; Jehn, 1994). More recent studies and meta-analyses (e.g., De Wit et al., 2012; Ensley & Hmieleski, 2005; Liang et al., 2007; Matsuo, 2006; Olson et al., 2007) suggest that although relationship conflict is most often detrimental, task conflict can be beneficial to group performance under specific circumstances. The reason why this might be the case is that task

conflict can increase constructive debate and enhance cognitive processing (e.g., Martinez-Moreno et al., 2009), both of which can benefit group performance. Unfortunately, however, past research on constructive debate (e.g., Amason, 1996; Ensley et al., 2002; Jehn, 1995; Olsen et al., 2007) and cognitive processing within groups (e.g., Carnevale & Probst, 1998; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), has also approached these issues without taking into account the possibility that the parties involved may have differing perceptions of the conflict. Therefore, in this study, we provide a new view of task conflict by considering how its effects are likely to depend on whether individuals have symmetric vs. asymmetric perceptions of conflict. Specifically, we aim to show that conflict asymmetry negatively influences people's cooperative expectations and social interdependence (Kelley & Grzelak, 1972; Rink & Ellemers, 2007; Yamagishi, 1986) of their relationship with their work partner. These negative expectations in turn negatively affect their objective performance, as well as their subjective estimates of their joint performance.

Task Conflict Asymmetry

Past research on work dyads, or on work partners, has often ignored that different individual perceptions exist (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; Mason, 2006), assuming that people work together on a task as if they have similar emotions (e.g., George, 1990; Mason, 2006; Totterdell, Kellett, Teuchmann, & Briner, 1998), attitudes (e.g., Mason & Griffin, 2003), and perceptions (e.g., Cannnon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1993; Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994). Although this might often be the case (e.g., due to shared identities and norms), prior research has also acknowledged that interacting individuals can have different perceptions of reality (Bruner, 1957; Searle, 1995). For example, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and the social information processing approach (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) have been employed to explain different experiences of individuals in organizations. Moreover, research on motivation

in negotiations and experimental games suggests that individuals often have different perceptions

of the same situation (Liebrand et al., 1986; Sattler & Kerr, 1991; Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994).

For instance, individuals with different levels of power over resources have different experiences

within a task interaction (e.g., Smith & Trope, 2006; for a review see Keltner et al., 2003). Also,

research on diversity and relational demography suggests that individuals in dyadic relationships

perceive conflict differently (e.g., Bono et al., 2002; Hojjat, 2000). It seems then important to

consider not only situations where work partners share perceptions of conflict (as has been done

before), but also situations where these perceptions are asymmetrical.

In this research, our focus is on the effects of asymmetric task conflict perceptions on

individuals' anticipated relationship with their partner, their subjective estimates regarding their

joint performance, as well as their actual task performance. Task conflict asymmetry exists

when one partner perceives a substantial level of task conflict while the other partner perceives

that there is really no (or very little) task conflict present (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al.,

2010). In our study, we specifically focus on task conflict given the aforementioned ongoing

debate regarding its importance for the performance of the work partners involved. Indeed, the

few studies that have been done to examine conflict asymmetry perceptions suggest that

perceptual differences of task conflict decreased performance and creativity of interacting

employees in field settings (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Rupert, Nauta, & Van Den Bossche,

2010).

The Current Research: Conflict Asymmetry and Task Performance

In the study reported here, we examined two collaboration partners working on a decision

making task. As in past studies, in this study we also focus on the effects of (a)symmetric task

conflict perceptions on task performance and use conflict asymmetry theory as our theoretical framework. However, in this paper we extend this analysis in three ways: (1) First, we carry out an experimental examination of these processes to enable a more solid understanding of the causal relationship between (a)symmetry of conflict perceptions and task performance within work interactions. Second (2), we examine not only how conflict (a)symmetry affects objective performance on a decision task, but also how it affects subjective performance, that is, individuals' estimations of their joint performance. And third (3), we examine the effect of (a)symmetry of conflict perceptions on expected relationship with the work partner, and whether these expectations mediate the negative effects of asymmetry of conflict on objective and on subjective performance.

By extending knowledge in these ways, we aim to provide a more complete picture of the effects of conflict in interdependent work interactions. The success of dyadic or of work interactions cannot be measured by objective performance alone (Balkundi & Harrison 2006; Hackman & Wageman 2005). Objective performance is indicative only of how partners did at that particular moment, but not whether or not they can be expected to do as well in the future. Dyads may perform well simply out of a desire to end the interaction as quickly as possible, in which case good performance is not necessarily to be repeated. Tapping into more subjective variables will provide additional insights not only about the process through which conflict perceptions might have their effects, but also about the continuation of the partnership. In this context, we think that partner's expectations about their relationship and their subjective perception of their joint performance are particularly relevant. Subjective performance estimates are important predictors of the resources that people are willing to invest in a future collaboration (Balkundi & Harrison 2006; Hackman & Wageman 2005), and are often based on people's initial expectations of those who they work with and their cooperative expectations in socially

interdependent situations (Kelley & Grzelak, 1972; Yamagishi, 1986). Indeed, expectations tend to colour our own behaviour, the way we view others (Rosenthal, 1994; Burgoon, LePoire & Rosenthal, 1995), and also tend to influence our motivation to remain in a working relationship (Rink & Ellemers, 2007). In the sections below, we discuss the relationship between conflict asymmetry perceptions and task performance, as well as the role that one's subjective experience of the collaboration has in this relationship, in more detail.

Research on shared mental models provides some evidence that consistency across individuals in views and interpretations of group processes increases performance (e.g., Marks et al., 2002; Mathieu et al., 2000). The logic provided is that for interdependent members working together to perform well, all involved must have a common understanding of the goals, the processes required to reach those goals, and the information that members have (Hinsz et al., 1997; Mohammed et al., 2000; Smith-Jentsch et al., 2001). We argue that if individuals working together have a common perception of the social processes in the dyad (i.e., conflict symmetry) it will be easier for them to work more effectively on their task (Hinsz et al., 1997; Marks et al., 2002; Mathieu et al., 2000). If they do not agree that a conflict exists, they are unlikely to share the cognitions necessary to allow them effective discussions regarding their joint efforts toward completion of the task. Work partners must exchange and process information to reach an optimal solution (Carnevale & Probst, 1998; Leenders et al., 2003). Therefore, we propose that if collaboration partners have different views of the conflict situation this will impair their joint performance:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Asymmetric conflict perceptions will be associated with poorer task performance compared to symmetric conflict perceptions.

Mediating Process: Anticipated Relationship with the Partner

We propose that there are several reasons *why* asymmetric conflict perceptions may be detrimental in work interactions. Research on collective cognition (Gibson & Earley, 2007), negotiated belief structures (Walsh et al., 1988), efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2001), and shared mental models (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994) suggests that groups benefit from consensus among their members. When the cognitive structures of work partners reflect a common understanding of the attributes, skills, responsibilities, and needs of their colleagues (Mohammed et al., 2000), or when work partners agree on the concerns they have about the upcoming interaction (Mason & Griffin, 2003), they can more easily help one another, coordinate work strategies, and communicate critical information (Mathieu et al., 2000). Perceived sharedness among members therefore has positive effects on a range of aspects involved in work processes (Bar-Tal, 1990; Cannon-Bowers et al.,1993; Mason, 2006; Salas et al., 1992) while asymmetric perceptions may not.

Although several processes may underlie these effects, to provide a controlled analysis of this process in this research we focus on one particular potential mediating process, controlling for the occurrence of the remaining through the use of an experimental approach. Specifically, we examine whether the negative effect of asymmetric perceptions on objective and subjective performance is mediated by one's expectations about the relationship with the partner. Precisely because sharedness (symmetry of perceptions) is so important in work interactions, we argue that when collaboration partners realize that they do *not* share conflict perceptions this is likely to be a problem for the relationship between work partners and their expectations (Kelley & Grzelak, 1972; Rink & Ellemers, 2007). People have a fundamental need to feel secure about their perceptions of the world (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Hogg, 2000; Weary & Edwards, 1996; Van de Bos & Lind, 2002). Uncertainty about one's own or other's attitudes, beliefs, and, in this case, task conflict perceptions, is generally experienced as aversive, and associated with feelings of

stress and anxiety (e.g., Hogg, 2000; Van den Bos et al., 2007; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). As individuals in work situations generally expect those with whom they have to collaborate with to hold similar views of the task at hand (e.g., naïve realism; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995), unexpected differences in perceptions are likely to cause confusion and discomfort *vis-à-vis* the work partner (Milton & Westphal, 2005; Polzer et al., 2002). Therefore, we propose that asymmetry of conflict perceptions will lead work partners to anticipate a poorer relationship with their work partner than when conflict perceptions are symmetric. That is, we expect more positive expectations when both collaboration partners perceive task conflict or when both partners do not perceive task conflict, than when one partner perceives more conflict than the other.

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2)*: Asymmetric conflict perceptions within a workgroup will be associated with less positive expectations about the relationship with the partner than symmetric conflict perceptions.

We also propose that partner's expectations about their relationship with their interaction partner will in turn influence how they estimate the effectiveness of the collaboration (their subjective performance), as well as their actual joint performance. Work interactions in which expectations about the upcoming collaboration partner are positive, tend to have more confidence in their potential to perform well, as well as actually perform better (Kelly & Grzelak, 1972; Rink & Ellemers, 2007). Indeed, in this sense, initial expectations about the interaction function in a self-fulfilling way—shaping partner's confidence that they will be successful, and their ability to do so. This is why we propose that the effect of (a)symmetric perceptions of conflict on objective and subjective joint performance will be mediated by participant's anticipated relationship with their partner. This final hypothesis therefore is:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The effects of asymmetric conflict perceptions on performance will be mediated by the expected relationship with the partner.

Method

Participants and Design

In a 2 x 2 between-participants experimental design, we manipulated participants' perception of task conflict (perceive task conflict vs. does not perceive task conflict) and the perceptual conflict composition of their dyad (asymmetry vs. symmetry). We chose to use the experimental method to control for other effects of our dependent variables, to examine causality, and to use a constant task. All of which have not been done in past research on conflict asymmetry as the majority has been cross-sectional field studies (c.f. Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010).

Participants were randomly allocated to each of the four experimental conditions. Eighty-four psychology students at a Dutch university participated (25 men and 59 women; average age = 21) and received €3.50 (about US$5 at the time) for their participation.

Procedure

All participants sat in separate cubicles in front of a computer, through which they received all instructions. Participants read that they were to perform a task together with a fellow student and that the dyad's computers were connected so they could exchange information with each other. Participants did not know each other nor the "partner." This partner, in reality, however, did not exist and all communications with the work partner were experimentally simulated and preprogrammed. To reduce potential problems of familiarity between the participants, participants remained unaware to whom exactly they were connected. In total, participants took about 30 to 40 minutes to complete the experiment.

Conflict Asymmetry Manipulation. At the start of the experiment, participants read that based on individuals' ways of perceiving conflicts between work partners it is possible to classify people in one of two categories: people who *do not* have the tendency to perceive task conflict in work situations, and people who *do* have the tendency to perceive task conflict in work situations. Allegedly, to determine whether or not they were the type of person that tends to perceive task conflict within work interactions, participants were asked to answer 12 questions. We used a procedure adapted from Salancik (1974) and De Dreu and Van Kleef (2004) in which leading questions were asked so that participants in the 'no conflict perception' condition would answer in ways that led them to infer that they did not expect conflict, whereas participants in the 'conflict perception' condition would infer that they indeed expected conflict which allowed us to put them into the asymmetry or symmetry condition by mismatching or matching (respectively) the conflict perceptions of their work partner (see Appendix A for the complete list of items). In all conditions, statements were as neutral as possible so that a tendency to perceive conflict was not seen as more or as less desirable than a tendency not to perceive conflict. Participants gave their responses to all questions on 7-point Likert scales with 'not at all' (1) and 'very much' (7) as endpoints.

After participants and their (alleged) work partner answered these questions, they received feedback about their answers. Depending on the condition, participants learned to which of the two categories they and their partner belonged—whether they had a tendency to perceive conflict or not, and whether or not their partner had the same tendency as themselves. In the <u>symmetry</u> condition, participants were told that they and their partner had similar tendencies to perceive conflict in work situations (or to not perceive conflict). Alternatively, in the <u>asymmetry</u> condition they were told that they and their partner had dissimilar tendencies to perceive conflict in work situations (i.e. when they had a tendency to perceive conflict in work situations their partner did

not, and vice-versa). Again, the feedback they received about their and their partner's perception

of conflict was preprogrammed and depended solely on the condition to which they were

randomly assigned. A pilot study conducted pretested these conditions and the asymmetry of

conflict perceptions.[1] Participants were then asked to fill in a questionnaire measuring their

expectations of their, and their work partner's, perceptions of task conflict, and the asymmetry of

conflict perceptions (manipulation checks), as well as expectations regarding the upcoming dyad

work.

  Task. In the next phase of the experiment the participants were asked to perform a dyad task -

the NASA-dilemma (see Cammalleri et al.,1973). This dilemma, in which participants are presented

with a moon landing scenario and a number of available objects, requires participants to rank objects

in order of usefulness to survive on the moon. It is possible to identify the most correct solution for

this problem, making it possible to compute a performance score. Participants first provided an

individual solution for this dilemma (Round 1, pre-debate), independently of their work partner

(Cammalleri et al., 1973). After this, participants were asked to perform the task another time

(Round 2, post-debate). This time, they were told that their score and their partner's score would be

averaged, and the best performing dyad would be awarded 50 Euros in addition to the experimental

reward that all participants would receive. Also, participants were told before doing the task a

second time that they and their work partner would have the opportunity to discuss the relevance of

several of the objects featured in the task.

  Debate. Before doing the task a second time, participants were given the opportunity to exchange

messages about the objects which featured in the task, in a debate session with the bogus workpartner.

To ensure actual debate, participants had to discuss at least three items. After the third item,

participants were asked whether they wanted to discuss another object or not. The 'debate' continued

until the participant chose not to debate the next object, or until eight (out of fourteen) objects were

discussed (to place a limit on the duration of the study). During the discussion of the first object, participants were asked to type a message to the bogus work partner. Hereafter, they received a pre-programmed message about the same object. This message provided an opinion about the usefulness of that object on the moon. For each object, both work partners were allowed to send one message. To make it credible that participants were interacting with a real partner, waiting times were randomized and spelling errors were included in the messages the participant received. After this exchange of messages, participants indicated their individual solution to the dilemma and were reminded that their answers would be combined with their partner's for their overall joint score. After this, the experiment was ended and participants were debriefed.

Measures

       Manipulation check. The manipulation checks were items adapted from the Intragroup Conflict Scale (Jehn, 1995). Due to limited subject time, and in line with past research (e.g., De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1994), we decided to use only 2 items to measure task conflict instead of the more standard four items. Two questions assessed whether participants expected to experience task conflict (for example, "I expect that I will have different viewpoints from my partner on the issues to discuss" $r = .88$, $p < .001$). Two items assessed whether participants expected *their work partner* to perceive task conflict (e.g., "I expect that my partner will think we have different ideas on the issues to handle", $r = .89$, $p < .001$) which allowed us to then put them into symmetry or asymmetry work situations. Participants gave their responses to all questions on 7-point Likert scales. To rule out the possibility that the (a)symmetry manipulation would simply trigger conflict in general, irrespective of conflict type, we also examined whether relationship conflict was affected. Again, two items assessed participants own experience of relationship conflict (e.g., "It was clear that we did not match on a more personal level" $r = .64$, $p < .001$). Given that the questions used to manipulate participants tendencies to perceive (or not perceive) conflict during collaborative tasks primarily focused on task

conflict (see De Dreu & Van Kleef, 2004), we did not expect to see differences for perceptions of relationship conflict.

Finally, two additional questions were added that assessed task conflict (a)symmetry directly; "I expect we will perceive the same amount of diverging viewpoints on the issues to discuss" and "I expect one of us will and one of us will not perceive diverging viewpoints on the issues to discuss" (reverse coded, $r = .90$, $p < .001$).

Dependent and mediating variables. All perception items were presented as statements, and participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed with each statement (from 1 "totally disagree" to 7 "totally agree").

Our main dependent variable, performance, was measured at different points in time. Participants carried out the task in two rounds: in round 1, they provided their individual answers, then they debated, and in round 2 they provided their final answers. *Subjective task performance* was measured after round 1 (right before the debate) with two items: 'I expect my partner and I to have performed well on the task' and 'I think my partner and I worked in an effective manner' ($\alpha = .81$). This subjective performance estimate was measured at this stage so as to remain uncontaminated by the actual interaction, or any type of feedback it might imply. *Objective task performance* was measured both in round 1 (pre-debate) and in round 2 (post-debate) of the task. In addition to the total number of correctly ranked items, the participant's total rank order of objects was compared with the correct order as suggested by Cammalleri et al. (1973). This comparison enabled us to compute an error score for each item (i.e. the difference between the correct rank and the participant's rank). All of the individual error scores were summed to obtain a total error score for the complete task. Furthermore, the number of correctly ranked items of the first round (pre-debate) was subtracted from the number of correctly ranked items of the second round (post-debate) to produce a difference score, reflecting the improvement made between the two tasks. Similarly, the total error score of the first

trial was subtracted from the total error score on the second trial, also reflecting the improvement between the two tasks.

Importantly, we examined the proposed mediator right after the conflict (a)symmetry manipulation, before the measurement of performance. Participants' anticipated relationship with their task partner was measured with three items (e.g., "I expect I will be happy working with my work partner", "I expect I will be satisfied with my work partner", and "I expect I would like to work again with my work partner", $\alpha = .93$) adapted from Jehn (1995) and consistent with expectation research (e.g., Rink & Ellemers, 2007).

Results

Unless otherwise indicated all variables were analyzed with a 2 (perceived task conflict vs. no perceived task conflict) X 2 (symmetry vs. asymmetry of perception) between-participants (M)ANOVA. The first condition was to allow us to examine whether high-high asymmetry (both perceive high levels of task conflict) versus low-low asymmetry (both perceive low levels of conflict) was expected. The second condition of asymmetry allowed us to test our hypotheses. Table 1 shows the correlations and descriptive statistics for the variables that were included in the analyses.

Manipulation Checks

The results of the manipulation checks indicate that our manipulations worked as intended. Participants in the 'tendency to perceive conflict' condition (which allowed us to put participants into the symmetry or asymmetry condition) expected to perceive more task conflict ($M = 5.71$, $SD =.85$) than participants in the 'tendency not to perceive conflict' condition ($M = 2.88$, $SD =1.34$), $F (1, 83) = 130.63$, $p < .001$. Participants linked with work partners who allegedly had low tendencies to perceive conflict, indeed expected their partner to perceive less task conflict ($M = 2.67$, $SD =1.27$) than participants linked with a work partner with alleged high tendencies to perceive conflict ($M = 5.92$,

$SD =.97)$, $F(1,83) = 18.7$, $p < .001$. This would be a symmetry condition.   Importantly, when

examining perceived levels of relationship conflict, however, *no* difference emerged between

participants in the 'tendency to perceive task conflict' condition, $M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.01$, and

participants in the 'tendency not to perceive conflict' condition, $M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.00$, $F(1, 83) < 1$, p

$= ns$. This finding demonstrates that the conflict (a)symmetry manipulation did not target relationship

conflict - participants primarily made assumptions about the presence or absence of task conflict, as

intended.

In line with our (a)symmetry manipulation, participants in the *symmetric* condition expected that

they and their work partner would not perceive different levels of conflict ($M = 2.67$, $SD =1.32$)

whereas those in the *asymmetry* condition expected that they and their work partner would perceive

different levels of conflict ($M = 5.40$, $SD =1.36$), $F(1, 83) = 86.32$, $p < .001$.

Dependent Variables

Task Performance. Hypothesis 1 suggested a negative relationship between asymmetric

conflict perceptions and performance (i.e., subjective performance, as well as objective performance).

As can be seen in Table 1, this prediction received support from our data. First, the main effect of

(a)symmetry on the subjective performance estimates was significant and in the predicted direction,

$F(1,83) = 5.171$, $p = 0.03$; indicating that participants in the symmetry condition estimated they (and

their partner) would perform well to a greater extent than participants in the asymmetry condition.

Second, although the number of errors made by participants in round 2 in the asymmetrical and

symmetrical conditions was not significantly different (Round 1, $F(1, 83) = .95$, $p = .33$; Round 2:

$F(1, 83) = .41$, $p = .53$), participants in the asymmetrical and symmetrical conditions did have

significantly different error-improvement scores $F(1, 83) = 5.64$, $p < .05$. That is, participants in the

symmetrical conditions were able to improve their performance ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 6.70$), so compared

to round 1, they made fewer errors in round 2. By contrast, participants in the asymmetry conditions

saw their objective performance worsen (M = -1.33, SD = 6.10): as compared to round 1, they made *more* errors in round 2.

Anticipated relationship with the partner. Hypothesis 2 proposed that asymmetrical conflict perceptions would lead to an immediate decrease in expected satisfaction with the partner. This analysis revealed a reliable main effect of (a)symmetry, F (1,83) = 6.14, p < .05, indicating that participants in the symmetry conditions (M = 5.07, SD = .95) expected to be more satisfied with their partner than participants in the asymmetry condition (M = 4.50, SD = 1.16). As expected, this was independent of the main effect of the level of conflict expected (high or low). Hence, people expected the relationship with their partner to be less optimal when they expected different conflict perceptions (asymmetry) than when they expected converging conflict perceptions (symmetry). This beneficial effect of symmetry was revealed irrespective of the absolute amount of conflict that was expected within the dyad, that is both when no one expected conflict and when both dyad members expected conflict.

Mediation analyses. The predicted mediation was found for the subjective performance estimates. First, regression analyses showed that the relationship between the (a)symmetry manipulation and people's performance estimates was significant, B = -.49, p = .03 (see Figure 1), just like the relationship between the (a)symmetry manipulation and their expected relationship with the work partner, B = -.55, p = .02, and the relationship between the expected relationship with the work partner and people's performance estimates, B = .42, p < .001. Secondly, a regression analyses on people's performance estimates showed that the effect of the (a)symmetry manipulation was not significant anymore, B = -.28, p = .17, when individuals' expected relationship with the work partner was included in the analyses (and which itself still had a significant effect on the performance estimates, B = .38, p < .001). Finally, to test the mediation relationship suggested in Hypothesis 3 through formal significance tests of the indirect

relationship between the predictor (i.e. conflict asymmetry perceptions) and the outcome

variables (i.e. objective and subjective performance), as transmitted by the mediating variable

(i.e. expected relationship with work partner), we used the mediation bootstrap procedures

following Preacher and Hayes (2004; 2008). This procedure does not make assumptions about

the shape of the sampling distribution of the indirect relation, thus producing relatively robust

results (Edwards & Lambert, 2007), and are recommended in small to moderate samples such as

in this study (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). For these analyses, we applied the PROCESS

 SPSS Macro by Hayes, using model 4 (http://www.afhayes.com/spss-sas-and-mplus-macros-and-code.html). The results showed that the bias-corrected bootstrapped estimates of the indirect

effect with 95% confidence (nboots = 5,000) were between, LL CI = -.43 and UL CI = -.02.

Given that this indirect effects differs from 0 at the $p < .05$ level (Preacher & Hayes, 2004),

hypothesis 3 was supported in that participants' expected relationship with their partner fully

explained the negative link between task conflict asymmetry and the subjective performance

estimates. No mediation was found for objective performance.

Discussion

The study reported here was designed to examine the consequences of asymmetric (vs.

symmetric) conflict perceptions on task performance, and the mediating effect of relationship

expectations. Asymmetric task conflict perceptions exist when the parties involved in what appears to

be the same conflict situation perceive the situation differently. We went beyond past research by

providing an experimental examination of this process, illuminating the causal relationship between

the core variables.

The results found on objective performance, the subjective performance estimates, as well as on

initial expectations about the relationship with the partner provide a more complete picture of the

effects of asymmetric task conflict on work interactions than past research has done (e.g., Jehn &

Chatman, 2000; Jehn & Rispens, 2008). We predicted and found that participants in the symmetrical condition were able to improve their objective task performance while participants in the asymmetrical condition had a decline in performance indicated by increased errors. We additionally showed that already after the first round, and without receiving any type of performance feedback, participants subjectively estimated their joint performance more negatively in the asymmetric conflict situation than in the symmetric situation. Mediation analyzes showed that this negative estimation can be explained by the expectations participants had about their partner, which in turn depended on (a)symmetry of conflict perceptions. That is, when conflict perceptions were asymmetric individuals developed lower expectations of their relationship with their work partner, and these in turn resulted in poorer subjective estimates of their joint performance. As such, the initial expectations developed on the basis of conflict (a)symmetry functioned as self-fulfilling prophecies by subsequently influencing individual's perceptions of the dyadic performance.

That we only found this mediation for subjective performance, and not for objective performance, is unexpected, but possible to explain. A possible explanation lies at the measurement level, given that both expectations about the relationship and subjective performance are subjectively made estimates, while performance was assessed on a rather objective indicator. This divergence also makes sense at a conceptual level. Indeed, the partner's subjective estimation of their joint work is likely to be a judgement that partly reflects the extent to which they trust the other to behave in a predictable way—such as when conflict perceptions are symmetric, but not when partners disagree about their conflict perceptions (i.e., when they are asymmetric). Subjective performance might thus even be more directly related to the expected relationship with the work partner, than actual performance. In fact, actual performance can additionally depend on a range of less controllable factors, such as both partners' level of expertise, while subjective performance more directly reflects how well individuals think they

did in comparison to how they think they could have done in different circumstances--such as when they have more positive expectations about their partner. Objective and subjective performance indicators can thus be relatively independent as they can depend on slightly different factors.

We contribute to the existing literature on intragroup conflict (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003) by showing that the way a conflict is perceived (i.e., symmetric or asymmetric) is an important factor in determining attitudes and joint outcomes. That is, we suggest a new insight to inform the ongoing debate of whether or not task-related conflict can be beneficial by examining the asymmetric perceptions of work partners and the effect of this above and beyond the basic conflict level during the interaction. This research is a first experimental step to provide insight to research on conflict asymmetry in workgroups, in addition to dyadic work relationships. In this study, we found that symmetric perceptions of conflict (both partners perceiving high levels, or both partners perceiving low levels) were both better for the work interaction (i.e., expected relationship with the partner and objective and subjective performance) than were asymmetric perceptions of conflict (one member perceiving a low level of conflict and the other a high level, and vice versa). From this, we infer that it is not necessarily the average amount of conflict that matters during work interactions, but whether or not individuals agree about the level of the conflict within the dyad (or group). More generally, we believe that our work also contributes to research on work interactions and perceptions by taking into account interpersonal or intragroup differences in how people perceive and respond to what from the outside appears to be the same situation.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has a number of limitations. First, we conducted this study in a laboratory setting to control for all other factors except symmetric and asymmetric conflict perceptions, and to test the

causal effect of these (a)symmetrical perceptions on attitudes and behaviors. The laboratory setting

also allows us to examine these effects on performance on the very same task, not easily

accomplished in the field. However, testing these processes in the laboratory limits the external

validity of our findings, so future research should attempt to replicate these findings in a field setting.

In addition, longitudinal research in the field would allow researchers to further examine the causality

of the mediating relationships. In addition, while the experimental manipulation measures were self-

report on task conflict asymmetry, other measures could be used in research to examine this such as

observation. However, given that asymmetry is a perception, this seems an appropriate first step.

In addition, we operationalized symmetry/asymmetry as a dichotomous variable. Future

research, however, should examine the continuous nature of asymmetry to symmetry of task conflict

perceptions (as well as relationship and process conflict asymmetry). This will allow a different set

of analyses of a continuous variable to test the proposed relationships with expectations and

performance. An important antecedent of conflict asymmetry, or how individuals perceive the level

of conflict within the group, may require an examination of personality characteristics of the parties

involved. Prior research suggests that individual dispositional variables (extraversion, neuroticism,

agreeableness, consciousness, openness to experience) influence employees' perceptions at work

(Barrick & Mount, 1991; Buss, 1991; Digman, 1990). For instance, it may be that individuals with a

higher level of agreeableness are less likely to perceive conflict while those with a high level of

neuroticism may be more likely to perceive that their task ideas are being attacked. This could be an

interesting direction for future research.

This research raises several additional interesting questions for future research. Given that

people tend to attribute expectancy violations, and negative expectancies about the work interaction,

to the target of this expectancy (i.e. the partner; Burgoon et al.,1995), one question would be whether

participants also impute the experience of conflict (a)symmetry to the partner rather than to the self. If

this is the case, it may become difficult for two parties who experience conflict asymmetry to resolve this issue, as they both expect the *other* to change the situation. If so, it might be even more difficult to reduce asymmetric conflict perceptions, than to reduce symmetric perceptions of high levels of conflict. Moreover, considering conflict resolution programs, it might seem important to establish whether it is fruitful to first focus on lowering the perceptions of those who perceive high levels of conflict, or whether it is best to first concentrate on making "the blind bright," so that those who do not perceive conflict learn to recognize its existence.

Another avenue for future research is to examine the effects of relationship and process conflict asymmetries and how these are similar or different from the effects of asymmetries in task conflict perceptions in work interactions. In this study we focused specifically on task conflict given the ongoing debate regarding task conflict and performance outcomes. In a similar vein, another area for future research is the concept of asymmetry of *type* of conflict, that is, a situation where one member perceives the conflict as a task-related conflict but the other member involved in the work interaction perceives the conflict as a relationship conflict. This can have extreme consequences for the interaction where one member is focusing on the task, while the other is focusing on the relationship and also feeling dismissed because their partner is apparently ignoring their relationship concerns and only focusing on task goals. Finally, while we examined a profile of consequences of asymmetrical conflict perceptions (expected relationship with the partner, subjective and objective performance), future research would also benefit from examining other group or work outcomes such as likelihood of continuing the collaboration, motivation to work, withdrawal from the group, and even absenteeism from work.

Conclusion and Implications

In sum, this research contributes to the understanding of work interactions and the different perceptions that employees may have when working together, and how this affects their expectations

and performance. Specifically, work partners involved in the same situation can perceive a conflict differently, thus interfering with their expectations about each other and with their performance on a joint task. Managers, as well as employees, should be aware that what appears to be the same conflict situation can be perceived and experienced in quite different ways by those involved, and that this has important consequences. This suggests that a first step in managing work conflicts is for managers and team leaders to facilitate a shared understanding of the situation and to provide a forum for perspective taking (Galinsky et al., 2005; Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001; Jehn et al., 2006) so that each party involved understands the other and can react with that in mind. In this way, individuals can agree that they disagree and move forward in their discussions toward more effective task conflict management and outcomes.

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Footnotes

1. We pilot tested our procedure to manipulate perceived task conflict by submitting a separate

sample of participants (N = 44) to the same instruction as in this study (without the dependent

measures). This test showed that participants who were told that they had a tendency to perceive

task conflict indeed expected to perceive more task conflict during the upcoming interaction (M =

2.91 , SD =1.45) than did participants who were told that they did not have a tendency to perceive

task conflict (M = 5.61 , SD =1.24), F (1, 44,) = 44.01, p < .001. Similarly, participants in the

"partner has a tendency to perceive task conflict" conditions expected their work partner to

perceive more task conflict (M = 6.13, SD = .76) than participants in the "partner does not have a

tendency to perceive task conflict" conditions (M = 2.83, SD = 1.52), F(1, 44,) = 77.24, p < .001.

Finally, participants in the asymmetry conditions (M = 5.18, SD = 1.81) expected more task

conflict asymmetry than participants in the no asymmetry conditions (M = 3.41, SD = .87), F (1,

44,) = 17.16, p < .001.

Figure 1. Diagram of the relationships between task conflict (a) symmetry perceptions and anticipated partner satisfaction, subjective performance and objective performance.
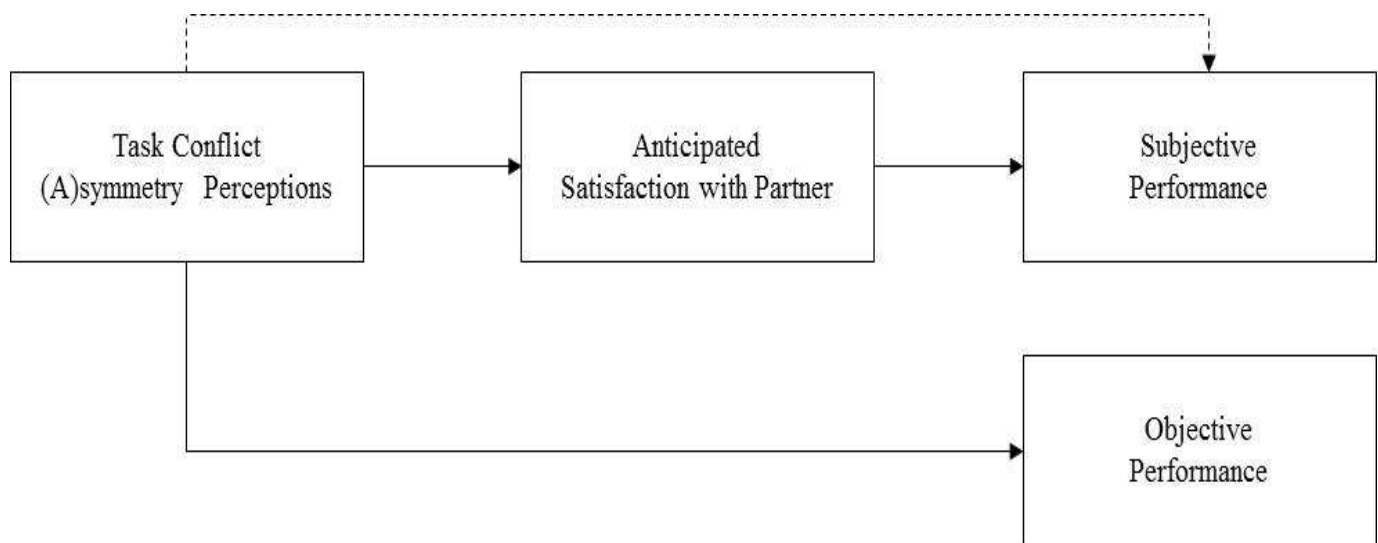
Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix (N = 84)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perception of task conflict (Perceiving vs. not perceiving task conflict)*	-				
2. Perceptual conflict composition of their group (asymmetry vs. symmetry)	.00	-			
3. Expected satisfaction with task partner	-.26*	.02	-		
4. Objective task performance	-.23*	-.03	.44**	-	
5. Subjective task performance	.26*	-.09	-.17	-.10	-
Mean	.50	.50	4.79	5.17	-.33
SD	.50	.50	1.09	1.00	6.58

* Used to control for level of conflict and to create symmetry and asymmetry conditions.

Table 2 Performance Results: Error-scores and Error-Improvement-scores

	Symmetrical Conditions	Asymmetrical Conditions
Subjective Performance	4.91[*]	5.40[*]
	(1.08)	(.87)
Number of Errors Round 1	40.90	38.90
	(8.88)	(8.74)
Number of Errors Round 2	38.90	40.23
	(8.57)	(9.45)
Error-Improvement [a]	2.00[*]	-1.33[*]
	(6.70)	(6.10)

Note. Standard deviations are given within parentheses

[a] Error-Improvement: the number of errors in Round 2 (post-debate) *minus* the number of errors in Round 1 (pre-debate); positive scores imply that, compared to the first round, participants improved and made fewer errors during round 2.

[*] Means in this row are significantly different: $p < .05$.

Appendix 1

Questions used to manipulate participants tendencies to perceive –or not perceive—conflict during

collaborative tasks

Tendency to Perceive Conflict	Tendency Not to Perceive Conflict
1. In work situations I think it is important for people to have their own opinion.	1. I think it is important for people to be cooperative in work situations.
2. When I am working on something with somebody else, I think it is important to get the most out of myself.	2. When I am working on something with somebody else, I think it is important to find some common ground.
3. When I work together with others, I think it is important for people to understand me.	3. When I work together with others I think it is important that people agree with each other.
4. During collaborations with others, it is easy for me to tell others I am unhappy with something.	4. During collaborations with others, I find it difficult to tell people I am unhappy with something.
5. When realizing certain goals, I stand up for myself.	5. When realizing certain goals, I do not always stand up for myself.
6. In work situations I am task-oriented.	6. In work situations I am socially-oriented.
7. When performing a task I think it is important to openly give your opinion.	7. I think modesty is important during the performance of a task.
8. Most of the time, I try to be open for a good discussion during a collaboration.	8. Most of the time, I try not to get involved in discussions during a collaboration.
9. During a collaboration, I enjoy convincing other people.	9. During a collaboration, I enjoy working together with others.
10. When necessary to perform a task I will not try to escape from facing a conflict.	10. Generally, I experience only little conflict in work situations.
11. I am bothered by differences of opinion that are not articulated during the completion of a task.	11. During the completion of a task, I sometimes think it is wise to stop a discussion.
12. People with whom I collaborated describe me as a strong person with an independent opinion.	12. People with whom I collaborated describe me as an easy-going person.