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Work relationships: counteracting the negative effects of conflict

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Abstract

Purpose – Guided by social resource theory, this study aims to examine the influence of conflict (i.e. task and relationship) on performance. The authors investigated whether job engagement mediates this relationship and whether social network quality moderates the relationship between conflict, job engagement and performance.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors built and tested a moderated mediation model, using data from 217 graduate students.

Findings – Results showed that job engagement operates as a mediating mechanism between task conflict and performance. The authors also found that the indirect effect of job engagement depended upon the quality of the social networks. When the quality of the social network was high, both the task and relationship conflict did not negatively influence the association between job engagement and performance.

Research limitations/implications – These findings provide new insights into how social embeddedness in the form of social network quality can create a social context in which conflict works out less detrimental.

Practical implications – Given that employees are interdependent and coworkers are likely to differ in their personal values and opinions, the authors conclude that managers should facilitate the development of meaningful relationships at work.

Originality/value – Whereas prior research has found conflict (i.e. task and relationship) to negatively associate with performance, the authors show that social networks do affect the strength of the relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and performance.

Keywords Performance, Job engagement, Moderated mediation, Social network quality, Task and relationship conflict

Paper type Research paper

In alignment with the increasing global shift from manufacturing economies to service and knowledge economies, scholars have started to pay more attention to the relational and interactional characteristics important to work design (Kilduff and Brass, 2010a; Grant and Parker, 2009). This growing interest for the importance of relational or interactional characteristics relating to different types of work design is driven by the insight that jobs, roles and tasks are more socially embedded than ever before (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2008). As such, in the present study, we will use this relational perspective and focus on conflict and social network quality.

In the present study, we will examine how the quality of embeddedness in social networks can buffer the negative effects of (perceived) conflict (i.e. task and relationship)

on performance. We depart from social resources theory (Lin, 2002) to argue that the quality of social networks can be used as indicator of the amount of social resource that is available to deal with the effects of disruptive conflicts. By identifying relational conditions that can minimize the impact of conflict, we provide insights for researchers and practitioners that are more valuable than simply avoiding the occurrence of conflict at work.

Our study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, our paper shifts attention from traditional work design variables to social embeddedness and the importance of relational characteristics in understanding how conflict works out on performance. Following up on this argument, we examine how the social embeddedness in the form of social network quality can be seen as meaningful relationships at work that can create a social context in which conflict works out less detrimental (Labianca and Brass, 2006). Second, this paper intends to understand how we can manage the effects of conflict on performance. Despite calls for future research to shift attention to explaining the linkages between conflict and performance (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003), very few studies to date have examined the theoretical mechanisms that link conflict and performance. In our study, we will focus on job engagement (i.e. employees' persistent and pervasive condition characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption [Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Bakker *et al.*, 2004]). Third, the disruptive effect of conflict on performance found in the past has inspired many researchers to advice companies and their employees to avoid provoking conflict (Edmondson and Smith, 2006). However, avoiding the development of conflict may be very difficult, if not impossible, given that employees are interdependent and coworkers are likely to differ in their personal values and opinions (Rispens *et al.*, 2011). Enhancing our understanding of the complex nature of intrapersonal relations at the workplace might be helpful for human resource management professionals or managers in creating and implementing those human resource (HR) practices stimulating the development of meaningful relationships at work.

We build a moderated mediation model (Figure 1) to investigate how social embeddedness or the constellations of individual social resources (i.e. social network quality) moderates the indirect relationship between conflict (i.e. relationship and task conflict), job engagement and performance. We used data from 217 graduate students majoring in international business at a Dutch university to test our hypothesis.
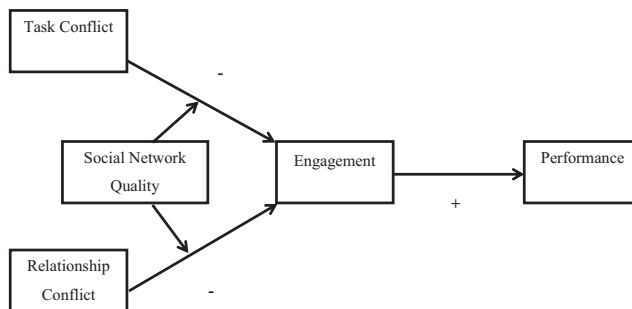

Figure 1.
The proposed
moderated mediation
research model

Theoretical background and hypotheses
In the organizational literature, conflict has been considered one of the most well-known interpersonal processes (Kozlowski and Ilgen, 2006; Marks *et al.*, 2001) which "one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party" (Wall and Callister, 1995, p. 517). Early organizational conflict theories presumed that conflict was counterproductive (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; Jehn, 1995). Indeed, workplace conflict has been suggested to interfere with performance because it produces tension, antagonism and distracts individuals from task completion (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Early empirical research confirmed this negative view of conflict. In a meta-analytical review, De Dreu and Weingart (2003) demonstrated that conflict is disruptive to performance. Relatedly, Carnevale and Probst (1998) in an experimental study showed that, compared with a control condition in which no conflict was induced, participants were more creative solving problems in situations of low conflict. Similarly, Wall and Nolan (1986) in a study among 375 students found that satisfaction was low in groups suffering from high conflict. Relatedly, scholars from disciplines other than organizational behavior (e.g. sociology, anthropology and political science) have also studied conflict, showing negative consequences of conflict (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003).

In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, conflict may be beneficial under certain circumstances (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Recent empirical evidence demonstrated that conflict improves decision quality and strategic planning, financial performance and organizational growth (Jehn, 1995). When in conflict, people confront issues, learn to take different perspective and are more creative (Tjosvold, 2008). For example, Pelled *et al.* (1999) showed that exposure to opposing views encourages individuals to gather new data and develop a more complete understanding of problems and alternative solutions. Similarly, Jehn (1994) showed that conflict was positively associated with performance on a class project. Relatedly, Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1990) found that conflict among team members was essential to effective team performance, because conflict prevents complacency and mistakes that might drain resources (Janis, 1989).

The different types of conflict
Drawing on this contradicting evidence, it is imperative to differentiate between types of conflict (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003; Shah and Jehn, 1993; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Commonly, conflict is distinguished in task conflict, relationship conflict and process conflict. Task conflict arises when individuals hold different opinions about the work to be done (Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Relationship conflict refers to interpersonal tensions that arise from perceived personal incompatibilities, such as differences in norms and values, and is generally found to harm performance (Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Simons and Peterson, 2000). Process conflicts are disagreements about logistical and delegation issues such as who is responsible for what and how tasks should be delegated (Jehn *et al.*, 2008; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Despite the critical role process conflict can play, it is has often been omitted from conflict research (Behfar *et al.*, 2010). First, process conflict has been difficult to distinguish empirically from task conflict and is highly correlated with relationship conflict (Behfar *et al.*, 2010; Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Second, definitions used in conflict research on task and process conflict have been inconsistent (Behfar *et al.*, 2010; Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Indeed, studies that exclude process conflict tend to define task conflict as including decisions about procedures and the distribution of

resources (Pelled *et al.*, 1999; De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003), whereas studies that include process conflict clearly separate such procedural decisions from divergent thinking in task conflict (Greer *et al.*, 2008; Behfar *et al.*, 2010). In this study, task conflict consists both of procedural and divergent perspectives (see for a similar approach De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Pelled *et al.*, 1999). As such, we will concentrate on task and relationship conflict in line with other conflict research (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012).

The effect of conflict on job engagement

Many scholars hypothesized that task and relationship conflict among employees are associated with outcomes such as (dis)satisfaction and (decreased) performance (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). However, little is known about the consequences of conflict (i.e. task and relationship) on psychological outcomes (i.e. job engagement). Largely ignoring job engagement is surprising, as previous research (Halbesleben, 2010) showed positive associations between job engagement and various work outcomes, such as turnover intentions, performance and organizational commitment.

Task conflict and job engagement. In a recent meta-analytical review, De Wit *et al.* (2012) showed that empirical evidence linking task conflict to performance outcomes has been equivocal at best. On the positive side, scholars have suggested that task conflict is positively associated with performance outcomes. For example, a main benefit of task conflict is an increased understanding of a task (De Wit *et al.*, 2012; Amason, 1996). Similarly, task conflict can enhance individual creativity and problem-solving capabilities because individuals are faced with disagreements which trigger a critical reflection of their own ideas (De Wit *et al.*, 2012; Marineau, 2010). As result, individuals could perceive task conflict as a challenge stressor potentially leading to higher levels of psychologically engagement with the task (Behfar *et al.*, 2010, 2008; LePine *et al.*, 2005).

However, De Wit *et al.* (2012) also found that task conflict benefits performance outcomes only under very specific circumstances. That is, task conflict appeared to be beneficial for performance outcomes in studies conducted among top management teams rather than non-top management teams, among studies where the association between task and relationship conflict was relatively weak and in studies where performance was measured in terms of financial performance or decision quality (Kuypers *et al.*, 2013). None of these circumstances, however, apply to our context of study.

Building on the stressor–strain approach (Bliese and Jex, 2002), we suggest that task conflict is more likely to demotivate individuals, because there are apparent costs (i.e. increased cognitive load) in the process of task conflict (Marineau, 2010). Indeed, task conflict distracts individuals from actually performing the required tasks and decreases goal clarity (Jehn and Chatman, 2000; Yang and Mossholder, 2004). Relatedly, cognitive disagreement can be misattributed as personal criticism potentially decreasing motivation (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). As such, in alignment with the stressor–strain model (Bliese and Jex, 2002) and the context of this study, we suggest that task conflict will associate negatively to job engagement. Hence, we submit:

H1a. Task conflict is negatively associated with job engagement.

Relationship conflict and job engagement. Relationship conflict has generally been considered as one of the most prevalent stressor at the work having significant negative effects on performance outcomes (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). The arguments for these detrimental consequences are that relationship conflict:

- increases hostile attributions concerning each other's intentions and behaviors (Janssen *et al.*, 1999, Simons and Peterson, 2000);
- decreases cooperation between individuals (Jehn *et al.*, 2008);
- increases the stress and anxiety levels among individuals (De Wit *et al.*, 2012); and
- decreases individuals' desires to participate in meetings or other collective activities (DeChurch and Marks, 2001).

Given the strong support to the view that relationship conflict harms performance outcomes (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012), we predict that relationship conflict, such as perceived personal incompatibilities, associates negatively with job engagement.

The stressor–strain model (Bliese and Jex, 2002), provides a theoretical framework to conceptualize the negative link between relationship conflict and job engagement. Building on the stressor–strain model (Bliese and Jex, 2002), we suggest that relationship conflict is a workplace stressor most likely to demotivate individuals. Indeed, employees perceiving higher levels of relationship conflict tend to have lower levels of motivation (i.e. job engagement) because conflicts cause individuals to be negative, irritable and even resentful (Jehn, 1997; Jehn *et al.*, 2006). As a result, the experienced personal tension diminishes job engagement because of the social and psychological discomfort experienced (Casciaro and Lobo, 2008; Seo *et al.*, 2004).

Empirical evidence for the association between relationship conflict and job engagement appears to be consistent with the stressor–strain model (Bliese and Jex, 2002). For instance, in a laboratory and field study among a variety of employees from the USA and the People's Republic of China, Chen *et al.* (2011) determined that relationship conflict demotivates employees. Similarly, in a study among 30 employees, Jehn *et al.* (2006) found that relationship conflict was negatively related to motivation. In alignment with empirical findings and in alignment with the stressor–strain model (Bliese and Jex, 2002), we suggest that relationship conflict, such as perceived personal incompatibilities, will associate negatively to job engagement. Hence, we submit:

H1b. Relationship conflict is negatively associated with job engagement.

The effect of job engagement on performance
Building on the job demands–resources model (Bakker *et al.*, 2014; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), we expect that higher levels of job engagement are associated with higher levels of performance, because job engagement signifies (Bakker *et al.*, 2014):

- experiencing more positive emotions, including happiness, joy and enthusiasm;
- experiencing better psychological health;

- creating more job and personal resources; and
- transferring job engagement to others.

Many studies have supported the relationship between job engagement and performance (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). For instance, in a study among 587 US employees from a wide variety of industries and occupations, Halbesleben and Wheeler (2008) determined that higher levels of job engagement were associated with higher levels of supervisor-rated performance, because employee invested more personal resources to improve different aspects of the job. Similarly, in a study among 54 Dutch teachers, Bakker and Bal (2010) found a positive association between job engagement and job performance. Relatedly, in a study among 261 Chinese female nurses and police officers, DeChurch and Marks (2001) determined that job engagement was positively associated with both commitment and performance. Finally, in a meta-analytical review, Christian *et al.* (2011) demonstrated that employees with higher levels of job engagement were more motivated and had higher levels of task and contextual performance. In alignment with empirical findings and in alignment with the job demands–resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), we suggest that job engagement will associate positively with performance. Hence, we submit:

H2. Job engagement is positively associated with performance.

The mediating role of job engagement
Building on the above-mentioned findings on the relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and job engagement (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012), as well as the literature on job engagement and performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Halbesleben, 2010; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008; DeChurch and Marks, 2001), we propose that job engagement is a psychological mechanism that can account for the relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and performance. Specifically, job engagement can be seen as a psychological concept reflecting the levels of energy while working (i.e. vigor, dedication and absorption) (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2012; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006) and this psychological process can be influenced by workplace conflicts.

Job engagement can emerge during task interaction, as they are influenced by social interaction (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Jehn *et al.*, 2008). In this paper, we argue that the positive psychological state of job engagement is less likely to occur when individuals perceive conflict (i.e. task and relationship), because conflict is typically considered a negative social process (i.e. stressor) that decreases individual motivation (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Relatedly, negative interpersonal relationships require high costs (i.e. increased stress and anxiety levels because of perceived feelings of tension and friction (De Wit *et al.*, 2012)) adversely affecting possible instrumental benefits of social interaction (Labianca and Brass, 2006; Marineau, 2010). Similarly, the emotional and cognitive effort associated with conflict results in lower levels of job engagement, which in turn diminishes performance because conflict reduces energy that could be used to perform tasks (LePine *et al.*, 2005). Hence, conflict (i.e. task and relationship) is assumed to evoke energy-depleting processes that result in lower levels of job engagement which translate into decreased performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

In alignment with empirical findings and in alignment with the job demands–resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), we expect job engagement to explain (i.e. mediate) the relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and performance. Hence, we submit:

H3. Job engagement mediates the negative relationship between (a) task and (b) relationship conflict and performance.

The moderating role of social network quality
Given the adverse outcomes of conflict, researchers have spent a great deal of effort trying to identify factors that may buffer its effects (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Results of previous studies have already shown that personality dispositions, such as agreeableness (Ilies *et al.*, 2011) and environmental variables, e.g. task complexity (De Wit *et al.*, 2012), successfully buffer against the negative outcomes of conflict.

In the present study, we will focus on the buffering effect of social network quality (i.e. the degree of contact and accessibility of one with other team members [Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998]). We expect that the strength of the relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and job engagement differs for people who are more or less embedded – i.e. that the quality of their networks differs. Hence, we want to examine how social network quality moderates the influence of conflict (i.e. task and relationship) on performance via job engagement on the basis of social resources theory (Lin, 2002) and social embeddedness arguments (Granovetter, 1985).

Central focus of the social network perspective is the structure of social interactions in the workplace and how these structures enhances or constrains access to valued resources (Lin *et al.*, 1981; Seibert *et al.*, 2001; Sandefur and Laumann, 1998). Examining the relationship between social embeddedness and work outcomes has the advantage that these factors are more easily observable stable individual characteristics such as personality traits (Emmerik and Sanders, 2004). Resources embedded within social networks are an essential part of resources (development) in the workplace (Burt, 2000; Bolino *et al.*, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2002; Putnam, 1995). Specifically, Lin (2002) distinguished two specific aspects of social resources, i.e. instrumental and expressive social resources. Instrumental social resources arise most frequently in the workplace and involve the exchange of job-related resources including information, expertise, professional advice and material resources (Ibarra and Andrews, 1993). Expressive social resources involve the exchange of expressive ties that are characterized by high levels of closeness, trust and intimacy (Krackhardt, 1992; Ibarra and Andrews, 1993; Hayton *et al.*, 2012). Although different social resources can be distinguished conceptually, they are not independent (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Visweswaran *et al.*, 1999). For example, employees having close relationships are also more likely to provide help or advice. Similarly, the exchange of instrumental resources encourages the development of expressive social resources (Hayton *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, we argue that the combination of available instrumental and expressive social resources in the social context or the social embeddedness signifies high-quality social networks that can lessen the negative consequences of workplace conflict and can contribute to performance (Ilies *et al.*, 2011; Kahn, 1990; Seibert *et al.*, 2001). First, being socially embedded or being included in high-quality social networks may intervene between the workplace conflict (i.e. task and relationship) event and reaction by

attenuating or preventing a negative appraisal response (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Indeed, high-quality social networks are social resources from which an individual can draw strength from to cope with a situation (e.g. workplace conflict). The perception that others can and will provide instrumental or expressive resources may cause a more positive evaluation of the stressful event (i.e. workplace conflict) (Eberly *et al.*, 2011; Simons and Peterson, 2000). Second, being socially embedded or included in high-quality social network may intervene between the experience of conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and the consequent decrease in motivation by reducing or eliminating stressful reactions. Indeed, high-quality social networks may alleviate the impact of conflict by providing a solution to the conflict (i.e. instrumental resources) or by reducing emotional tensions (i.e. expressive resources).

Generally, empirical studies have found support for the core tenets of the above-mentioned buffering hypothesis of social support on stressor–strain relationships. For instance, Rispens *et al.* (2011) explored the role of relational closeness as a buffer between conflict and performance amongst 117 employees from a telecommunication company in The Netherlands. They found that the degree of relational closeness indeed buffers the negative association between conflict and performance. Specifically, these results suggest that conflict does not always have detrimental effects on performance. Similarly, in a quantitative study among 82 full-time employees from a Midwestern university, Ilies *et al.* (2011) showed that conflict was more strongly associated with negative attitudes for employees with lower levels of social resources at work.

On the basis of social resource theory (Lin, 2002) and the social embeddedness model of Granovetter (1985), we argue that high-quality social networks weaken the effects of conflict on performance, because high-quality social networks impact both the perception and reactions to workplace conflict (i.e. task and relationship). As the quality of social networks increases, employees receive increasingly high levels of expressive and instrumental support and are less likely to react personally and emotionally to conflict (Ilies *et al.*, 2011; Rispens *et al.*, 2011; Simons and Peterson, 2000). Therefore, we expect the quality of social networks to buffer against the negative effects of conflict (i.e. task and relationship) on performance:

H4. Social network quality acts as a moderator to the negative associations of (a) task and (b) relationship conflict with job engagement, such that the strength of the negative association between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and job engagement decreases when social network quality increases.

Assuming social network quality moderates the association between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and job engagement, it is also likely that social network quality will conditionally influence the strength of the indirect relationship between conflict (task and relationship) and performance – thereby demonstrating a pattern of moderated mediation between the study variables (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Thus, we submit:

H5. Social network quality will moderate the negative and indirect effect of (a) task and (b) relationship conflict on performance (through job engagement). Specifically, job engagement will mediate the indirect effect when social networks is low, but not when it is high.

Method

Sample and procedure

We collected data from 217 graduate students majoring in international business at a business school in The Netherlands. To fulfill course requirements, students were required to write a consultancy report on a topic related to the course. Each graduate student was expected to select a research problem, implement specific tools, write a report and to present their work to the class at the end of the course period. These conditions are similar to employees within organizations who are temporarily assigned to a specific issue, making it an ideal setting to test our research questions.

Data were collected in the third week of the course when the project of writing the consultancy report started. The course content did not cover issues related to any of the study variables. Questionnaires were made available to the students via an electronic learning environment. A reminder e-mail was sent to all potential respondents three days after the questionnaire was made available. Relatedly, we provided an incentive (i.e. a bonus point for their participation in class) for students to complete the questionnaire. In total, 261 questionnaires were returned (i.e. 95 per cent of the 273 students who participated in the course). Listwise deletion of respondents with missing values on the study variables reduced the number of usable observations to 217 students. From the respondents, 40 per cent were female and the average age of the individuals was 24.1 years old (SD = 2.4).

Measures

All scales were derived from previous published studies, with only minor changes of wording necessary to adjust items to the context of the study.

Relationship conflict. To measure relationship conflict, we used a three-item scale from the study by Jehn *et al.* (1999). A sample item reads "How much are personality conflicts evident in the project team?". The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = None; 5 = A lot). Cronbach's alpha for this measurement was $\alpha = 0.84$.

Task conflict. To measure task conflict, a three-item scale from the study by Jehn *et al.* (1999) was used. A sample item reads "How much conflict about the work you do is there in your project team?". The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = None; 5 = A lot). Cronbach's alpha for this measurement was $\alpha = 0.83$.

Performance. As workplace conflicts cannot easily be prevented but can easily be detrimental to the performance level of people working in teams, we asked the graduate students to assess the end result of their course work in their team. Hereto, we relied on a three-item scale from the study by Aubé and Rousseau (2005) asking about:

- if they thought that the members of this team attain their assigned performance;
- if the members of the team produced quality work; and
- if they assessed that the team had been productive.

All three items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Completely disagree; 7 = Completely agree). Cronbach's alpha for this measurement was $\alpha = 0.90$.

Job engagement. To measure job engagement, we relied on a nine-item scale from the study by Schaufeli *et al.* (2006). A sample item reads "I got carried away when I was working on the project". All items in this construct were measured on a seven point Likert scale (0 = No, completely disagree; 6 = Yes, completely agree). Schaufeli *et al.*

(2006) have argued and showed that the three job engagement dimensions can be combined in one overall score (Sonnentag, 2003). Cronbach's alpha for this measurement was $\alpha = 0.88$.

Social network quality. The quality of the social networks refers to the degree of contact and accessibility of one with other team members (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Accordingly, Chow and Chan (2008) operationalized the quality of the social networks by the following three items:

(1) "in general, I have a very good relationship with the other team members";

(2) "in general, I am very close to the other team members"; and

(3) "I always hold lengthy discussions with the other team members".

All three items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Completely disagree; 7 = Completely agree). Cronbach's alpha for this measurement was $\alpha = 0.71$.

Data analysis

We took a two-step approach to test our hypotheses (Kuypers *et al.*, 2013). First, we examined a mediation model (*H1a-H3b*). Second, we integrated the proposed moderation variable into the model and tested the conditional indirect effects (*H4a-H5b*). Prior to the analysis, we grand mean-centered the independent, mediator and moderator variables (Enders and Tofighi, 2007; Aiken and West, 1991).

H1a-H3b suggest an indirect effects model, where the relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and performance is mediated by job engagement. To test such mediation hypotheses, the multistep method by Baron and Kenny (1986) is most widely used. However, contemporary methodologists question whether it is necessary to demonstrate a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable (Shrout and Bolger, 2002; MacKinnon *et al.*, 2002). As the initial relationship itself becomes more complex (as in our case with task and relationship conflict), the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable decreases because it is affected by competing causes (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). To cope with this complexity, we followed the procedures outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test mediation. They suggested that a mediation effect can be concluded when the product of the path between the independent variable and the mediator (called *Path a*) and the path between the mediator and the dependent variable (called *Path b*) is statistically significant. This approach has been recommended over the frequently used Baron and Kenny (1986) method because it has greater power and better controls for Type I errors (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2002). Another advantage of the Preacher and Hayes (2008) approach is that it allows researchers to generate confidence intervals for indirect effects by using bootstrapping that is less influenced by sample sizes.

H4a-H5b suggest a conditional indirect effect or a moderated mediation model (Muller *et al.*, 2005). A moderated mediation occurs when the mediating process depends on the value of a moderator variable (Muller *et al.*, 2005; MacKinnon *et al.*, 2002). We tested the mediation hypothesis (Model 4) and the conditional indirect effects (Model 7) using the PROCESS application for SPSS provided by Hayes (2012). Hayes (2012) procedure includes bootstrapping and provides a method for testing the conditional indirect effects at different values of the moderator. Hence, we report confidence intervals for the predicted effects to facilitate interpretation.

Results

Table I provides an overview of the means, standard deviations and correlations for all the study variables. Inspection of the table shows that relationship conflict is negatively related to both job engagement ($r = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$) and performance ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, task conflict is negatively related performance ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.01$). Results also show that job engagement is positively related to performance ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, social networks is positively related to both performance ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and job engagement ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$), but correlated negatively to relationship conflict ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$).

Confirmatory factor analysis

To test whether the study variables exhibited sufficient convergent and discriminatory validity, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) at the individual level. Following Vandenberg and Lance (2000), we selected several fit indices to determine overall model fit. We used root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). We used a RMSEA threshold of 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Vandenberg and Lance, 2000). The thresholds for CFI and TLI were set on 0.95 following the recommendations of Vandenberg and Lance (2000). Finally, the threshold for SRMR was set on 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Vandenberg and Lance, 2000). CFA provided acceptable fit (χ^2 of 277.51 [df =176], with an RMSEA of 0.05, SRMR of 0.05, CFI of 0.95 and TLI of 0.95). Overall, we can conclude that our measures were sufficiently valid and we can be confident in using the defined scales for our analysis.

Tests for mediation

Table II presents the results of the mediation analyses for *H1a*, *H2* and *H3a*. The results support *H1a*, task conflict is significantly and negatively related with job engagement ($\beta = -0.13$, SE $= 0.08$, $p < 0.10$). Relatedly, the results also show support for *H2*, job engagement and performance, when controlling for task conflict, are positively associated ($\beta = 0.49$, SE $= 0.07$, $p < 0.00$). Task conflict and performance also appeared to be negatively related, when controlling for job engagement ($\beta = -0.29$, SE $= 0.08$, $p < 0.00$). In support of *H3a*, the bootstrap results show an indirect effect of task conflict on performance ($\beta = -0.06$, boot SE $= 0.04$, $p = [-0.45; -0.12]$).

Table III presents the results of the mediation analyses for *H1b* and *H3b*. The results support *H1b*, relationship conflict is significantly and negatively associated with job engagement ($\beta = -0.17$, SE $= 0.09$, $p < 0.05$). Continuing, the relationship between job

No.	Variable name	Mean	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Performance	5.55	0.99	1-7	–				
2.	Social network quality	4.83	0.92	1-7	0.52**	–			
3.	Relationship conflict	1.64	0.66	1-5	−0.44**	−0.17*	–		
4.	Job engagement	3.75	0.83	0-6	0.43**	0.39**	−0.14*	–	
5.	Task conflict	2.39	0.72	1-5	−0.25**	0.05	0.46**	−0.11	–

Notes: $N = 217$; $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$

Table I.
Means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables

Regression results for simple mediation				
Variable	Effect	SE	p	(95% CI)
Performance regressed on task conflict (Step 1)	−0.35	0.09	0.00***	(−0.53; −0.17)
Job engagement regressed on task conflict (Step 2)	−0.13	0.08	0.09†	(−0.28; 0.02)
Performance regressed on job engagement controlling for task conflict (Step 3)	0.49	0.07	0.00***	(0.35; 0.63)
Performance regressed on task conflict controlling for job engagement (Step 4)	−0.29	0.08	0.00***	(−0.45; −0.12)
Bootstrap results for indirect effects	Effect	SE		(95% CI)
Indirect effect of x on y	−0.06	0.04		(−0.45; −0.12)*

Table II.
Regression results for simple mediation: task conflict.

Notes: $N = 217$; *$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.001$; †$p < 0.10$; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported; bootstrap sample size = 10,000; CI = confidence interval

Regression results for simple mediation				
Variable	Effect	SE	p	(95% CI)
Performance regressed on relationship conflict (Step 1)	−0.67	0.09	0.00***	(−0.85; −0.48)
Job engagement regressed on relationship conflict (Step 2)	−0.17	0.09	0.04*	(−0.34; −0.01)
Performance regressed on job engagement controlling for relationship conflict (Step 3)	0.45	0.07	0.00***	(0.32; 0.59)
Performance regressed on relationship conflict controlling for job engagement (Step 4)	−0.59	0.09	0.00***	(−0.75; −0.42)
Bootstrap results for indirect effects	Effect	SE		(95% CI)
Indirect effect of x on y	−0.08	0.05		(−0.19; 0.01)

Table III.
Regression results for simple mediation: relationship conflict.

Notes: $N = 217$; *$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.001$; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 10,000; CI = confidence interval

engagement and performance, controlling for relationship conflict, was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.45$, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.00$). Relationship conflict and performance also appeared to be negatively related when controlling for job engagement ($\beta = -0.59$, SE = 0.09, $p < 0.00$). Results do not show support for *H3b*, the bootstrap results show an insignificant indirect effect of relationship conflict on performance [$\beta = -0.08$, boot SE = 0.05, $p = (-0.19; 0.01)$]. Overall, the results from the mediation analysis show a partial mediation of our proposed model, only finding mediation for task conflict and not for relationship conflict.

Tests for conditional indirect effects
Table IV presents the results for *H4a* and *H5a* on the indirect effect of task conflict on performance, conditional on social network quality. In *H4a*, we predicted that the negative relationship between task conflict and job engagement would be weaker for

Predictor	β	SE	p	(95% CI)	Negative effects of conflict
Job engagement					
Constant	−0.01	0.05	0.90	(−0.10; 0.09)	
Task conflict	−0.20	0.07	0.01**	(−0.34; −0.06)	
Social network quality	0.32	0.06	0.00***	(0.21; 0.43)	
Task conflict × social network quality	0.22	0.08	0.01**	(0.07; 0.38)	237
Performance					
Constant	5.55	0.06	0.00***	(5.43; 5.67)	
Job engagement	0.49	0.07	0.00***	(0.35; 0.63)	
Task conflict	−0.28	0.08	0.00***	(−0.45; −0.12)	
Conditional indirect effect job engagement	Boot indirect effect		Boot SE	Boot CI	
Mean (social networks)	−0.10		0.04	(−0.19; −0.04)*	
−1 SD (low social networks)	−0.20		0.07	(−0.36; −0.09)*	**Table IV.**
+1 SD (high social networks)	0.00		0.04	(−0.07; 0.08)	Results of multiple regression for conditional indirect effects: task conflict.

Notes: $N = 217$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 10,000; CI = confidence interval

individuals with higher-quality social networks than for individuals with lower-quality social networks. The results indicate that the cross-product term between task conflict and the quality of the social networks was significant ($\beta = 0.22$, SE $= 0.08$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, PROCESS offers quantile values for probing interactions. The main advantage is that the values are guaranteed to be within the range of the observed data (Hayes, 2012). The quantile values confirm the significant interaction between social network quality and task conflict on the 10, 25 and 50th percentile (results are available upon request from the first author).

Although these results show that the quality of the social networks interacted with task conflict (Figure 2), they do not directly assess the conditional indirect effects model (i.e. *H5a*). Therefore, we examined the conditional indirect effect of the quality of the social networks (through job engagement) at three values of social network quality [mean, 1 SD above the mean (i.e. high) and 1 SD below the mean (i.e.
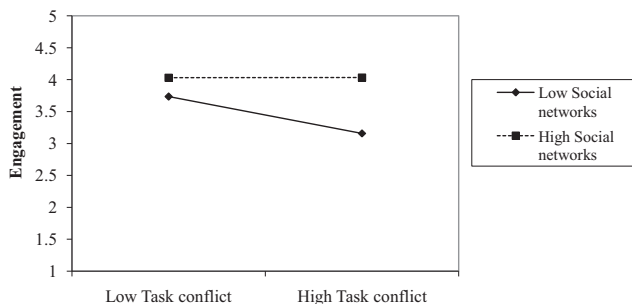

Figure 2.
Job engagement predicted by task conflict moderated by quality of the social network

low)]. The results for task conflict shown in Table IV values for low and mean level social network quality, with bootstrapped 95 per cent confidence intervals around the indirect effect of conflict on performance not containing zero (low = [−0.36; −0.09] and mean = [−0.19; −0.04]). Thus, *H5a* is supported, such that the indirect and negative effect of conflict on performance through job engagement is observed when levels of social network quality are moderate to low, but not when social network quality is high.

Table V presents the results for *H4b* and *H5b* on the indirect effect of relationship conflict on performance, conditional on social network quality. We predicted that the negative relationship between relationship conflict and job engagement would be weaker for individuals with higher-quality social networks than for individuals with lower-quality social networks. The results indicate that the cross-product term between relationship conflict and the quality of social networks was significant ($\beta =$ 0.23, SE = 0.08, $p < 0.01$). Hence, *H4b* was supported. Additionally, the quantile values confirm the significant interaction between social network quality and task conflict on the 10th and 25th percentile (results are available upon request from the first author).

Although these results show that the quality of the social networks interacted with relationship conflict (Figure 3), they do not directly assess the conditional indirect effects model (i.e. *H5b*). Therefore, we examined the conditional indirect effect of the quality of the social networks (through job engagement) at three values of social network quality (Mean, 1 SD above the Mean [i.e. high] and 1 SD below the Mean [i.e. low]). The results in Table V only indicated a significant interval for low levels of social network quality (low = [−0.21; −0.03]). Thus, *H5b* is supported,

Predictor	β	SE	P	(95% CI)
Job engagement				
Constant	0.02	0.05	0.66	(−0.08; 0.12)
Relationship conflict	−0.04	0.08	0.60	(−0.20; 0.11)
Social network quality	0.28	0.06	0.00***	(0.16; 0.39)
Relationship conflict * social network quality	0.23	0.08	0.01**	(0.08; 0.36)
Performance				
Constant	5.55	0.06	0.00	(5.44; 5.66)
Job engagement	0.46	0.07	0.00***	(0.32; 0.59)
Relationship conflict	−0.59	0.08	0.00***	(−0.75; −0.42)

Conditional indirect effect job engagement	Boot indirect effect	Boot SE	Boot CI
Mean (social networks)	−0.19	0.03	(−0.09; 0.04)
−1 SD (low social networks)	−0.11	0.05	(−0.21; −0.03)*
+1 SD (high social networks)	0.08	0.05	(−0.01; 0.19)

Notes: $N = 217$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 10,000; CI = confidence interval

Table V.
Results of multiple regression for conditional indirect effects: relationship conflict.

such that the indirect and negative effect of conflict on performance through job engagement is observed when levels of social network quality are low, but not when social network quality is moderate or high.

Discussion

Workplace conflicts cannot easily be prevented but can easily be detrimental to the performance level of people working in teams (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Past research, however, has not paid much attention as to how the negative relationship between conflict and performance can be reduced by the social context (Berscheid, 1999; Dutton and Ragins, 2007). The current study was conducted to fill this gap and to examine whether this negative relationship can be mitigated by being socially embedded or the quality of the social network. The results of this study show that social network quality indeed buffers the association between both task and relationship conflict and ultimate performance in the team of graduate students. Specifically, we found that the negative relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and performance became non-significant for employees who have access to higher-quality social networks. Rather, conflict (i.e. task and relationship) was only negatively related to performance for employees who do not have access to high-quality social networks. In line with past research, these findings suggest that conflict is not always associated with lower performance, rather this is only likely for employees who do not have access to high-quality social networks (Ilies *et al.*, 2011; Rispens *et al.*, 2011).

Another contribution of the current study is that we investigated whether job engagement mediated the relationship between conflict and performance. Until now, only a few studies have investigated the underlying mechanisms in the relationship between conflict and performance (see for an exception Jehn *et al.*, 2008; Tekleab *et al.*, 2009). As expected, we found that job engagement mediated the relationship between task conflict and performance. This finding suggests that when employees experience or perceive task conflict, employees are less engaged with their work because they experience their working environment as unpleasant. Indeed, task conflict disrupts the established working norms and increases feelings of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty diminishing job engagement (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). The same, however, cannot be said for relationship conflict, as findings do not
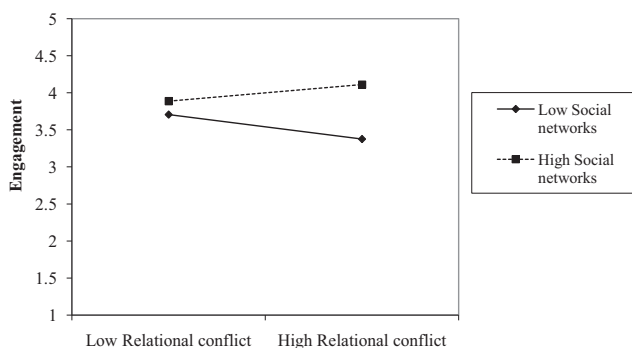

Figure 3.
Job engagement
predicted by
relationship conflict
moderated by quality
of the social network

show the expected mediation. One possible explanation may be that relationship conflict, in comparison to task conflict, progresses in a different trajectory over the duration of a project. This idea is consistent with the previous research indicating that relationship conflict may be low at the beginning of a project but intensifies over time (Jehn and Mannix, 2001).

Theoretical implications
Our research has several theoretical implications. First, growing evidence supports the idea that under appropriate conditions, conflict can yield important benefits (De Wit *et al.*, 2012). Following up on this argument, we examined social network quality as a moderating variable and argued that meaningful relationships at work can create a social context in which employees perceive conflict more positively. In contrary to the expectations of Cohen and Wills (1985), these findings show that social networks do provide additional insights and do not only provide descriptive information about relationships at work. We hope our findings inspire other scholars to build and test models investigating the role of meaningful relationships at work.

Second, despite the recent positive psychology movement (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the majority of scholars still emphasize what is wrong with people ignoring the potential for development hidden in each employee (Luthans, 2002). Building on Bakker and Schaufeli's (2008) initial attempts to study positive organizational behavior, this paper intended to understand the interpersonal mechanisms responsible for job engagement and performance. We found that job engagement does mediate the relationship between task conflict and performance. Hence, this study demonstrated the value of looking at more positive motivational concepts to understand underlying theoretical mechanisms.

Third, although social relationships have been known to influence job engagement, the work design literature has paid relatively little attention to social relationships (Kilduff and Brass, 2010b). This research has made some steps in narrowing this knowledge gap.

Practical implications
Commonly it is argued that workplace conflict is detrimental to performance (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit *et al.*, 2012). In contrary, our findings suggest that conflict is less likely to decrease performance if employees have access to meaningful relationships at work. Given that employees are interdependent and coworkers are likely to differ in their personal values and opinions; it is unlikely for managers to avoid conflict (Rispens *et al.*, 2011). Instead, it is more likely that managers can facilitate the development of meaningful relationships at work which are more resilient against workplace conflict. There are several possible ways for HR managers to facilitate the development of meaningful relationships at work. First, HR managers could be more selective during the hiring and selection period of new employees. Indeed, how an organization recruits and selects its future employees already shapes the beliefs of how these employees should interact in an organization (Baker and Dutton, 2007). HR managers could use those selection criteria that emphasize interpersonal skills (e.g. team-building competences, communication skills or conflict management capabilities). Second, at the moment a new employee enters the organization, HR managers could implement mentoring

programs in which new and senior employees have more opportunities to build meaningful relationships with each other (Cross and Parker, 2004). Third, HR managers can also implement reward systems which stimulate the development of relational skills or use group incentives. These reward systems can be informal (e.g. praise or on-the-spot recognition) or formal (requiring a more explicit monitoring and measurement system) (Baker and Dutton, 2007). Finally, HR managers or supervisors can organize events where employees can meaningfully interact (Rispens *et al.*, 2011).

Limitations and future research
Although this study has a number of strengths, certain limitations must also be noted.

First, the sample of this study is exclusively composed of graduate students. Hence, it remains to be examined to what extent our findings generalize to employees in organizations. However, in many aspects, the conditions under which the students worked together to achieve their goals (e.g. the extent of autonomy and how much task interdependence) may well be similar to employees in organizations who are temporarily assigned to address a specific issues. Second, resting on students' perceptions for all of the variables used in our model, suggesting a potential source of common-method bias. However, we followed the recommendations (e.g. instructing participants that there are no right or wrong answers and protecting participants' anonymity) for questionnaire design suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2012) to diminish the possibility of common method variance. Further, for this type of research – studying how students experience their teamwork – it is imperative that "it is all in the eye of the beholder". Future studies may use various more advanced design strategies to avoid common method issues while testing the proposed relationships. Third, our study relied on a cross-sectional survey design. The implication of this is that we cannot make any definite inferences about causal relationships. To allow for causal conclusions, future research is needed to test our model in a longitudinal design. Time-lagged studies will be needed to investigate causal relationships between relational or interactional characteristics of work and employees' outcomes (Kwon and Adler, 2014).

Finally, more empirical research is needed on the measurement of social networks. We focused rather globally on the quality of the social networks within a team, but it would beneficial to study the configuration of the network structures more in detail (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Ng and Feldman, 2010). Indeed, it is important for researchers to pay greater attention to the more specific types of social ties of employees by distinguishing between, for example, instrumental and expressive ties (Umphress *et al.*, 2003). It is possible that differences exist between conflict and structural features of different types of networks.

Conclusion
In this article, we built and tested a moderated mediation model to examine the relationship between workplace conflict and performance, and the buffering role of social network quality in this relationship. We found that the negative relationship between conflict (i.e. task and relationship) and performance became non-significant for employees who have access to high-quality social networks. Indeed, workplace conflict is less likely to decrease performance if employees have access to

meaningful relationships at work. Given that employees are interdependent and coworkers are likely to differ in their personal values and opinions, we conclude that managers should facilitate the development of meaningful relationships at work which are more resilient against negative employee behavior. We hope other scholars find our results that much compelling that they will continue this (important) line of research.

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