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## PERFORMANCE AND SATISFACTION IN CONFLICTED INTERDEPENDENT GROUPS: WHEN AND HOW DOES SELF-ESTEEM MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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**Drawing upon behavioral plasticity arguments, we posited that self-esteem is an important factor explaining the effects of two group characteristics, relationship conflict and task interdependence, on group members' performance and satisfaction. Results based on data from a sample of individuals working in classroom groups over a four-month period showed that when task interdependence was high, low self-esteem attenuated the negative relationship between relationship conflict and peer evaluations and exacerbated the positive relationship between relationship conflict and absenteeism.**

Researchers have been interested in the characteristics, structures, and processes that may enhance the performance of groups for several decades (e.g., Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Gladstein, 1984). Research has demonstrated that the level of personal disagreement or relationship conflict in a group (e.g., Jehn, 1995, 1997) and the extent of work's relatedness, or task interdependence, in the group (e.g., Wageman, 1995) have important implications for group functioning. Relationship conflict is consistently and negatively related to the performance and satisfaction of group members, and high interdependence may intensify these negative effects (Jehn, 1995). In recent years, investigators have further argued that these issues should be considered in the context of the attitudes and personalities of group members (e.g., Wageman, 1995; Wagner, 1995), noting that the *congruence* between group members' individual differences and design or process characteristics may be more explanatory than any one particular factor alone. The studies containing these ideas have often been based on the premise that individual differences are activated, or exhibit their influence, only in certain situations.

Here, we argue that self-esteem (SE) is an important factor in the effects of group characteristics such as relationship conflict and task interdependence

on outcomes. In particular, research in the area of behavioral plasticity has indicated that individuals with high and low self-esteem (henceforth, high-SE and low-SE people, or high SEs and low SEs) differ in their reactions to situational cues such as conflict, negative feedback, and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Brockner, 1988). Drawing on behavioral plasticity theory and following Brockner's (1988) suggestion that SE be embedded into existing organizational and group theory, we developed predictions concerning how SE interacts with relationship conflict and task interdependence to affect the satisfaction and performance of group members.

The general focus on group-level performance variables in the group literature (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996) means that far less attention has been paid to the prediction of individual-level performance outcomes in group contexts. This state of affairs leaves a critical gap, the identification of the factors that relate to individual satisfaction and performance levels in group contexts. The assessment of group effectiveness should not be de-emphasized, but the use of groups also has important implications for individual group member outcomes, themes that are underdeveloped in the literature. We construe individual performance as an amalgam of distinct dimensions—performance evaluation by peers, group member satisfaction, and absenteeism.

*Peer evaluations* are evaluations of individual effectiveness or performance in a group made by other group members (Mello, 1993). Peer evaluations are increasingly used, since "when it comes to team-based work situations, peers may be the only

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ones who can provide relevant information on an employee's contributions to group outcomes" (Fedor, Bettenhausen, & Davis, 1999: 93). Much conceptualizing has been devoted to the idea that designing work in groups has important implications for satisfaction levels (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993), and hence we focused on *group-member satisfaction* as an outcome in this context. Finally, we examined *absenteeism*, which has a rich history of study in the general organizational literature (Mitra, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1992) but has more rarely been studied in the group context. Following Wagner (1995), we conceptualized this study and measured all variables at the level of the individual, although the context of the theoretical predictions is the work group. In the following sections, we (1) review the literature on relationship conflict and task interdependence in groups, (2) integrate research on SE into the group context, and (3) derive predictions about interactions among these three key independent variables and the outcomes.

## BACKGROUND AND THEORY

### Relationship Conflict and Task Interdependence

Relationship conflict is defined as interpersonal incompatibilities, tension, animosity, annoyance, and bickering among group members (Jehn, 1995). Although task conflict may be beneficial in some circumstances, no evidence to date supports a positive relationship of any kind between relationship conflict and satisfaction or performance (Jehn, 1997). Interpersonal conflict reduces performance by directing attention away from tasks, by diminishing the ability of group members to process new information, and by making group members less receptive to the ideas of their peers (Baron, 1991; Jehn, 1995). Moreover, relationship conflict diminishes group member satisfaction by increasing the frequency of threats, decreasing goodwill, and creating uneasiness in a group (Ross, 1989).

Task interdependence, or the degree to which group members must rely on one another to complete their work (Van de Ven, Delbecq, & Koenig, 1976), is an often-studied variable in the group literature. Although sometimes argued to have positive, direct effects on group-related outcomes (Campion et al., 1993), negative relationships between task interdependence and performance and satisfaction have also been reported (e.g., Brass, 1985). Task interdependence is generally seen as a contingency variable, exacerbating or attenuating the effects of other factors on outcomes. As Wageman and Baker noted, "There are many potential benefits of interdependent tasks, but the benefits of

an interdependent work design do not come automatically" (1997: 141). Recent evidence, for example, suggests that the impact of relationship conflict on group-related outcomes may be exacerbated when group members must work closely together in order to be successful (e.g., Gladstein, 1984). Conversely, "interpersonal problems will not be as detrimental" (Jehn, 1995: 262) when tasks are relatively independent. Many of the theoretical positions used to justify these relationships, including reactions to negative events, social cues, and behavioral changes, overlap to a great extent with arguments presented in research on self-esteem. The literature should benefit, then, from the simultaneous consideration of relationship conflict, task interdependence, and self-esteem in the group context.

### The Role of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is defined as the evaluation an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to him- or herself (Coopersmith, 1967). These self-assessments may be positive or negative and will vary in intensity with the person's evaluation of self-worth. Direct relationships between SE and work-related outcomes are inconsistent (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), but considerable evidence suggests that self-esteem may be an important individual difference moderator of the relationship between job characteristics and employee outcomes (e.g., Pierce, Gardner, Dunham, & Cummings, 1993), as well as of the group process-group outcomes relationship (e.g., Mossholder, Bedeian, & Armenakis, 1982). These findings show that individuals low in SE may be more "reactive" or "behaviorally plastic" than those high in self-esteem, and hence, the former may be more likely to be affected by contingencies in the external work environment.

Developed by Brockner (1988) as a response to the inconsistent research findings on direct effects between SE and outcomes, behavioral plasticity refers to "the extent to which individuals' actions are susceptible to influence by external and, particularly, social cues" (Brockner, 1988: 27). In particular, Brockner cited three theoretical reasons why low-SE individuals are more easily influenced, or more plastic, than their high-SE counterparts. Low-SEs are more likely to be uncertain about the correctness of their thoughts and actions and thus will rely on social cues to guide them (e.g., Festinger, 1957). Low SEs also have a higher need for approval from others than do high SEs, so they engage in self-presentation strategies like going along with, or being influenced by, the attitudes and behaviors

of others (Brockner, 1988). Finally, low-SE individuals are more susceptible to negative feedback and are more likely to believe that the feedback is valid or self-diagnostic than are high-SE people. A considerable amount of research has examined a variety of social influences, cues, and opportunities for feedback that occur in the group context (e.g., Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991). Thus, given the salience of social (external) cues in groups, they appeared to provide an ideal setting for studying the moderating role of SE.

### The Present Study

A natural extension of the two lines of research presented above is to consider whether self-esteem simultaneously interacts with relationship conflict and task interdependence in predicting outcomes. In particular, we examine this potential three-way interaction as predicting three important individual performance outcomes in group contexts: (1) peer evaluations of performance, (2) group member satisfaction, and (3) absenteeism. Theoretical predictions for each of these outcomes are outlined below.

**Peer evaluations.** At first glance, a theoretical justification for a direct relationship between SE and peer evaluation may seem apparent. On the one hand, people with high self-esteem are more confident in social situations, have higher expectations for their success, and have higher attentional focus than low SEs (Brockner, 1988), characteristics that would seem to engender success in groups and, consequently, high levels of peer-rated performance. But these arguments are counteracted by arguments that low SEs are more willing to see the value in others' opinions and to change their own opinions in the face of contradictory evidence; in addition, low SEs strongly value positive evaluations of their own performance. These contradictory, but plausible, arguments for direct effects are consistent with Brockner's (1988) conclusion that empirical evidence tying SE to performance is weak and inconsistent and that the effects of SE on performance are likely to be most noticeable in plasticity-eliciting contexts.

One such context is groups characterized by high levels of relationship conflict and task interdependence. Clearly, high conflict-high interdependence groups are fraught with a variety of social cues owing to increased interpersonal demands (Jehn, 1995). High individual performance in such circumstances involves not only making high-quality contributions to group tasks, but also having the ability to consider the appropriateness of one's own contributions, to see the value in the differing opin-

ions of group members, and to adjust one's own thinking toward group consensus. We propose, then, that the performance of high-SE individuals in these situations is likely to suffer more than that of low-SE people. High SEs are generally convinced of their own correctness and are unlikely to view negative social cues (a high amount of relationship conflict) as self-diagnostic. Thus, they are unlikely to change their own opinions in conflict situations, to see the value in others' opinions, to conform to group expectations, or to change their attitudes and behaviors simply to gain approval from other group members. Research on high SEs suggests that they may stubbornly hold onto their ideas in the face of contradictory evidence (Brockner, 1988), behavior that is unlikely to "win points" from other group members or to contribute to the success of a group.

In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem are more self-diagnostic in negative situations like high group conflict and tend to conform to others' expectations and react to social cues. Moreover, given that low SEs "may be especially dependent upon others to provide them with positive evaluations" (Brockner, 1988: 29), is it likely that low SEs will be more likely than their high-SE counterparts to alter their behavior in high conflict-high interdependence contexts in order to gain approval from other group members. Although behavioral malleability could be negatively construed, similar behaviors are often emphasized as strengths in the conflict management and resolution literature. Several authors have noted the effectiveness of open-mindedness and adaptability in situations in which interpersonal conflicts are the norm (e.g., Thomas, 1992). Thus, in groups characterized by highly interdependent tasks, intense relationship conflict is predicted to affect the peer evaluations of high-SE individuals more negatively than the peer evaluations of low-SE individuals. Stated formally:

*Hypothesis 1. When task interdependence is high, the negative association between relationship conflict and peer evaluations will be significantly stronger among group members with high self-esteem than among group members with low self-esteem.*

**Group member satisfaction.** Consistent with the plasticity notion, there is considerable evidence to suggest that high and low SEs differ in their attitudinal reactivity to negative feedback and to their environments (Brockner, 1988). Most closely related to the arguments presented here are the findings of Mossholder and colleagues (1982), who found that support from group members had stronger beneficial effects on job-related tension and job attitudes for low SEs than for high SEs, who tended

not to be as attitudinally responsive to their work group environments. In this case, high levels of relationship conflict and task interdependence are more likely to adversely affect the satisfaction of low SEs than of high SEs. Drawing again on Brockner (1988), we suggest that low-SE individuals are more likely to view relationship conflict as a reflection of their own self-worth and to consider the problem their fault. Although relationship conflict in a group may not be directly aimed at a particular low-SE individual, people with low self-esteem tend to overgeneralize and apply negative social cues in a broad, introspective pattern (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). Working on highly interdependent tasks in a group replete with cues they believe indicate personal failings would likely not be a satisfying group situation for low-SE individuals. High SEs, on the other hand, are not as cognizant of negative social cues and will not be as adversely affected by having to perform highly linked tasks in a group characterized by high relationship conflict. Thus, we expected the focal situational context—high relationship conflict and high task interdependence—to elicit attitudinal plasticity among low-SE individuals, with the negative relationship between relationship conflict and satisfaction exacerbated by high task interdependence and further moderated by self-esteem. Thus:

*Hypothesis 2. When task interdependence is high, the negative association between relationship conflict and group member satisfaction will be significantly stronger among group members with low self-esteem than among group members with high self-esteem.*

**Absenteeism.** Studies of absenteeism in group contexts generally concern the importance of work groups' norms or cultures (e.g., Markham & McKee, 1995) in the prediction of both individual and group-level absenteeism. Few studies have examined the dynamics of self-esteem and absenteeism (Brockner, 1988), but plasticity theory also gives an indication of SE's role in facilitating the prediction of absenteeism in high conflict-high task interdependence situations. In particular, the plasticity hypothesis lends itself to the prediction that the positive relationship between relationship conflict and absenteeism when task interdependence is high will be stronger among low SEs. For example, Brockner, Derr, and Laing (1987) found low SEs, when severely criticized, were more likely to exhibit mild withdrawal behavior than high SEs. As noted earlier, high-SE individuals are more likely to make external attributions regarding negative situations (e.g., Adler, 1980) and consequently would be less likely to feel a need to withdraw from a high

conflict-high task interdependence situation. Extending these ideas to the present study, we posited that high task interdependence and high relationship conflict will elicit behavioral plasticity among low SEs; thus, the association between relationship conflict and absenteeism will be more strongly positive among low SEs than among high SEs when task interdependence is high. Formally stated:

*Hypothesis 3. When task interdependence is high, the positive association between relationship conflict and absenteeism will be significantly stronger among group members with low self-esteem than among group members with high self-esteem.*

## METHODS

### Sample

Respondents were 566 upper-division undergraduate students enrolled in business administration courses at a large university in the southern United States. Eleven instructors teaching a total of 17 classes were contacted prior to the term and granted us permission to solicit participation from the students in their classes. The students, who were guaranteed confidentiality and assured that participation was voluntary, signed waivers allowing supplemental information to be collected from the instructors of the courses, as needed. Data were collected at three points during the term—during the first week of class and before groups began to interact and complete projects (time 1), at midterm (time 2, 8 weeks following the time 1 data collection), and just prior to final examinations (time 3, 8 weeks after time 2 and 16 weeks after time 1). Control variables and self-esteem measures were collected at time 1, task interdependence and relationship conflict measures at time 2, and measures of group member satisfaction and absenteeism at time 3. Following the term, peer evaluations were collected from course instructors for those students who signed waivers. The average age of respondents was 22 years, and 39 percent were women.

To more closely approximate actual work groups, we applied two primary criteria for inclusion of a particular class in the study: (1) the instructor required groups to complete several projects or assignments and (2) groups remained intact throughout the term. A member of the research team discussed a class's format with each instructor prior to the term to determine its eligibility. In each of the classes involved, the instructor required groups to work on projects, such as textbook cases and exercises, group quizzes, and written term projects, both during and outside of class through-

out the term. As a check, respondents were asked at time 3 to estimate the amount of time that group members spent per week working on group projects outside of class. The mean time was 2.27 hours outside of class each week, a total of about 36 hours in addition to in-class group work. Groups' sizes ranged from 3 to 7 members, with a mean of 4.77 (s.d. = 1.07).

## Measures

**Independent variables.** *Task interdependence* was measured with a four-item scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ) adapted from Campion et al. (1993). A sample item is "I can't accomplish my tasks without information from other team members." *Relationship conflict* was measured with the four-item internal fragmentation scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) from Cammann, Jenkins, Fichman, and Klesh (1983). A sample item is "There is constant bickering in this team." *Self-esteem* was assessed with Rosenberg's (1965) ten-item measure ( $\alpha = .84$ ). A sample item is "I feel I have a number of good qualities." Items in these scales were presented with seven Likert-type response options.

**Dependent variables.** *Peer evaluations* were collected from course instructors following the term for each individual who had signed a waiver. Participants in 12 of the 17 classes were required by their instructors to evaluate the performance of each of their groups' members during the final week of the term. The wording of the peer evaluation measure differed somewhat by class, but each evaluation concerned the quality of group members' contributions to group projects. A sample is "Allocate up to 100 points to each of your group members based on their performance on your group's assignments during the semester." The average evaluation for each individual (total peer evaluation points received divided by the number of evaluating group members) was divided by the maximum number of points possible for that particular class (for instance, 100, using the previous example). The resulting variable for each individual is the percentage of the total possible peer evaluation points that he or she received. Following previous researchers (e.g., LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), we assessed interrater agreement with the  $r_{wg(j)}$  technique (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). In this case, however, the assessment is the level of within-group agreement of the peer evaluation score for each referent, and the group is the unique group of raters for each referent, not the actual working group itself. Since the groups (and hence, the cadre of raters) varied in size, separate equations were calculated for each group size. These

estimates yielded excellent indicators of peer evaluation reliability ( $\bar{r}_{wg(j)} = .90$ ).

*Group-member satisfaction* was measured with a three-item scale ( $\alpha = .78$ ) with seven Likert-type response options adapted from the global or facet-free job satisfaction scale (Cammann et al., 1983) at time 3. A sample item is "All in all, I am satisfied with my team." *Absenteeism* was defined as the number of days absent from class during the term, as reported by the respondents. An archival measure of days absent was not available since instructors generally did not take daily attendance. All course instructors required groups to complete assignments, coordinate activities, and interact during class time, and some group work was usually required during each class period.

**Control variables.** *Age* and *gender* (women = 0, men = 1) were included since they may be related to group work preferences and satisfaction (e.g., Mason, 1995). *Class standing* (sophomore = 1, junior = 2, senior = 3), cumulative grade point average (*GPA*), and grade expectations were included as controls for gross ability and effort levels and since they may be related to peer evaluations (Wagner, 1995). *Grade expectation* was measured by asking respondents, at time 1, what grade they were going to "shoot for" for the class. (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1). Finally, *group size* affects work coordination and distribution (Gladstein, 1984) and may influence peer evaluations and therefore was controlled. Information on group size was collected from course instructors following the term.

## RESULTS

### Bias and Measurement Checks

The unfolding, longitudinal nature of our study, the collection of data from two separate sources, and the use of three separate dependent variables resulted in different sample sizes across our regression analyses and the potential for sample composition biases. We addressed this issue first by deleting individuals for whom complete information was available in the group member satisfaction analysis, but not in the peer evaluation or absenteeism equations, from the regression analyses. The group member satisfaction results using the reduced sample size were substantively identical to the reported results. Second, we used the set of control variables (essentially a demographic profile) to compare participants whose cases appeared in the analyses with those who were dropped from one or more of the analyses because of missing data. Following Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, and Gupta (1998), we ran three logistic regression analyses to

test for differences on the control variables (age, gender, class standing, GPA, grade expectation, and group size) between surviving and nonsurviving cases. For example, the dependent variable was coded 1 if the case appeared in the peer evaluation equation ( $n = 275$ ) and 0 if not ( $n = 291$ ; original sample minus 275). This procedure was repeated for the analysis samples of the other dependent variables. None of the independent variables was significant in any equation, and thus there appeared to be no systematic differences between retained and deleted cases.

Group functioning or interactions (relationship conflict and task interdependence) were measured at the individual level as perceptions of the functioning of a group. It is possible, however, for different individuals in the same group to perceive the level of relationship conflict or task interdependence very differently. Establishing that group members had similar views regarding group processes would more fully substantiate that these perceptions reflected the actual situational characteristics of the group. We calculated the amount of within-group interrater agreement ( $r_{wg(j)}$ ) for the relationship conflict and task interdependence measures. These estimates provide strong evidence that individual perceptions of relationship conflict and task interdependence were shared among group members ( $\bar{r}_{wg(j)} = .91$  for relationship conflict;  $\bar{r}_{wg(j)} = .92$  for task interdependence).

The validity of our dependent variables, peer evaluations in particular, is also open to question. We could not directly assess the convergent valid-

ity of this measure, but other measures of academic ability and performance were available for analyses; these tests strengthened our confidence in the measure. As Table 1 shows, peer evaluation was strongly associated with a proxy for ability (GPA;  $r = .26, p < .01$ ) and negatively related to absenteeism ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ). Individual exam scores (also collected from instructors following the term) were also strongly related to the peer evaluation measure ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ).

### Regression Results

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for, and correlations among, all variables in the study. Reliability estimates are shown on the main diagonal of Table 1 where appropriate. We computed regression equations (shown in Table 2) by entering control variables in the first step; task interdependence, relationship conflict, and SE in step 2; the set of two-way interactions in step 3; and the three-way interaction in the final step. Standardized regression coefficients and changes in explained variance were examined.

**Peer evaluations.** The final step in the regression shows that the three-way interaction among task interdependence, relationship conflict, and SE is significantly associated with peer evaluations ( $\beta = -.14, \Delta R^2 = .02, p < .05$ ). The plotted interaction, split into 2 two-way interactions by low and high task interdependence, is shown in Figure 1. When task interdependence is low (the left panel of Figure 1), there is a positive, but not significant,

TABLE 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations<sup>a</sup>

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Control														
1. Age	21.86	3.95												
2. Gender	0.39	0.49	.40											
3. Standing	3.19	0.83	.23**	-.08										
4. GPA	2.88	0.52	-.01	.23**	-.13**									
5. Grade expectation	3.64	0.55	.05	.12**	.02	.27**								
6. Group size	4.77	1.07	.05	.03	.15	-.05	.10*							
Independent														
7. Task interdependence	4.37	1.05	.03	.03	.06	.01	.03	.03	(.70)					
8. Relationship conflict	2.55	1.15	.02	-.13**	.03	-.01	-.01	.10*	-.02	(.77)				
9. Self-esteem	5.57	0.87	.04	-.12**	.10	-.07	.11**	.04	.01	-.05	(.84)			
Dependent														
10. Peer evaluation	0.87	0.16	.06	.13**	.06	.26**	.12*	.12*	-.01	-.18**	-.01			
11. Group-member satisfaction	5.43	1.52	-.03	.08	.04	-.11**	-.02	.12**	.10*	-.50**	.05	.11*	(.78)	
12. Absenteeism	2.21	2.38	.02	-.09	.08	-.17*	-.04	-.13*	.01	.09	.07	-.19**	-.14**	

<sup>a</sup> Coefficient alpha reliabilities are reported on the main diagonal where appropriate. Range of  $n$ 's is 288-371.

\*  $p < .01$

\*\*  $p < .05$

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1582 x 18

TABLE 2  
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses<sup>a</sup>

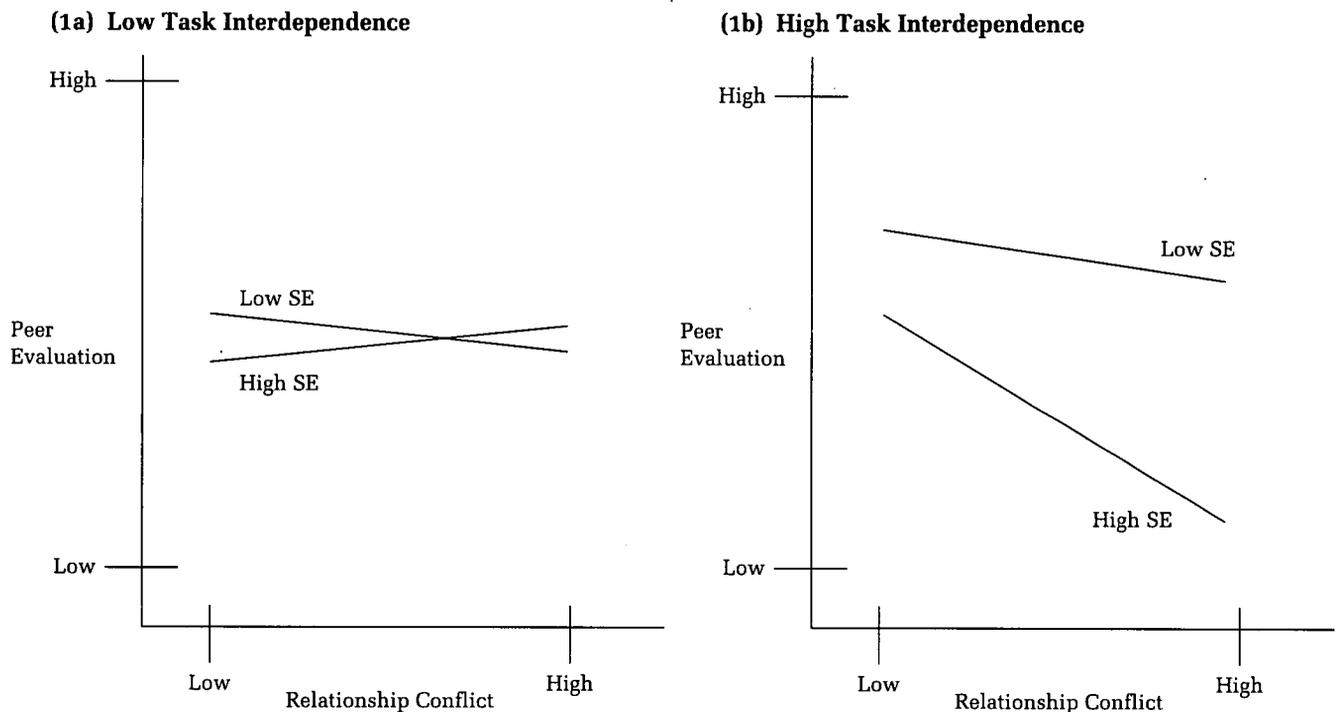
Variable	Peer Evaluation				Group Member Satisfaction				Absenteeism			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control												
Age	.01	.00	-.01	-.01	-.05	-.07*	-.06	-.06	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.02
Gender	.15*	.10	.10	.10	.01	-.07*	-.06	-.06	-.01	-.01	-.01	.01
Standing	.15*	.15*	.15*	.16**	-.01	.00	.01	.01	.08	.08	.08	.09
GPA	.17*	.17**	.18**	.19**	-.09	-.05	-.06	-.06	-.16*	-.16*	-.16*	-.15*
Grade expectation	.07	.09	.08	.09	.01	-.01	-.03	-.03	.04	.05	.04	.03
Group size	.06	.06	.07	.07	.13*	.17**	.16**	.16**	-.21**	-.22**	-.22**	-.22**
Independent												
Task interdependence		.06	.05	.04		.12*	.14**	.14**		-.05	-.05	-.06
Relationship conflict		-.16**	-.15**	-.13*		-.51**	-.51**	-.51**		.14*	.14*	.15*
Self-esteem		-.14*	-.14*	-.14*		-.02	.01	.00		.02	.02	.01
Interactions												
Self-esteem × relationship conflict		-.02	-.02	-.04		.10*	.10*	.09		.00	.00	-.04
Self-esteem × task interdependence		-.08	-.08	-.11		-.06	-.06	-.06		-.04	-.04	-.10
Task interdependence × relationship conflict		-.11	-.11	-.08		.09	.09	.09		-.02	-.02	.02
Self-esteem × relationship conflict × task interdependence				-.14*				-.01				-.18**
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.10**	.14**	.15**	.17**	.03	.30**	.32**	.32**	.07**	.09**	.09*	.12**
ΔR <sup>2</sup> block	.10**	.04**	.01	.02*	.03	.27**	.02*	.00	.07**	.02	.00	.03**

<sup>a</sup> For peer evaluation,  $n = 275$ ; for group-member satisfaction,  $n = 362$ ; for absenteeism,  $n = 259$ . Standardized regression coefficients are shown.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

FIGURE 1  
Three-Way Interaction Predicting Peer Evaluation



relationship between conflict and peer evaluation for high-SE individuals, and there is a nonsignificant, negative relationship among low SEs. Supporting Hypothesis 1, when task interdependence is high (right panel of Figure 1), the relationship between relationship conflict and peer performance evaluations is significantly negative among high SEs, but the relationship is not significant among low SEs.

**Group member satisfaction.** The three-way interaction step is not significant in the group member satisfaction equation; therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not supported. The two-way step did significantly contribute to explained variance, although only the interaction between self-esteem and relationship conflict is significant ( $\beta = .10, p < .05$ ). This interaction conformed to a typical plasticity effect; the association between relationship conflict and satisfaction is significantly negative among low SEs, but the negative relationship is not significant among high SEs.

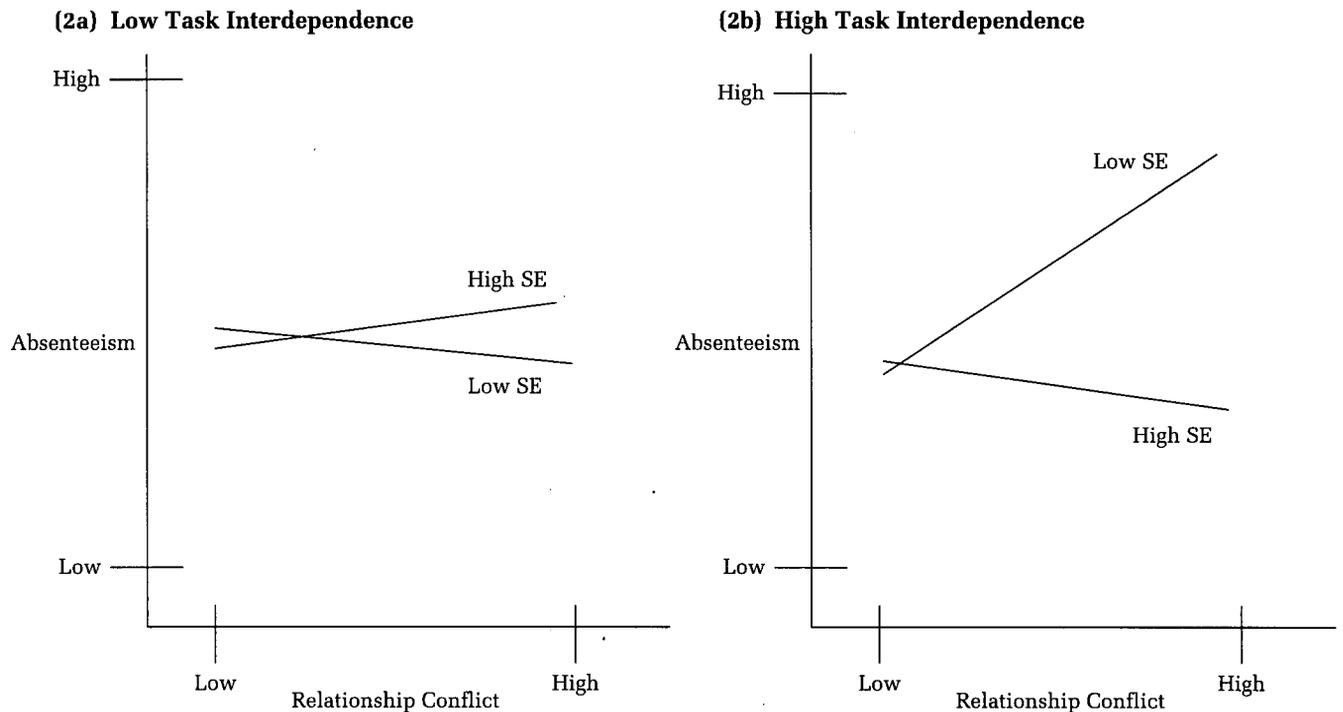
**Absenteeism.** The three-way interaction is a significant predictor of absenteeism ( $\beta = -.18, \Delta R^2 = .03, p < .01$ ). The plotted interaction (Figure 2) shows that when task interdependence is low, there is a marginally significant, positive relationship between relationship conflict and absenteeism among high SEs, but absence levels among low SEs are nearly constant across levels of conflict. A reversed and exacerbated pattern appears in the right

panel (high task interdependence). In support of Hypothesis 3, relationship conflict and absenteeism are significantly and positively related among low SEs when task interdependence is high, but the association (slightly negative) is not significant among high SEs.

## DISCUSSION

This study suggests that the interrelation of relationship conflict and task interdependence in predicting outcomes in a group context operates differently depending on the SE level of group members. The findings are consistent with Brockner's (1988) observation that the effects of self-esteem are generally found in complex plasticity-eliciting contexts. The results point to the complexities in personality research in that the person, the situation, and the *type of performance* count (Somers & Birnbaum, 1998). Prior research confirms that people with low self-esteem do not perform poorly because they lack the ability to perform well, but rather because they often experience a performance-weakening cycle of deflating cognitive processes in difficult situations (Brockner & Guare, 1983). This study is rare in that it identifies an instance in which low SE attenuated the negative effects of a difficult situation (high task interdependence and relationship conflict) on a dimension of performance.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Three-Way Interaction Predicting Absenteeism**



We argued and found support for the notion that a tendency toward overconfidence would result in a strongly negative relationship between relationship conflict and peer evaluations among high SEs but that the tendency to be open-minded and flexible and the desire to be positively evaluated, all characteristic of low SEs, would buffer the effect. We also predicted and found that the relationship between relationship conflict and absenteeism would be more strongly positive among low SEs. Drawing again on behavioral plasticity and other characteristics of low SEs, such as the tendency to make internal attributions in negative situations, we considered it possible to make different plasticity predictions for different dimensions of individual performance. We do not suggest that the performance of people with low self-esteem increases as their absences increase, but rather that performance decreases at a less severe rate among low SEs as relationship conflict intensifies. These findings are also interesting when compared to the results for group member satisfaction. Although the three-way interaction was not significant in this case, the significant two-way interaction between conflict and self-esteem in predicting satisfaction conformed to the traditional form of behavioral plasticity, with the satisfaction of high SEs less susceptible to relationship conflict than the satisfaction of low SEs. The lack of a significant three-way interaction for this dependent variable is also interesting; relation-

ship conflict may be such a powerful influence on the satisfaction of group members that dissatisfaction results regardless of the level of interdependence.

The limitations of this study include our use of student groups, which calls into question its generalizability. Analyzing groups working in actual organizations, where organizational history and potential future interactions come into play, may result in somewhat different dynamics. But the use of simulated intact work groups over a four-month period, three separate self-report questionnaires, and a key dependent variable (peer evaluation) collected from a separate source bolsters our confidence in the results.

A potentially fruitful path extending this line of research would be to create models with cross-level, and possibly group-level, effects (e.g., Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). We considered the individual level more appropriate and compelling in this study, although future cross-level investigations would be beneficial in furthering understanding of contextual influences in groups. Finally, the complex interactions proposed in this study and the focus on personality do not lend themselves easily to managerial applicability, but a fuller understanding of personality may help researchers and managers alike better construe how groups and possibly larger organizational units function

(George, 1990) and may facilitate better decision making.

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