The Opening "Black Box" between Conflict and Knowledge Sharing: A Psychological Engagement Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Previous research indicated that task conflict benefits knowledge sharing within organization, whereas relationship conflict damages it. However, little is known about the underlying psychological process by which task and relationship conflicts have distinct effects on knowledge sharing. In this study, we aim to open the "black box" in the relationship between conflict and knowledge sharing. This paper presents a mediational model of knowledge sharing and tests how three psychological states (psychological meaningfulness, availability, and safety) and knowledge workers' engagement mediate the effects of two types of conflict on knowledge sharing. Results of a study of 144 knowledge workers showed that task conflicts have positive effects on three psychological states, while relationship conflicts have negative effects. Furthermore, three psychological states affected workers' engagement and knowledge sharing behaviors. The results supported an integrative perspective on how workers' psychological processes affected workers' knowledge sharing behavior in different conflict contexts.

1. Introduction

Knowledge sharing in organizations becomes increasingly the norm. Prior empirical studies identified a number of contextual factors as the determinants of knowledge sharing, such as information technology utilization [28], identification, pro-sharing norm, interpersonal trust [25], and intra-group conflict [33]. Among them, conflict is viewed as a double-edged sword, as it may enhance or inhibit knowledge sharing within groups, organizations, or virtual teams [8, 9, 19, 32, 43]. Conflict refers to “the tension between team members due to real or perceived differences”. Conflict literature classifies conflicts into task conflict and relationship conflict [21]. The former is task-oriented and functional, whereas the latter is relationship-oriented and dysfunctional, especially for non-routine tasks [21], such as creative idea generation [34], strategic decision making [2], and knowledge sharing [33]. On one hand, knowledge sharing literature denoted that task conflict elicits divergent thinking regarding task [2]. To some extent, it reflects the spirit of “letting a hundred schools of thought contend” and encourage free discussion. It, therefore, may facilitate knowledge sharing [33]. In line with this argument, Dreu [12] found that a change from low to moderate task conflict is associated with an increase in information sharing. On the other hand, relationship conflict reflects competitive and hostile interpersonal interaction, and promotes divide, diminishes trust, curtails open discussion, which in turn may have a negative influence on knowledge sharing [33].

More recently, some studies explored behavioral mediators that link conflict with outcomes. For example, Dreu and Vianen [13] suggested that three conflict responses, including collaborating, contending, and avoiding, mediate the relationship of relationship conflict with team functioning and team effectiveness. Dreu and Beersma [11] also reported that conflict results in flight behavior, which in turn, negatively affects individuals’ well-being. However, literature review shows that little is known about the underlying psychological process by which task and relationship conflicts have distinct effects on knowledge sharing.

In contrast, the theory of psychological engagement [24] accounts for various psychological states people may have under diverse work contexts; and these psychological states will propel employees’ engagement at work. Psychological engagement refers to both people’s driving their personal energies into work role behaviors and displaying themselves within their work role [24]. Engagement is important for managers to cultivate, as it promotes many desirable organization outcomes, including intrinsic motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and high performance [37]. However, a literature review of knowledge sharing and psychological engagement reveals that there is missing cross-fertilization...
between them. This study suggests that to assess members’ knowledge sharing behaviors, the contextual factors and psychological engagement in knowledge sharing behavior must be studied jointly.

In sum, the objective of the present study is to demonstrate how task and relationship conflicts affect knowledge sharing through these psychological processes. According to Kahn’s [24] psychological engagement theory, a mediational model was built to guide this study. The results should support an integrative perspective in which task and relationship conflicts, as contextual factors, should have different influences on members’ psychological states (meaningfulness, availability, safety) and engagement, which in turn, affect individuals’ knowledge sharing.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we describe the literature and present the research hypotheses. Section 3 presents the study’s research methodology respectively. In section 4, we present the result of data analysis. Then, we discuss the results, present the implications, limitations and suggest future research directions in the final section.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses
2.1 Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing (KS) was defined as a set of behaviors including how to help colleagues work together, facilitating exchange knowledge, enhancing individual learning capacity, and increasing individual ability to achieve goals [14]. Knowledge sharing was examined between both individuals and organizations. Prior literature employed social exchange theory, planned behavior theory, or social capital theory to examine the motivational and contextual antecedents of knowledge sharing. This body of research identified intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were predictive of knowledge sharing [27]. Bock et al. [5] found that organizational climate influences knowledge sharing. Wasko et al. [42] reported that organizational capitals including structural capital, cognitive capital, and relational capital have relationships on knowledge sharing. Moreover, Lu, Leung and Koch [28] reported that information technologies utilization was positively related to knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing refers to sharing work-relevant knowledge and information, whereas, little research examines whether engaged at work affects employees’ willingness to sharing their work knowledge.

Therefore, this study tends to fill up this gap by theorizing work engagement as an important determinant for employee knowledge sharing.

2.2 Psychological engagement theory

Psychological engagement theory [24] accounts for three specific psychological conditions including meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability, which mediate the effects of various contextual determinants on employees’ psychological engagement. Two qualitative studies have been filed. Kahn [24] identified different contextual antecedents of these three psychological variables. Simply put, the meaningfulness which people experience at work is influenced by work characteristics. Availability is decided by work-related resource with which people can play their work roles. Safety is linked with non-threatening interpersonal relationship in which people are willing to engage [24, 29]. May, Gilson and Harter’s [29] empirical study corroborated Kahn’s framework. Furthermore, Brown and Leigh [7] adopted this theory to explore the mediating process (involvement and effort) by which perceived organizational environment has influences on employees’ performance.

Based on the psychological engagement theory, we proposed a mediational model of psychological factors mediating conflict and knowledge sharing. The research model is illustrated in Figure 1. Hypotheses are presented in the following sections.

2.3 Psychological engagement and knowledge sharing

In Kahn’s [24] ethnographic study, engagement was categorized into self employment and self expression. The former refers to people’s devotion of personal energies into role behaviors, such as effort input. The latter refers to people’s displaying oneself in the work role. It is closely related to the concepts of personal voice, emotional expression, non-defensive communication [24]. As Kahn [24] denoted, when people are engaged in work role, they are physically involved in task and empathically connected to others. They display their thinking, feeling, and creativity. Harter, et al. [17] showed that involvement is related to personal safety. Under safe conditions, people will be more likely to share their ideas. More recent studies show engagement has positive associations with organizational citizenship behavior and identity [37]. It is reasonable that if people show high citizenship behavior and high identity with their organizations, they are willing to share their knowledge within their organizations. Sonmentag [40] also found that engagement is positively related to some discretionary proactive behaviors including personal initiative and pursuit of learning. They argued that when dedicated to their
work, individuals will be more likely to engage in proactive actions to further improve their work. Moreover, only when people are devoted to their work and concentrate on it, they are likely to persist in the proactive behavior. We extend this linkage to knowledge sharing, as knowledge sharing is a kind of proactive behavior. And there is a major reason why psychological engagement at work will affect knowledge sharing. To share work-related knowledge, it is necessary for individuals to concentrate on their work and master the knowledge and skills of their work. Furthermore, only when people are devoted to their work, they regard it worthwhile to invest the extra effort of communicating work-related knowledge. The above argument is captured in the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Members’ psychological engagement positively affects their knowledge sharing.

### 2.4 Psychological factors under the context of conflict

Based on psychological engagement theory, people ask themselves “three fundamental questions in each role situation: 1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this job; 2) How safe is it to do so; 3) How available am I to do so?” [29].

#### 2.4.1 Psychological meaningfulness

Meaningfulness is viewed as the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to people’s own standard [29]. When workers feel that their work is worthwhile, useful and valuable, they experience meaningfulness. Workers experience lack of meaningfulness, when there is little room for them to give or receive in the work—as if they make no difference [24].

Psychological engagement theory [24] proposes that job characteristics and co-workers relations affect the degree of meaningfulness that people experience at work. May et al. [29] showed job characteristics which allow autonomy of using personal discretion, enable people to experience meaningfulness. Brief and Nord [6] found when employees see that they possess the right to voice and to learning, they will experience meaningfulness. All in all, task characteristics involving voice, self-expression, and learning enable workers to experience meaningfulness in their work.

Besides, Kahn [24] proposed that good interpersonal interactions with co-workers foster a sense of social identity, which further leads to a sense of meaningfulness. Subsequently, May [29] found empirical evidence to support a positive relation between rewarding co-worker interactions and meaningfulness.

#### 2.4.2 Psychological availability

Psychological availability refers to the sense of having the physical, emotional, or cognitive resources to engage in work role [24]. Psychological engagement theory [24] proposes job-related

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**Figure 1. Research model of psychological factors mediating conflict and knowledge sharing**
resources are the most important determinant of availability. In line with this, May et al. [29]’s empirical research found cognitive resource positively affects psychological availability. They argued that a complex job generally demands more cognitive resources and information processing than an individual can handle. As a result, the presence of sufficient cognitive resources will result in greater psychological availability and engagement.

### 2.4.3 Psychological safety

In safe situations including consistent, non-threatening, predictable, and unequivocal conditions, members will have confidence that their organizations will tolerate for any unintentional mistakes [24]. On the contrary, in an unsafe environment, incumbents make a conclusion that their organization will embarrass, punish or reject someone for making a mistake or speaking up [15].

Kahn’s [24] psychological engagement theory put forth that open communication climate and interpersonal relationship are antecedents of psychological safety. As Kahn [24] argued:

“People felt safer in climates characterized by such openness...... in which members shared ideas and concepts about designs without feeling that it was dangerous to do so” In addition, “supportive and trusting interpersonal relationship had a flexibility that allowed people to try and perhaps to fail without fearing the dangerous consequences” [24].

A number of empirical studies corroborated the proposition. Brown and Leigh [7] proposed that the freedom of self-expression is positively related to employees’ psychological safety. May et al. [29] showed that supportive and affective trust-building co-workers relations lead to greater psychological safety. Furthermore, Brown and Leigh [7] proposed that the freedom of self-expression is positively related to employees’ psychological safety.

### 2.4.4 Relationship conflict and task conflict

Task conflict is defined as “an awareness of differences in viewpoints and opinions pertaining to a group task” [23]. It focuses on how best to achieve common objectives. A review of conflict literature showed that task conflict has three major strengths.

First, previous conflict literature suggested task-oriented conflict endows a task with the characteristics as diversity of knowledge, voice, self-expression, creativity, and learning. Specifically, task conflict generates a variety of viewpoints of task content issues. Specified task conflict allows members to scrutinize task issues, express their different perspectives, and exercise voice in the decision making processes [2, 38]. Baron [4] offered evidence that task conflicts encourage people to learn from each other and increase innovative insight. Based on the above argument, we expect high task conflict will make members experience more meaningful.

Second, task conflict connotes the openness of a communication climate in teams. As mentioned before, task conflict provides workers with the chance of self-expression and voice, thus fostering an open climate within the team. Viewed in this light, task conflict will be beneficial to psychological safety, as it is able to foster an open climate of communication.

Third, task conflict generates diverse cognitive resources that some people need for completing complex task. Jehn [22] found that complex task requires more complex information processing than an individual can deal with. Task conflict generates and integrates the diverse perspectives of all team members, and the integrative viewpoints are essential cognitive resources for dealing with complex tasks [2]. Since task conflict provides diverse cognitive resources, it is expected that it will increase the psychological availability of workers to engage in their work, especially with nonroutine and complex tasks.

Relationship conflict is relationship-oriented, and it involves personal issues such as dislike among group members and feelings such as animosity, annoyance, frustration, and irritation [23]. Relationship conflict tends to be emotional and focuses on personal incompatibilities or disputes (e.g., [36]. Most studies converge in the finding that relationship conflict jeopardizes performance (for a review [10]). Relationship conflict result in the individuals’ feeling of threat and anxiety [41], which in turn, reduce their psychological safety. Moreover, relationship conflict is expected to decrease individual’s social identity and the sense of meaningfulness. Based on the argument above, a set of hypotheses is offered.

**H2:** Task conflict positively affects psychological meaningfulness (H2a), psychological availability (H2b), and psychological safety(H2c).

**H3:** Relationship conflict negatively affects meaningfulness (H3a) and psychological safety (H3b).

### 2.5 Psychological factors and individuals’ engagement

According to the tenets of psychological engagement theory [24], the three psychological conditions, including meaningfulness, safety and availability, decide the extent to which an individual
engages in one’s work role. May et al.’s [29] empirical research confirmed these propositions. They argued that workers who regard their work as meaningful tasks are likely to be motivated to engage themselves in it. Second, team psychological safety will facilitate engagement, because it alleviates excessive concern about teammates’ negative reactions towards their “self employment” and “self expression”, which engagement behaviors often have. For example, workers may be willing to bring up new ideas only when they believe other co-workers will not flee or attack them if they get a failure. Third, team members will not engage themselves to work if they think they are not capable of doing it. In other words, when recognizing they possess enough physical and cognitive resources, incumbents should be more confident to immerse into work roles. The above argument is captured by the following hypothesis:

**H4:** Individuals’ psychological beliefs including meaningfulness (H4a), availability (H4b), and safety (H4c) positively affect their psychological engagement.

### 2.6 The mediating effects of three psychological factors

This part explores the question that whether or not the effects of task and relation conflicts on knowledge sharing are sufficiently explained by different psychological factors? Both conflict and knowledge sharing literature have neglected the examination of such psychological processes. We believe that it could help us better understand how task and relationship conflicts affect knowledge sharing. As mentioned before, given that task conflict is expected to predict three psychological variables (meaningfulness, availability, safety) and these three variables predict engagement, it is obvious that three psychological variables mediate the relationship between task conflict and engagement. Likewise, since relationship conflict is expected to predict meaningfulness and safety, it is expected that meaningfulness and safety mediate the relationship between relationship conflict and engagement.

To complete the study, this research brings forth the following hypotheses. When confirming our hypotheses, we believe that these psychological processes will explain the influence of conflict on more individual-level outcomes.

**H5:** Meaningfulness (H5a), availability (H5b) and psychological safety (H5c) mediate task conflict and individuals’ engagement.

**H6:** Meaningfulness (H6a) and psychological safety (H6b) mediate relationship conflict and individuals’ engagement.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Operationalization of Constructs

A survey instrument was designed to get information about all of the variables. Wherever possible, existing scales were used or adapted to enhance validity [18]. Elsewhere, new questions were developed based on a review of literature. All constructs were measured through seven-point scales anchored from “never” to “very frequently” or “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. A summary of operationalization of constructs is listed in Table 1. Given the survey was executed in China, we used a backward translation to ensure consistency between the Chinese and the original English version of the instrument [30, 39].

Previous studies suggest that gender [28], age [20], and work experience [26] may have an impact on knowledge sharing. The basis of these differences in thinking and behavior may influence the formation of knowledge sharing. In this study, gender, age and experience of participants are included as control variables. Department size, which may affect the individual’s free-riding tendency of knowledge sharing [1], is also considered as a control variable since the knowledge sharing behavior is usually lower in large departments.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Respondents were recruited in China from 210 part-time MBA students in Shanghai, Suzhou and Hefei. All respondents had similar backgrounds, and were knowledge workers likely to participate in knowledge sharing activities in their firms.

We sent 210 questionnaires to these respondents, and received 144 useful returned questionnaires, achieving a response rate of 68.6%. Out of 144 respondents, 23 were female (16%). Most of respondents were in the age of 30 to 39 (52%). Among respondents, 49 had work experiences of 4 to 6 years (34%), and 51 had work experiences of 1 to 3 years (35%). On average, respondents worked in the departments of 17.1 employees. We tested the non-response bias according to Armstrong and Overton’s [3] method. The chi-squares of the first 25% of the respondents to that of the final 25% were compared, and no differences between these two groups on constructs were indicated by our results.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Measurement Model
### 4.1.1 Reliability

We assessed reliabilities of all independent variables by calculating Cronbach’s alpha at individual level. As shown in Table 1, all the variables were found to be reliable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Item Wording and Code</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Source</th>
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| **Task Conflict** (TCO) | ● How often do people in your work unit disagree about opinions regarding the work being done? (TCO1)  
● How frequently are there conflicts about ideas in your work unit? (TCO2)  
● How much conflict about the work you do is there in your work unit? (TCO3)  
● To what extent are there differences of opinion in your work unit? (TCO4) | 0.88    | Jehn [22]    |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.86 |                                                                                       |         |              |
| **Relationship Conflict** (RCO) | ● How much friction is there among members in your work unit? (RCO1)  
● How much are personality conflicts evident in your work unit? (RCO2)  
● How much tension is there among members in your work unit? (RCO3)  
● How much emotional conflict is there among members in your work unit? (RCO4) | 0.72    | Jehn [22]    |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.84 |                                                                                       |         |              |
| **Engagement** (EN) | ● Performing my job is so absorbing that I forget about everything else (CEN1)  
● I often think about other things when performing my job (reverse coding) (CEN2)  
● I am rarely distracted when performing my job (CEN3)  
● Time passes quickly when I perform my job (CEN4)  
● I really put my heart into my job (EEN1)  
● I get excited when I perform well on my job (EEN2)  
● I often feel emotionally detached from my job* (EEN3)  
● My own feelings are affected by how well I perform my job (EEN4)  
● I exert a lot of energy performing my job (PEN1)  
● I stay until the job is done (PEN2)  
● I avoid working overtime whenever possible* (PEN3)  
● I take work home to do (PEN4)  
● I avoid working too hard* (PEN5) | 0.68    | May et al. [28] |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.93 |                                                                                       | 0.74    |              |
| **Meaningfulness** (MEA) | ● The work I do on this job is very important to me (MEA1)  
● My job activities are personally meaningful to me (MEA2)  
● The work I do on this job is worthwhile (MEA3)  
● My job activities are significant to me (MEA4)  
● The work I do on this job is meaningful to me (MEA5)  
● I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable (MEA6) | 0.86    | May et al. [28] |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.94 |                                                                                       | 0.89    |              |
| **Psychological Safety** (PSA) | ● I’m not afraid to be myself at work (PSA1)  
● I am afraid to express my opinions at work* (PSA2)  
● There is a threatening environment at work* (PSA3) | 0.85    | May et al. [28] |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.82 |                                                                                       | 0.91    |              |
| **Psychological availability** (PAV) | ● I am confident in my ability to handle competing demands at work (PAV1)  
● I am confident in my ability to deal with problems that come up at work.(PAV2)  
● I am confident in my ability to display the appropriate emotions at work (PAV3)  
● I am confident that I can handle the physical demands at work (PAV4) | 0.93    | May et al. [28] |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.88 |                                                                                       | 0.95    |              |
| **Knowledge Sharing** (KS) | ● I share work reports and documents with members of my team (EKS1)  
● I share report templates, models, and designing methodologies with members of my team (EKS2)  
● I share success and failure stories about my work in documents with members of my team (EKS3)  
● I share related knowledge obtained from other media (EKS4)  
● I share my experience or know-how from work with other team members (IKS1)  
● I provide my knowledge about know-where or know-whom at the request of other team members (IKS2)  
● I share my expertise obtained from my education or training with other team members (IKS3) | 0.92    | Lee[26]       |
| Crabon’s alpha=0.97 |                                                                                       | 0.93    |              |

*Reverse-coded*
Cronbach’s alpha values were found to be greater than 0.7, the threshold suggested by Nunnally [31].

### 4.1.2 Convergent and Discriminant Validity

We assessed the convergent validity by examining the 1) reliability of items, 2) composite reliability of constructs, and 3) average variance extracted (AVE). As Table 1 shows, the loading of all items are up 0.60. In Table 2, the values of composite reliability range from 0.89 to 0.97 and above the .70 recommended level [16]; and AVE scores for each construct range from 0.55 to 0.85 and above the .50 recommended level.

Discriminant validity indicates the extent to which a given construct differs from other constructs. It can be verified by comparing the correlations among constructs and the square root of AVES [16]. As Table 2 shows, the square root of AVES for each construct is greater than the correlations between constructs.

### 4.1.3 Confirmative factor analysis

The correlational data collected in this study may be influenced by common method variance. To assess the severity of this problem, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted [35], and several models with different numbers of factors were examined. The hypothesized model, containing the seven factors-- task conflict, relationship conflict, psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, psychological availability, work engagement and knowledge sharing ---yielded a better fit than the models with fewer factors (NNFI=0.94, CFI=0.94, NFI=0.91, RMSEA=0.098, $x^2=1795$, $df=758$). It suggests that the common method variance problem should not be a serious problem.

### 4.2 Structural Model

With an adequate measurement model, the proposed hypotheses were tested with Partial Least
Squares (PLS). Compared to alternative structural equation modelling techniques, PLS has a minimal demand in terms of the sample size to validate a model [43]. Additionally, PLS has the ability to model latent constructs under condition of non-normality. The results of the analysis are presented in Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, 47.7% of the variance in knowledge sharing is explained. The results also show that conflicts explain 29.6% of the variance in meaningfulness, 27.1% of the variance in psychological availability, and 21.9% of the variance in psychological safety. Psychological process variables explain 52.5% of the variance in engagement. Control variables were included in the model. The t-value is 0.569 for age, 0.045 for gender, 0.398 for experience, and 0.271 for department size. None of these control variables were found to be significant.

As hypothesized, engagement has a significant impact on knowledge sharing behavior (path coefficient=0.691, t-value=15.145, p<0.01), supporting H1. Task conflict is significantly associated with meaningfulness (path coefficient=0.367, t-value=8.553, p<0.01), supporting H2a. Task conflict is significantly associated with psychological availability (path coefficient=0.354, t-value=7.698, p<0.01), supporting H2b. Task conflict is significantly associated with psychological safety (path coefficient=0.254, t-value=6.262, p<0.05), supporting H2c. Relationship conflict has a significantly negative impact on psychological meaningfulness (path coefficient=-0.451, t-value=7.499, p<0.01), and psychological safety (path coefficient=-0.426, t-value=6.557, p<0.01) supporting H3a and H3b. However, we found relationship conflict has a significantly negative impact on psychological availability (path coefficient=-0.429, t-value=6.870, p<0.01), which we did not mention in the hypotheses. This interesting finding will be covered in the discussion section. Meaningfulness has a significant impact on engagement (coefficient=0.314, t-value=6.660, p<0.01), supporting H4a. Psychological availability has a significant impact on engagement (path coefficient=0.362, t-value=7.835, p<0.01), supporting H4b. Psychological safety has a significant effect on engagement (path coefficient=0.126, t-value=2.094, p<0.05). Thus, H4c is supported.

4.3 Mediating Effect Tests

To test the mediating effect of the psychological meaningfulness (MEA), availability (PAV), and safety (PSA), we adopted Baron and Kenny’s [4] three-step method. First, showing that the independent variable (IV) can directly predict the dependent variable (DV); second, showing that IV should significantly predict the mediator (M); last, assessing the significance of the path coefficients between IV and DV when controlling for M. If M is significant but IV is not, M’s mediating effect will be full. If both M and IV are significant, M’s mediating effect will be partial.

As Table 3 shows, between the TCO-EN links, the mediating effect of meaningfulness, availability, and safety is full, H5 is supported. Between the RCO-EN links, the mediating effect of meaningfulness is full, and mediating effect of safety is partial. Thus, H6 is also supported. The testing results support the above new findings that availability has the full mediating effect on between relationship conflict and engagement.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study is to describe a process through which knowledge workers’ experience of
Task conflict has significant and positive effects on psychological meaningfulness, availability and safety, which in turn affect workers’ engagement and knowledge sharing behavior. Relationship conflict has significant and negative effects on meaningfulness and safety, which in turn affect workers’ engagement and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, meaningfulness, availability and safety were found to significantly mediate the effects of task and relationship conflict and workers’ engagement. However, an unexpected finding is that relationship conflict also has a significant and negative effect on psychological availability. One possible explanation is that relationship conflict distracts workers’ attention. Workers spend too much time and energy on interpersonal attacks so that they have not enough physical or cognitive resources to engage in task per se.

Previous research indicated task conflict benefits knowledge sharing, whereas relationship conflict damages it. Building on Kahn’s framework [24], this research contributes to knowledge sharing literature by opening a “black box” concerning how two types of conflicts have different effects on knowledge sharing. It addresses the calls for studies to explore the psychological processes that mediate the relationships between contextual antecedents and workers’ behavior [7], such as knowledge sharing. Our model delineates a dynamic mechanism between intra-group conflicts, team psychological conditions, team engagement and team effectiveness. To a large extent, this research bridges the gap between conflict literature and motivation literature. This research should be a good starting point for exploring the mediating processes by which a set of contextual factors affect knowledge sharing.

This research also has clear practical implication. For instance, in the context of high relationship conflict, managers can take some measures to increase workers’ psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability, which can buffer the negative effect of relationship conflict on workers’ knowledge sharing behavior. In contrast, managers should pay great attention on open communication, voice, and learning in task conflict, as these factors will enhance workers’ psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability and promote their knowledge sharing.

Our study has several limitations, requiring future research to examine. First, the data is based on self-report, and the common method variance problem may pose a validity threat. However, confirmatory factor analysis showed that common method variance is not serious. Nonetheless, future research should include data from different sources to address this issue. Moreover, future research should further test our model with longitudinal data. Second, although the measures of all studied variables have been validated and published in the past literature. The items used to measure psychological engagement and psychological safety appeared to be repetitive. Such repetition may undermine the content validity. Future research should adopt more representative measures of the two variables to re-examine our research model. Third, based on the theory of psychological engagement, our theoretical focus is to explore how conflict affects psychological states and psychological engagement, which in turn, influences individual’s knowledge sharing behaviors. However, the causal relationships of the studied variables could be different. Future research should adopt other theories to examine whether the reverse logics exist. The findings should contribute much to knowledge sharing and conflict literature.

References


