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To avoid or not to avoid? Gender and the emotional experience of relationship conflict

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**TO AVOID OR NOT TO AVOID? GENDER AND THE EMOTIONAL
EXPERIENCE OF RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT**

ABSTRACT

Relationship conflict has detrimental effects, and scholars advise avoiding these conflicts. However, little is known about the emotional experience of relationship conflict and the intrapersonal consequences of conflict avoidance. In a field study of a long-term healthcare organization, we developed and tested a model examining the emotional experience of relationship conflict, and, in particular, the role of gender and conflict avoidance. We proposed that gender will influence the negative emotional experience of relationship conflict, the amount of emotional labor associated with hiding these emotions, and the effectiveness of avoidance as a conflict management strategy. Findings revealed that women experienced significantly more negative emotions from relationship conflict than men. For women, conflict avoidance led to increased emotional labor, whereas for men, conflict avoidance did not influence emotional labor. Overall, results indicated that relationship conflict elicited negative affective effects, ultimately leading to emotional exhaustion, which were exacerbated by conflict avoidance for women.

Keywords: Relationship conflict, gender, conflict avoidance, emotional labor, emotional exhaustion.

TO AVOID OR NOT TO AVOID? GENDER AND THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

Conflict and its outcomes are crucial to the study of individuals and teams within organizations. Relationship conflict, due to its personal and emotional nature, has been shown to interfere with team performance and decrease satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2011). Because relationship conflicts are typically about non-task related issues, scholars often advise that disputants avoid talking about relationship conflicts so that these types of conflict will not interfere with task-related activities (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix & Trochim, 2008; De Dreu & van Vienen, 2001). The assumption is that work can continue on, and the people involved will be able to function effectively. However, this advice focuses on the task and ignores issues related to the personal well-being of the disputant (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). What happens to individuals on an intrapersonal and, in particular, on an affective level when they avoid relationship conflict?

We argue that relationship conflict will be emotionally taxing to disputants, particularly in terms of emotional labor (specifically, the hiding of emotions) and emotional exhaustion, which are highly related to stress and turnover in the workplace (Bono & Vey, 2005; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). We develop and test a model of the emotional experience of relationship conflict that suggests that gender will influence the experience of relationship conflict in terms of resultant negative emotions, the amount of emotional labor associated with hiding of emotions, and the effectiveness of avoidance as a conflict management strategy (see Figure 1). The ample literature devoted to gender and the experience and expression of emotion (for a review, see Brody & Hall, 2008) suggests that gender is an important individual difference to be examined together with the emotional experience of relationship conflict and emotional

labor. More specifically, we suggest that avoidance of relationship conflict will be a less effective strategy for women than for men. Together these factors help explain whether and when relationship conflict will result in emotional exhaustion in workers, and whether avoidance will be a useful conflict management strategy.

We examine this model in the health care field, where emotional labor and exhaustion have been shown to run high. Emotional exhaustion is defined as feeling emotionally depleted and drained due to interpersonal contact at work (Maslach, & Jackson, 1984; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1997), and is a critical component of burnout, which is a chronic problem in the healthcare field given the emotionally demanding nature of the profession (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Burnout is correlated with a variety of negative, organizational outcomes, including decreased commitment, turnover, absences, and psychological withdrawal from work (Cropanzano, Rupp & Byrne, 2003; Janssen, Lam & Huang, 2010). Conflict is also prevalent in healthcare contexts, and interpersonal conflict, which closely resembles relationship conflict, has been identified as an important issue in health care organizations (Brinkert, 2010; Hendel, Fish & Berger, 2007; Cox, 2003). Understanding the effect of relationship conflict on individuals, as well as the role of conflict avoidance, can enhance our understanding of conflict management in the workplace and in healthcare in particular.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Relationship Conflict and Negative Affective Experiences

Relationship conflict is defined in terms of interpersonal incompatibility with others at work (Jehn, 1995). A great deal of past research has shown that relationship conflict has detrimental effects on performance and morale (see deWit et. al., 2011 for a meta-analytic

review of this literature). Other studies consider the damaging effects of negative emotions such as anger, irritation, and frustration during relationship conflict (Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). However, it is important to note that negative emotionality has been embedded in prior conceptualizations of relationship conflict, which is typically characterized by interpersonal ill will, anger, and antagonism (for exceptions and discussions of this point, see Jehn et. al. 2008; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). For example, seminal work by Jehn (1995: p. 258) defined relationship conflict as existing "...when there are interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group." And while Pinkley (1990) and Jehn (1997), identified negative emotionality (e.g., anger, frustration, uneasiness, discomfort, tenseness, resentment) as an independent dimension of conflict, most subsequent research has incorporated negative emotions into their definitions and measures of relationship conflict. For example, one study of the effects of team conflict over time included the item "How often do people get angry while working in your group?" as an indicator of relationship conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Thus, relationship conflict has been both defined in terms of and shown to lead to negative feelings, thereby confounding the experience of relationship conflict and the resultant emotions. We theoretically and empirically separate relationship conflict and emotionality, and our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Relationship conflict will elicit negative emotions concerning the conflict.

While negative emotions will be elicited by relationship conflict, it is typically counter-normative for people to express these negative emotions in the workplace. Thus we predict that the negative emotions associated with relationship conflict will lead to emotional labor, specifically in the form of hiding one's feelings. Emotional labor is an intrapsychic process

engaged in to manage one's emotions when interacting with others in organizations (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2011). Emotional labor entails managing one's internal feelings and outward expressions in order to meet work demands (Hochschild, 1983), as well as managing the emotional dissonance experienced when the emotional expression and display rules required do not match one's internal state (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Grandey 2000). As such, employees can change their inner feelings (*i.e.*, their private experience) via "deep acting" or their external emotional displays (*i.e.*, their public displays) via "surface acting" (Grandey, 2000). In our model, we focus specifically on the hiding feelings, or surface acting, aspect of emotional labor because part of conflict avoidance involves hiding one's feelings from others. Evidence shows that hiding emotions via surface acting negatively affects individual well-being by increasing stress, but the same does not occur in response to deep acting, or attempting to alter one's own emotional experience (Grandey, 2003).

Not surprisingly, negative affect has been shown to be highly correlated with emotional labor (Judge, Woolf, & Hurst, 2009; Grandey, 2003). While emotional labor is likely to evoke negative emotions, the opposite is also tenable. We argue that the more negative emotions experienced as a result of relationship conflict, the more people will feel the need to hide their (negative) feelings at work because employees are typically expected to express positive emotions at work in order to enhance group cohesion (*i.e.*, adhere to integrative display rules) (Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Thus, people are likely to hide the negative feelings that conflict elicits. Above and beyond display rules, emotional events in the workplace can trigger emotional reactions that employees aim to control in order to maintain an appropriate self-image (Grandey, 2000). Our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Increased negative feelings resulting from relationship conflict will be associated with increased hiding of one's feelings.

The Role of Gender

We argue that individual differences are also important to consider in terms of the emotional experience of relationship conflict, and that gender matters in particular. People differ in terms of how they construe themselves, especially concerning autonomy versus relationality (Cross, Bacon & Morris, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Women are more likely than men to construe themselves in interdependent terms, meaning in terms of their relationships with others (Cross, Bacon & Morris, 2000; Cross & Madson, 1997). Given women's heightened interdependent self-construal, we maintain that relationship conflict will be more distressing for women compared to men, and thus lead to a more negative emotional experience for women than men. Our prediction is also corroborated by past work showing that conflict in interpersonal relationships arouses greater anxiety and discomfort in women compared to men (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Smith, Gallo, Goble, Ngu & Stark, 1998). Thus, we predict a main effect of gender on the experience of emotions resulting from relationship conflict in light of women's greater interdependent self-construal compared to men:

H3: Women will experience greater negative emotions from relationship conflict than men.

For men, though they are less likely to experience negative emotions during relationship conflict, we predict that they are more likely to hide the emotions that they do experience compared to women. Norms of suppression of emotion expression, especially in terms of relationships, apply more strongly to men than women, even from a young age (Simon & Nath, 2004; Brody, 1985). Likewise, there is evidence that men are more likely than women to suppress emotions during discussions of relationship conflicts in close relationships (Christensen

& Heavey, 1993; Gottman & Carrere, 1994). Thus, in the particular case of relationship conflict, we predict that men will be more likely to hide their emotions because the expression of negative emotions stemming specifically from relationship conflict is more congruent with the female, communal gender role, which involves concern for others and relationship maintenance, than with the male, agentic, gender role, which involves concern for oneself and autonomy (Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp & Redersdorff, 2006; Bakan, 1966). Thus, we again hypothesize a main effect of gender given norms for emotional expression associated with traditional gender roles:

H4: Men will be more likely to hide emotions than women.

Role of Avoidance Conflict Management

Conflict avoidance is a form of conflict management that involves withdrawal, suppression and ignoring the conflict (De Dreu & van de Vliert, 1997; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). When people avoid a conflict they might still interact with the others involved, but they will not address the unspoken conflict. There are mixed findings about the benefits vs. detriments of conflict avoidance, with primarily negative effects of avoidance shown on team performance and satisfaction (Friedman, Tidd, Currall & Tsai, 2000; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). However, recent work has shown beneficial effects of avoidance in the context of relationship conflict such that conflict avoidance enables individuals to “ignore” the relational incompatibility and focus on the task itself (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochim, 2008; De Dreu & van Vianen, 2001). De Dreu and van Vianen (2001) show that avoiding relationship conflict improves team functioning, i.e., team behaviors including helping, team compliance, and voice. They also provide evidence that avoiding relationship conflict improves team effectiveness in terms of approaching the task effectively and dealing well with unexpected events. This evidence, however, does not speak to how avoidance affects the *emotional* experience of the relationship conflict participants. We

argue that the effect of conflict avoidance on the emotional experience of the relationship conflict participants will depend on whether the disputant is a man or a woman.

In general, one might argue that conflict avoidance should reduce the need for people to hide their feelings from one another, thereby reducing emotional labor. If people do not actively engage in the conflict, the associated negative emotions will not threaten to surface, and thus will not need to be hidden. We propose that this argument is more likely to hold for men than women because of men's independent self-construal. Engaging in a conflict triggers one's relationships with others by making interdependence, which is inherent to conflict and conflict management, salient. When the conflict is not addressed (i.e., avoided), relationships are less salient, and men can default to their independent self-construal, focusing on themselves and experiencing less of a need to hide their emotions.

In contrast, for women, their interdependent self construal will not allow the conflict and associated emotions to merely dissipate when it is avoided. By defining themselves to a greater extent in terms of relationships, these relationships will remain salient regardless of whether the conflict is avoided or engaged. So, minimally, for women, avoiding conflict will not reduce their need to hide emotions because the conflict and associated negative emotions will remain salient even when avoided. We take the argument a step further and argue that avoiding conflict will *increase* the need for women to hide their feelings. Women are motivated to maintain relationships, because of their interdependent self-construal and communal social role (Baker & McNulty, 2011; Cross & Morris, 2003), and resolution of existing conflict is important for relationship maintenance. However, avoidance does not facilitate conflict resolution. The lack resolution associated with conflict avoidance might then exacerbate the negative emotionality, increasing the need for women to hide their emotions. Thus, we hypothesized the following

moderating effect of gender in light of the theorized differential ramifications of conflict avoidance for men versus women:

H5: Gender and conflict avoidance will interact to affect emotional labor. Conflict avoidance will decrease emotional labor for men and will increase emotional labor for women.

Effects on Emotional Exhaustion

One of the central components of burnout at work is emotional exhaustion, which is defined as the extent to which employees feel emotionally overextended and exhausted by their work, resulting in the depletion of their emotional resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, Leiter & Maslach, 1988). Emotional exhaustion has been shown to predict a variety of important outcomes at work, such as increased turnover intentions, reduced job performance and decreased engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors (Cropanzano, Rupp & Byrne, 2003; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Janssen, Lam & Huang, 2010). Emotional exhaustion also leads to stress, anxiety and other poor mental and physical health outcomes (Leiter & Maslach, 2000a; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993).

Hiding one's emotions is tiring and emotionally depleting, especially when done frequently as part of work demands, and there is some evidence for a positive association between hiding emotions and emotional exhaustion (Hulsheger et al., 2010; Bono & Vey, 2005; Grandey, 2003). Scholars theorize that hiding emotions is exhausting due to the physiological (Gross & Levenson, 1993, 1997) and psychological (Morris & Feldman, 1997; Grandey, 2003) effort of suppressing one's true feelings. In the following hypothesis, we attempt to extend this finding into the domain of emotional labor that is driven by relationship conflict and its associated negative emotions.

H6: Increased hiding of feelings will be associated with increased emotional exhaustion.

Finally, in addition to the indirect effect of negative emotions due to relationship conflict on emotional exhaustion via hiding emotions, we predict a direct relationship between those negative emotions and emotional exhaustion. Negative affectivity has been shown to be a positive and significant predictor of emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Maslach, 2000a; Zellars, Perrewe, & Hochwarter, 2000), even when controlling for hiding feelings (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Negative affect is associated with increased levels of physiological arousal (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004), and, therefore, efforts to regulate negative affect require cognitive and physiological resources that can lead to depletion and emotional exhaustion. Thus, it is important to include this direct path in our model and we hypothesized the following:

H7: Increased negative emotions due to relationship conflict will be associated with increased emotional exhaustion.

METHOD

The present study was conducted at a large healthcare organization that provides services for senior citizens ranging from assisted living and temporary rehabilitation to palliative care and advanced dementia care. The facility is located in a suburb of a medium-sized city in the Northeastern United States. The study was conducted with full approval of the organization's management.

Procedure

Two paper-and-pencil surveys were administered approximately two months apart. All of the measures were collected at time one, except for emotional exhaustion, which was collected at time two. During the weeks prior to the survey administration, fliers were placed around the facility advertising the survey. The protocol for the survey administration required that employees come to a large room centrally located in the organization. We explained to each

participant the purpose of the survey (to understand conflict in organizations) and obtained informed consent. Subsequently, participants sat in the room and filled out the survey. After they completed the survey, participants were paid \$20 and received a free boxed meal to take with them. In order to link the data from both time points, participants were assigned a participant ID.

Because the facility operates 24 hours per day with three eight-hour shifts, data were collected for both surveys during the day and night in order to ensure that we obtained a representative sample of employees from different shifts. Finally, before collecting the survey data, we interviewed employees and pretested the survey items using a talk-aloud method (Schwarz, 1999) with a small sample (approximately 8 employees) from various levels of the organization to verify that items had face validity and were worded appropriately.

Sample

At time 1, the sample consisted of 276 employees, 74% of whom were female and 73% of whom were Caucasian. 20% were between ages 18-34 and 47% were between ages 35-55. In terms of education, 35% were high school graduates, 35% had technical certification and/or an associate's degree, and 25% had nursing or undergraduate degrees. Employees had an average of 23 years work experience, and average tenure at the current facility was 5.6 years. 420 employees were employed at the organization when the surveys were conducted yielding a 66% response rate. At time 2, the sample consisted of 232 employees, indicating a 16% attrition rate between time 1 and time 2. However, the demographic characteristics of the two samples were almost identical, and there were no significant demographic differences between the 44 participants who dropped out of the survey at time 2 and the 232 remaining participants.

Measures

See the Appendix for a complete list of items.

Relationship conflict. Six items were developed for this measure with the express purpose of eliminating direct reference to negative emotions or emotionality. The items focused on both personality conflicts and conflict behaviors that targeted the person (e.g., arguments that got personal, personal attacks, offending one another). Participants rated the items concerning “people you regularly interact with at work” (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The scale exhibited high inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .87$).

Negative emotions during relationship conflict. This measure consisted of seven negative emotions (e.g., frustrated, annoyed, irritated, exhausted) elicited during relationship conflict based on Watson and Tellegen (1985). When participants rated the seven items, they were instructed to refer back to the questions about relationship conflicts and to rate “When these things happen [relationship conflicts], I feel...” (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The scale exhibited high inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

Conflict avoidance. We used the conflict avoidance subscale from the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) scale (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, Nauta, 2001). Participants were asked to rate four items starting with the stem “When I have a conflict or disagreement with people at work, usually...” (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). Based on an exploratory factor analysis, we dropped one item that appeared to be confusing to the respondents (“I try to make differences seem less severe”, factor loading = .44). The resultant 3-item scale exhibited acceptable interitem reliability ($\alpha = .74$).

Hiding feelings. We used four items related to hiding one’s feelings from the emotional labor scale developed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003). Participants first read the stem, “When I interact with people at work, I ...” and then rated the items (e.g., “... hide my true feelings about

a situation”) on a scale from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. The scale exhibited acceptable inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .77$).

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was measured using the nine-item emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et. al., 1997) ($\alpha = .92$). Participants rated the items according to how they feel about their job on a scale from 0 = Never to 6 = Everyday.

Gender. Gender was coded 0 for male participants and 1 for female participants.

Control variables. Based on previous research on emotional exhaustion and conflict avoidance, we controlled for age, time spent interacting with residents (“resident” is the term preferred by the organization to refer to people living in the facility who are cared for by the staff), and job status. Past findings show a positive effect of amount of time spent interacting with residents (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001) and an inverse effect of age on emotional exhaustion (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Turnipseed, 1994), as well as a positive correlation between low status in the workplace and conflict avoidance (Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002). Participants indicated their age on a scale ranging from 1 = under 18 to 7 = 65 and over. Participants also indicated time spent with residents by choosing among options ranging from “no time” to “between 6.5 hours and 8 hours per shift.” Job status was coded as high versus low depending on level of education (some high school, high school or GED, certification, technical school and associate’s degree were coded as low status, and nursing license/degree, undergraduate and graduate degree were coded as high status).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, frequencies, and bivariate correlations of all variables. Continuous variables were centered at their means before conducting analyses in

order to avoid multi-collinearity with interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991). We used SPSS AMOS 19.0 with observed variables to assess the hypothesized theoretical model, since this method enabled us to test our hypotheses by accounting for all of the variables in the model simultaneously and assess goodness-of-fit of the model as a whole. All paths were freely estimated. The hypothesized model was estimated with maximum likelihood procedures. Our sample was not large enough to allow us to simultaneously test our measurement model while including an interaction in the model. Missing data were imputed using regression imputation, though missing data was not a serious problem, since all items had two or fewer cases missing.

We tested the hypothesized model with and without control variables predicting the ultimate dependent variable, emotional exhaustion. Model fit for the hypothesized model without controls displayed a strong fit to the data according to the goodness of fit criteria suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999): $\chi^2[232] = 18.48$, $df = 10$, $p = .05$; NFI = .96, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .06, RMSEA confidence interval = .006, .103. Overall, the results supported our hypotheses (see Figure 2 for standardized regression weights and significance levels), though our prediction for the form of the gender by conflict avoidance interaction was only partially supported (see Figure 3 and explanation below). There were statistically significant paths from relationship conflict to negative emotions due to relationship conflict (H1), from negative emotions due to relationship conflict to hiding emotions (H2), from gender to negative emotions due to relationship conflict (H3), from gender to hiding emotions (H4), from gender x conflict avoidance on hiding emotions (H5), from hiding emotions to emotional exhaustion (H6), and from negative emotions due to relationship conflict to emotional exhaustion (H7).

In the model with controls predicting emotional exhaustion, all of the paths were significant as per the model without controls, but the model fit was worse ($\chi^2[232] = 55.78$, $df =$

28, $p = .002$; NFI = .90, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .06, RMSEA confidence interval = .04, .09). From the control variables, only age had a significant, negative effect on emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.12, p = .04$), which is consistent with prior research showing an inverse effect for age on emotional exhaustion (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Turnipseed, 1994).

We tested two additional models to rule out the alternative that gender moderates effects on negative emotions and hiding feelings, rather than having direct effects. More specifically, we tested whether there was an additional interactive effect of gender and relationship conflict on negative emotions due to relationship conflict and whether there was an additional interactive effect of gender and negative emotions due to relationship conflict on hiding feelings. Results showed that the interactive effects were not significant and the model fit became significantly worse when they were included, ruling out the alternatives.

The statistically significant interaction between gender and conflict avoidance on hiding feelings is graphed in Figure 3. We identified the form of the interaction based on Aiken and West (1991). We used multiple linear regressions controlling for relationship conflict, negative emotions due to relationship conflict, age, status, and time with residents. Our hypothesis about the shape of the interaction was partially supported. The slope of the regression line for conflict avoidance on hiding feelings for women was positive and significant ($\beta = .20, t = 2.29, p < .05$), as predicted. For men, unlike our prediction that conflict avoidance may reduce hiding feelings, the slope of the regression line was not significant ($\beta = -.11, t = -.84, ns$), though it was in the predicted direction.

DISCUSSION

These findings tell an intriguing story about the ways in which relationship conflict and the resultant emotional experience differs for men and women. Overall, we found that

relationship conflict is emotionally exhausting, and avoiding it can exacerbate emotional labor, especially for women. In terms of the emotional experience, relationship conflict evokes negative emotions that people try to hide, which, in turn, are associated with emotional exhaustion. Moreover, gender influences the underlying emotional labor involved. Given that women experience more negative emotions in response to relationship conflict, it appears that they subsequently need to hide these negative emotions, whereas men hide their emotions most likely due to normative display rules that apply more to men than women. Furthermore, avoiding conflict has differential effects on men compared to women. For women, conflict avoidance leads to increased emotional labor because their communal nature motivates them to resolve the conflict, and the negative emotions will not dissipate unless the conflict is resolved, which avoidance does not permit. For men, avoiding does not help or hurt the situation.

These findings make a number of important contributions to research on conflict and gender roles. By basing our hypotheses on the theoretical framework of gender and relational self-construal, this study extends previous work on gender roles to the emotional experience of relationship conflict. Conflict is a logical milieu to investigate the influence of gender and self-construal, since conflict is inherent to interpersonal relationships in a variety of settings. In addition, during relationship conflict, interpersonal relationships—and individual differences in perception concerning these relationships—become quite salient. Our finding that women experience negative emotions from relationship conflict to a greater extent than men is consistent with past work on close relationships, particularly marriage (Wanic & Kulik, 2011; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). This finding is also consistent with past research showing that women, to a greater extent than men, construe themselves interdependently, which helps to explain why relationship conflict, a situation that specifically threatens one's relationships with others, is

particularly threatening to women. However, we also extend this research to the workplace setting and conflicts between co-workers, and it appears that relational gender roles are salient in the workplace as well.

Likewise, this study shows that gender is an important moderator of the effectiveness of conflict avoidance. These findings are especially interesting to consider in light of previous research showing that women are more likely to avoid conflict compared to men (Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Rahim, 1983b; Valentine, 1995). Since conflict elicits more negative emotions for women than men, women may prefer to avoid conflicts, but when they do, it still does not mitigate their negative feelings due to conflict, and even is costly on a psychological level. Although women may be inclined to avoid conflict to a greater extent than men, women should consider whether this conflict management strategy is in their best interest in light of these results.

In addition, our findings demonstrate the negative intrapersonal effects of relationship conflict. Much of the conflict literature focuses on effects of conflict on performance and other outcome variables at the team level but does not address the effect of conflict on individual well-being (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b), nor does the literature showing the benefits of conflict avoidance on team performance (Behfar et al., 2008; De Dreu & van Vianen, 2001) address the potentially negative, intrapersonal effects of avoiding rather than confronting conflict in the long-term. Furthermore, relationship conflict and negative emotions have been confounded in the past, with relationship conflict typically characterized by negative emotions, i.e. feelings of ill will between disputants, antagonism etc. (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). However, this characterization confounds the experience of relationship conflict with the resultant negative feelings. Separating conflict from emotion enabled us to look at additional predictors of conflict

related emotions. We hope that these findings concerning the detrimental effects of negative emotions due to relationship conflict will open the door for new research that examines the complex relationships between conflict and emotions more fully.

This is also, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to show a relationship between conflict management and emotional labor. On closer examination, these constructs have a great deal in common since both tap into the ways in which people manage interpersonal relationships, especially in demanding situations, at work. In particular, both conflict avoidance and emotional labor involve a dissonance between one's internal experience and external expressions. Just as conflict avoidance entails suppression concerning conflict (De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Putnam & Wilson, 1982), emotional labor entails suppressing certain experienced emotions and hiding one's true feelings (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1997). On a broader level, by examining the two constructs together, we can gain a better understanding of whether different conflict management styles intensify or ease emotional labor at work. Indeed, much of the research on emotional labor has been done in the context of customer service interactions involving aggressive customers and customer complaints (*e.g.* Grandey, Dickter & Sin, 2004; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), which often involve conflict resolution though they are not typically framed as such. For example, Grandey et. al. (2004) found that dealing with aggressive customers led to emotional exhaustion and withdrawal. An important empirical and practical question is whether the use of different conflict management styles would improve versus worsen these outcomes. It could be that yielding, *i.e.* the typical "customer is always right" approach, increases surface acting, but reframing the situation as problem-solving, *i.e.* finding a way to reframe the situation in terms of both the employee's and the customer's interests, reduces surfaces acting. Thus, similar to this study, future studies should examine whether

conflict management styles are related to emotional labor and whether different conflict management styles reduce or exacerbate emotional labor.

Finally, these findings contribute to the literature on emotional exhaustion and burnout. Previous work has shown a relationship between conflict and emotional exhaustion (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Yoon, Rasinski & Curlin, 2010), and our finding that negative emotions due to relationship conflict significantly predicted emotional exhaustion helps to explain this relationship. In addition, past work has not examined the role of conflict management style. In order to make a practical contribution to help employees cope with conflict and emotional exhaustion, further investigations of the role of conflict management are needed. Our finding that conflict avoidance led to increased emotional labor for women, which subsequently increased emotional exhaustion, is an important first step in this direction.

Although the results of this study are intriguing, there are a number of important limitations that should be addressed in future work. First, the data from both time 1 and time 2 are self-report data. However, since the dependent variable – emotional exhaustion – was collected two months after the independent variables were collected, common method bias is less of a concern (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). In addition, we measured conflict avoidance as a conflict management style in general. It could be that the effect of conflict avoidance also depends upon the specific characteristics of the conflict episode. For example, conflict avoidance may reduce emotional exhaustion when the conflict involves a higher status individual in the workplace, but it may increase emotional exhaustion when the conflict involves a peer.

Also, similar to any study conducted in a single organization, these results may not generalize. Though a healthcare facility is a logical context in which to examine emotional

exhaustion, given that burnout and emotional exhaustion are especially prevalent in this line of work, the effects may be magnified in this type of organization. However, it is important to note that not all employees surveyed were in direct contact with residents of the facility at all time – indeed, many employees were in administrative and non-clinical roles – making the findings relatively generalizable. When we controlled for amount of time spent working directly with residents, the results did not change, nor was amount of time with residents significantly correlated with emotional exhaustion.

The results of this study make an important contribution by uncovering new relationships among a family of variables that have not been investigated together previously, namely relationship conflict, negative emotions stemming from this conflict, conflict avoidance, gender, emotional labor, and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, the results show differences in the emotional experience of relationship conflict for women and men. More importantly, they show that conflict avoidance did not mitigate the negative emotional effects of relationship conflict for women and, in fact, exacerbated their experience of emotional labor, which led to emotional exhaustion. In light of these findings, both women and men should consider when and why they avoid conflict at work and whether conflict avoidance is ultimately helpful or harmful in terms of their well-being. On a broader level, our results also highlight the need for future research to adopt an individual differences approach to better understand the usefulness of different conflict management styles and the intrapersonal experience of conflict.

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APPENDIX

Relationship conflict

My coworkers and I often have arguments that get personal.
Personal attacks occur when we work together.
It is common to offend one another.
Personality conflicts exist when we work together.
There are often personality clashes.
Our personalities do not work well together.

Negative emotions due to relationship conflict

Frustrated
Angry
Annoyed
Tense
Irritated
Worn out
Exhausted

Conflict avoidance

I avoid a confrontation about our differences.
I avoid differences of opinion as much as possible.
I try to avoid confrontations with my coworkers.

Hiding feelings

Hide my true feelings about a situation.
Resist expressing my true feelings.
Conceal what I'm feeling
Show emotions that are expected rather than what I feel.

Emotional exhaustion

I feel emotionally drained from my work.
I feel used up by the end of the workday.
I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
I feel burned out from my work.
I feel frustrated by my job.
I feel I'm working too hard on my job.
Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.
I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.

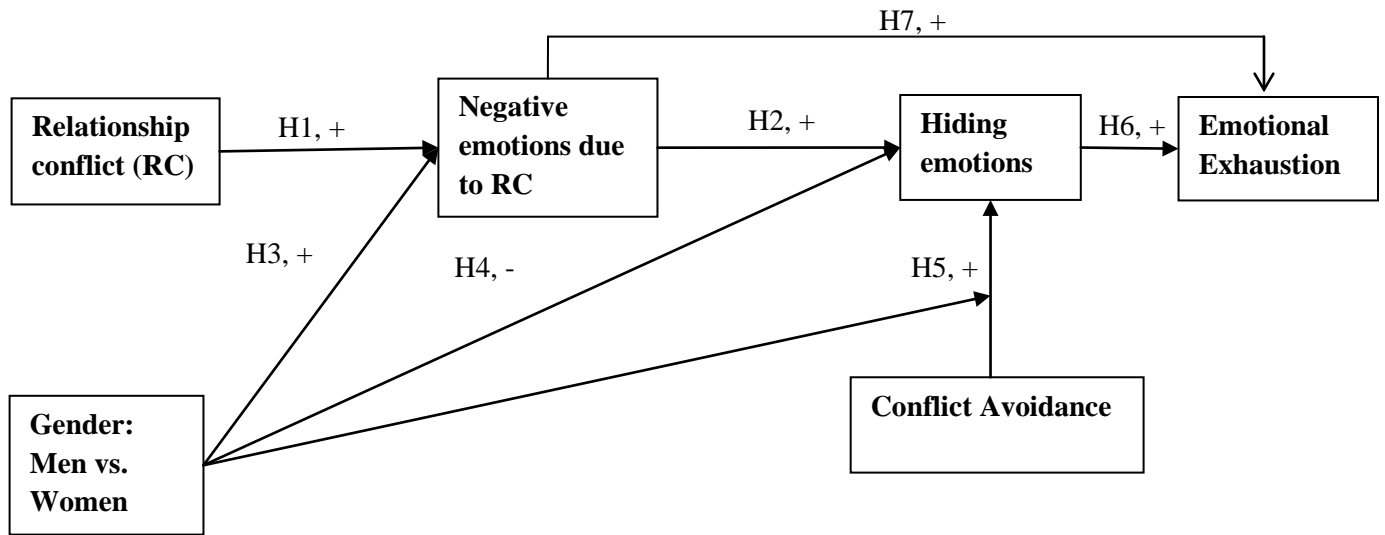
Table 1

Means and correlations among all variables

	Mean (SD)/Frequency	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Relationship conflict	2.39 (1.26)									
2. Negative emotions due to relationship conflict	3.56 (1.45)	.48**								
3. Conflict avoidance	4.70 (1.30)	.10	.05							
4. Hiding feelings	2.43 (0.86)	.22**	.28**	.12						
5. Emotional exhaustion	1.69 (1.31)	.33**	.38**	.07	.23**					
6. Gender	Men = 61 Women = 171	-.03	.18**	.22**	-.08	.12				
7. Age	Under 18 = 1 18-25 = 15 26-34 = 26 35-44 = 47 45-54 = 65 55-64 = 58 65 and over = 18	-.11	-.09	.16*	.004	-.16*	.08			
8. Job status	Low = 149 High = 60	-.07	.10	-.17*	.06	.04	.08	-.05		
9. Time with residents (Hours per shift)	None = 11 0 - < 1.5 = 43 1.5 - < 3 = 36 3 - < 5 = 37 5 - < 6.5 = 23 6.5 - < 8 = 78	.08	.02	.23**	.06	.08	.23**	.001	-.06	

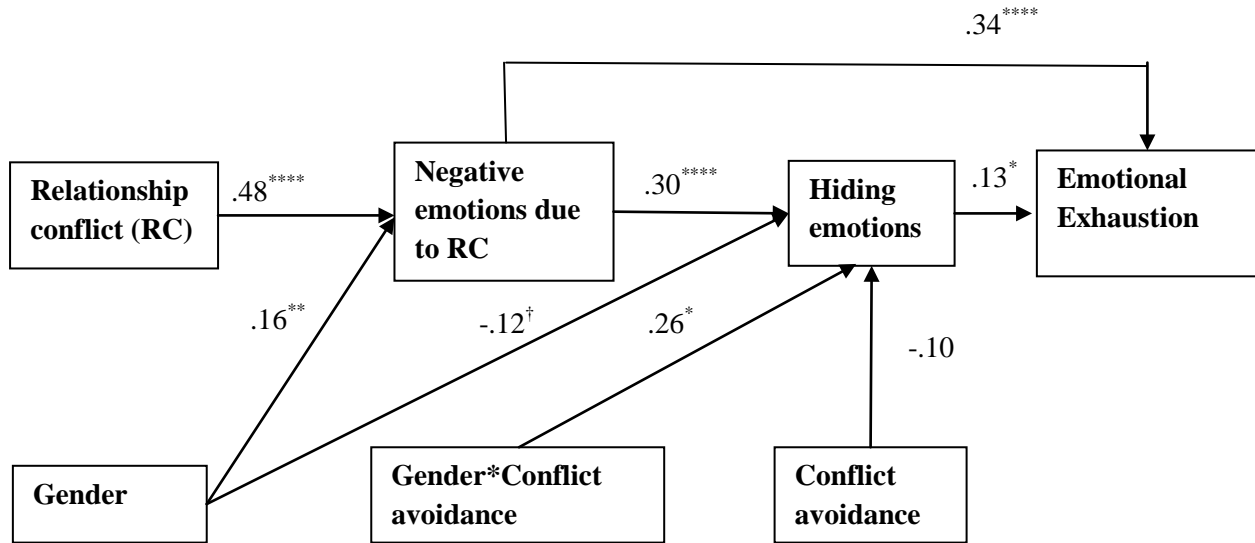
All variables collected at time 1 except for emotional exhaustion, which was collected at time 2. N = 232 (analyses only conducted on data from participants who completed surveys at both time 1 and time 2). Demographic data was collected at the end of the survey at time 1. Due to compliance issues and that reporting demographic information (including all control variables) was optional, some of the demographic variables (excluding gender) have missing data. Pearson correlation coefficients; Spearman correlation coefficients for categorical variables (gender, status, age and time with residents); *p < .05; **p < .01. Gender coded as 0=male and 1=female. Job status coded as 0 = low and 1 = high. Age coded as 1=Under 18, 2=18-25, 3=26-34, 4=35-44, 5=45-54, 6=55-64, 7=65 and over. Time with residents coded as 1 = None, 2 = 0-1.5, 3 = 1.5-3, 4 = 3-5, 5 = 5-6.5, 6 = 6.5-8 hours per shift.

Figure 1: Theoretical model



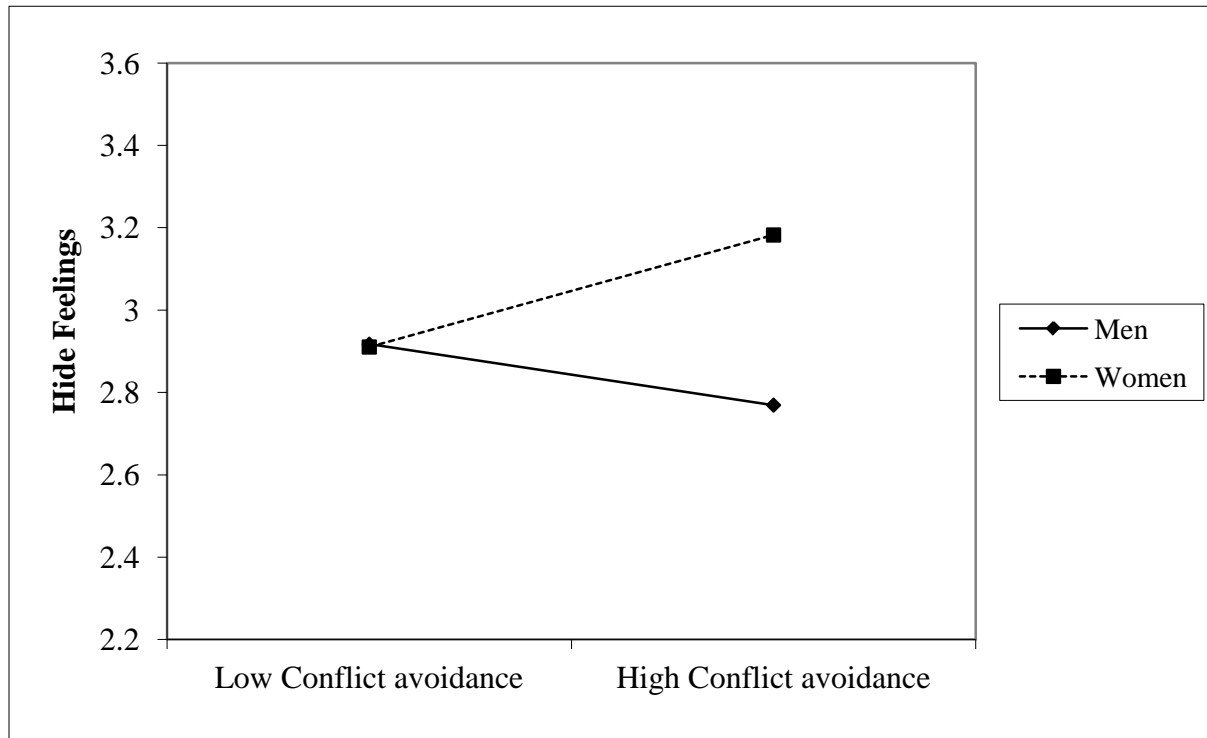
Note: Gender coded as 0 for men and 1 for women.

Figure 2: Structural model



Numbers next to arrows represent standardized regression weights from structural equation modeling. Model fit: $\chi^2[232] = 18.48$, $df = 10$, $p = .05$; NFI = .96, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .06, RMSEA confidence interval = .006, .103. † $p < .08$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ **** $p < .0001$. We also included a path from avoid to emotional labor, in order to control for the main effect of avoidance, but the path was not significant ($p = .41$). Gender coded as 0 for men and 1 for women.

Figure 3: Interaction between gender and avoidance on hiding emotions



Simple slope for women: $\beta = .20$, $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$; Simple slope for men: $\beta = -.11$, $t = -.84$, ns (Interaction statistics reflect multiple linear regression results after controlling for relationship conflict negative emotions, relationship conflict, age, status and time with residents.)