Putting Socio-Cognitive Conflict In Context:
Disagreements Are More Threatening In Competition

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Introduction

- Socio-cognitive conflict theory describes the psychological processes of resolving disagreements with others over the solution to a problem (e.g., Doise & Mugny, 1984)
- Socio-cognitive conflict can create curiosity, knowledge-seeking, and task engagement (Ohlsson, 1996) or it can be seen as a threat to one's own competence (Butera & Mugny, 2001)
- We hypothesized that competition would moderate an individual's response to conflict, such that:
  - In the *absence of competition*, conflict would lead to more task engagement and perceived competence than no conflict, but
  - In the *presence of competition*, conflict would be perceived as a threat and lead to less task engagement and lower perceptions of competence than no conflict

Study Design

- Fall 2005 laboratory study
- *n* = 163 Introductory Psychology students
- Tasks: Practice task of five 3x3 Boggle puzzles
  Performance task of two 4x4 Boggle puzzles
- Factorial Design: 2 (conflict: yes or no) x 2 (competition: yes or no)

Measures

(1) Anticipated Boggle enjoyment ($\alpha = .85$)
(2) Anticipated competence ($\alpha = .91$)
(3) Task involvement ($\alpha = .93$)
(4, 5) Perceived competence ($\alpha = .87$ before feedback, $\alpha = .89$ after feedback)
(6) Behavioral inclination to return to Boggle
  binary index coded yes = 1, no = 0

Procedure

Participants...
(1) Came to lab in pairs but worked in separate lab rooms ostensibly connected via Ethernet
(2) Solved five 3x3 Boggle puzzles and then saw the other participant's solutions

A	I	R
X	F	E
W	D	Q

No Conflict: Participants saw the same word they had typed in (e.g., "AIR")

Conflict: Participants saw a different word than they had typed in (e.g., "FED")

(3) Then solved two 4x4 Boggle puzzles, either in competition with the other participant or independently
(4) All participants were given positive feedback ("won" in competition; "above average" in non-competition)
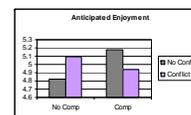
Analyses

Continuous measures were analyzed using multiple regression.

The binary measure of behavioral inclination was analyzed using logistic regression.
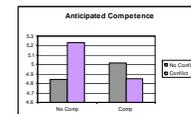
Results

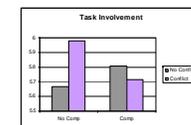An overall pattern of competition x conflict interactions was documented in the predicted direction:

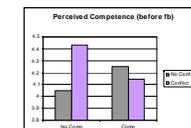*Anticipated Enjoyment*
(interaction $\beta = -.16$, p = .07)

Anticipated Competence
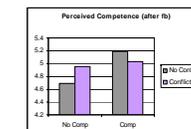(interaction $\beta = -.19$, p = .04)

Task Involvement
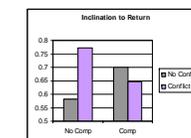(interaction $\beta = -.23$, p = .01)

Perceived Competence (before feedback)
(interaction $\beta = -.16$, p = .09)

Perceived Competence (after feedback)
(interaction $\beta = -.15$, p = .09)

Inclination to Return
(interaction B = -.42, p = .03)

Conclusions

- These results shed light on how social context can change the experience of socio-cognitive conflict
- In **non-competitive** settings, conflict engages individuals, increasing enjoyment, involvement, and perceptions of competence
- But in **competition**, conflict leads to less engagement, suggesting that the disagreement is perceived as threatening
- Additional studies addressing anxiety and worry will investigate the role of threat in competitive conflict situations

References

- Butera, F., & Mugny, G. (2001). Conflicts and social influences in hypothesis testing. In C. K. W. De Dreu & N. K. De Vries (Eds.), Group consensus and minority influence: Implications for innovation (pp. 161–182). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Doise, S., & Mugny, G. (1984). The social development of the intellect. New York: Pergamon.
- Ohlsson, S. (1996). Learning from performance errors. Psychological Review, 103, 241–262.