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Relationship conflict, low goodwill trust, innovation propensity—and help? How to encourage helping behaviors even in conflict-laden work settings

Dirk De Clercq

Goodman School of Business
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario L2S 3A1
Tel. +1 905 688 5550
ddeclercq@brocku.ca

Renato Pereira

Business Research Unit
ISCTE Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
Avenida das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal
and
Emerging Markets Research Center
ISCIM, Maputo, Mozambique
Renato.Pereira@iscte-iul.pt

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Abstract

To unpack the link between employees' relationship conflict and helping behaviors, this study postulates a mediating role of the extent to which employees exhibit low goodwill trust in coworkers and a moderating role of their innovation propensity. As the findings confirm, emotion-laden conflict compromises employees' propensities to assist coworkers because they believe that they cannot count on coworkers' goodwill, which, as we theorize, is informed by their desire to protect their self-esteem. The extent to which employees derive joy from generating novel ideas subdues this process. This study points to a notable mechanism (low goodwill trust) by which emotion-based tensions translate into low voluntarism and how this process is disrupted by an intrinsic motivation for innovation.

Keywords: relationship conflict; goodwill trust; helping behavior; innovation propensity; conservation of resources theory

Introduction

Employees can add to their own, their firm's, and their coworkers' success by helping one another voluntarily (Liang et al., 2015; Peng & Zeng, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Such discretionary helping behavior may take different guises—listening to others' work-related problems, asking their personal opinions, passing along valuable information—but it is not detailed in formal job descriptions (Poile, 2019; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Helping activities tend to enhance group and organizational performance (Bachrach et al., 2006; Lorinkova & Perry, 2019) and can benefit the helpers too, because when employees go out of their way to assist others, they likely feel a sense of personal accomplishment (Lemoine et al., 2015), receive reciprocal assistance with their own tasks (Korsgaard et al., 2010), or adjust better to organizational norms (Jia et al., 2021). Previous studies identify favorable work conditions that can encourage employees to engage in productive helping behaviors, including transformational leadership (Lim & Moon, 2022), team diversity (Liang et al., 2015), a sense of being paid for performance (He et al., 2021), and organizational climates marked by procedural justice (Shin et al., 2015).

Yet a parallel research stream indicates that adverse, resource-draining situations may threaten to steer employees *away* from helping behavior, to the extent that these conditions undermine their motivation or stamina to go out of their way to assist other members. For example, employees are less likely to extend help to coworkers if they experience family-to-work conflict (De Clercq et al., 2019c), workplace ostracism (Peng & Zeng, 2017), abusive supervision (Zhao & Guo, 2019), or a dissatisfying job (De Clercq et al., 2019a). Similarly, if they suffer *relationship conflict*—defined as the extent to which their interactions with coworkers are marked by emotion-based tensions (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2021;

Kammerhoff et al., 2019)¹—employees are less likely to offer voluntary support to coworkers (Lu et al., 2011). With this study, we seek to delineate *why* and *when* relationship conflict with coworkers might transform into low helping behavior, so that we can offer organizational decision makers detailed insights into how employees’ reactions to negative relationship dynamics might make the adverse situation worse and prompt even more conflict (Podsakoff et al., 2014)—and then how this harmful process might be contained.²

First, the negative connection between relationship conflict and helping behavior may emerge because employees exhibit low levels of *goodwill trust* in coworkers. As explicated by De Clercq (2020), goodwill trust refers to employees’ beliefs in the “honesty and truthfulness” of coworkers (p. 168) and their associated convictions that coworkers “would not take advantage of them, even if the opportunity arose” (p. 173). Although not identical, the notion of goodwill trust aligns closely with the benevolence dimension of trust, which Mayer and colleagues (1995) identify as one of three critical trust dimensions (with ability and morality). It captures employees’ beliefs that their coworkers want to do good and are not focused solely on their own interests (Mayer et al., 1995). Notably, we consider the extent to which employees exhibit *low* goodwill trust in coworkers, not their levels of distrust. This nuance is critical, because trust and distrust are not the opposite ends of the same continuum (Guo et al., 2017; Sitkin & Roth, 1993); “it is possible for parties to both trust and distrust one another, given different experiences within the various facets of complex interpersonal relationships” (Lewicki et al., 1998, p. 440). More generally, we propose a mediating role of (low) goodwill trust, which is consistent with

¹ Relationship conflict differs from task conflict, which is content-based and captures the extent to which employees’ opinions differ from coworkers’, as well as from process conflict, which is procedurally oriented and refers to the extent to which employees adopt different perspectives on how to execute work tasks (Jehn, 1995).

² Our empirical design cannot specify whether relationship conflict experienced in interactions with coworkers leads to diminished goodwill trust and helping behaviors targeted at precisely the *same* coworkers, but the theoretical arguments we develop imply that the coworkers are the same. We elaborate on this point in the “Limitations and future research” section.

conservation of resources (COR) theory, according to which employees seek to cope with self-depreciating thoughts evoked by resource-depleting situations (Bentein et al., 2017). As De Dreu and Weingart (2003, p. 156) assert, “being in conflict threatens one’s self-esteem.” Moreover, Zheng et al. (2019) indicate that low trust in other members may harm employees’ sense of self-worth with respect to their professional functioning (Zheng et al., 2019). Following COR theory, we accordingly theorize that employees’ low goodwill trust in response to relationship conflict, as well as their low helping behavior in response to low goodwill trust, may stem from a desire to avoid self-deprecating thoughts and protect their remaining self-esteem resources (Hobfoll, 2001).

Second, and also in line with the logic of COR theory, the extent to which employees adopt self-protective responses to emotion-based tensions likely depends on whether they possess personal resources that can mitigate the experienced hardships (Hobfoll et al., 2018). We specifically predict that their *innovation propensity*—defined as their intrinsic motivation to develop new ideas and solutions at work (Tierney et al., 1999)—might buffer against self-damaging thoughts that come with emotion-based conflicts (Kim & Beehr, 2018) and associated beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers (Zheng et al., 2019). Other personal resources can play buffering roles too, but our focus is informed by recent research on the critical role of employees’ creative or innovative propensities in helping them deal with work-related hardships, such as role ambiguity (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017), aversive leadership (Choi et al., 2009), family-to-work conflict (De Clercq, 2020), or workplace bullying (De Clercq, 2022). This latter study is particularly useful for our purposes, in that it details how an innovation propensity enables employees to fend off threats to their self-esteem resources in the presence of adverse coworker relationships (De Clercq, 2022).

These considerations inform several research contributions. First, we propose and empirically demonstrate how relationship conflict, a pertinent threat to employees' sense of self-worth (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Kim & Beehr, 2018), reduces the likelihood that employees go out of their way to help coworkers with their job tasks, as informed by their low goodwill trust in coworkers. When upset by emotion-laden conflicts, employees' beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers might make them reluctant to exert voluntary work efforts that offer no formal guarantees of rewards (Rispens et al., 2007). As previous studies have shown, voluntary work behaviors are inhibited by relationship conflict (Lu et al., 2011; Pooja et al., 2016). We add to this research stream by detailing how employees' convictions that coworkers might take advantage of them can explain this dynamic. The findings thus offer a fuller theoretical understanding of the danger of a possible counterproductive *spiral*, in which employees suffer emotion-based tensions with colleagues, then develop less positive perceptions about those colleagues' goodwill, and ultimately become complacent in their helping efforts, which might fuel retaliation by colleagues and exacerbate tensions even further (Lorinkova & Perry, 2019).

Second, to provide a necessary contingency perspective on the detrimental consequences of emotion-based conflict (Cheung et al., 2022; Jiang et al. 2021), we establish how a low probability of helping behavior, in response to relationship conflict and subsequent low goodwill trust in coworkers, might be avoided if employees feel driven to find novel solutions to problem situations (Hormiga et al., 2013; Tierney et al., 1999). As extant research points out, the harmful outcomes of emotion-laden quarrels do not surface automatically. Positive contextual conditions, such as informal peer relationships (Pooja et al., 2016) or supervisor mentoring (Ismael et al., 2012), as well as personal conditions, such as their own passion (Lin & Chen, 2016), can enable employees to deal with the associated hardships. We identify another important buffer:

innovation propensity, which is a notable source of positive work energy in contentious coworker relationships (De Clercq, 2022). The creative insights that this personal characteristic tends to prompt may mitigate the mediating effect of low goodwill trust, by which relationship conflict steers employees away from dedicated helping efforts. We accordingly reveal an unexplored instrument employees can use to *shield* themselves from the risk that their apathetic responses to emotion-laden quarrels might backfire and distance coworkers even more.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Conservation of resources theory

As mentioned, our conceptual arguments about the mediating role of goodwill trust and moderating role of innovation propensity are anchored in COR theory. One key premise of this theory, as explicated by Halbesleben and colleagues (2014, p. 1337), is that a “lack of resources leads to defensive attempts to conserve remaining resources.” In work settings, this premise implies that employees’ exposure to adverse situations that threaten their resource bases—such as when they maintain adverse relationships with other organizational members—tends to direct them toward protective beliefs and behaviors, such that they are able to *cope* with the adverse situations (Al-Hawari et al., 2020; De Clercq, 2022). Another tenet of COR theory is that people’s access to personal resources that make the hardships experienced in the presence of resource-draining conditions less severe can *buffer* this dynamic (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). For example, employees’ ingratiation skills (Azeem et al., 2021) and religiosity (Haq et al., 2022) make it less likely that they respond to workplace incivility and job insecurity, respectively, with negative work beliefs or actions.

One resource that is highly valuable to employees, such that they actively seek to protect it—according to Hobfoll’s (2001) initial work and subsequent implementations of COR theory

(e.g., Bedi, 2021; Bentein et al., 2017; Haq et al., 2021)—is self-esteem or a sense of self-worth. As previous studies underscore, exposure to emotion-laden conflict (Kim & Beehr, 2018) and low trust in other people (Bao et al., 2016) elicit self-depreciating thoughts in employees. According to COR theory, low goodwill trust in coworkers and associated refusals to exhibit helping behaviors represent reasonable responses to relationship conflict, because these reactions help them *express* their dismay and thus avoid further depletion of their self-esteem resources (Bentein et al., 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Moreover, an intrinsic drive for innovation might offer a personal resource that decreases the perceived need for such responses (Hormiga et al., 2013; Tierney et al., 1999). According to prior research (De Clercq, 2022), employees' innovative propensities can help them contain threats to their self-esteem resources, as caused by workplace bullying, such that they exhibit a lower propensity to vent their frustration with negative gossip behavior. We propose a similar buffering role of innovation propensity in relation to the self-damaging thoughts that they experience in the presence of emotion-based conflict and their subsequent beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers.

Figure 1 summarizes the proposed conceptual framework and its constitutive hypotheses. We purposefully formulate these hypotheses as pertaining to employees' *low* goodwill trust (instead of high levels of such trust), to be consistent with our theoretical arguments about the resource drainage that stems from relationship conflict and beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers, as well as to accentuate the *mitigating* effect of innovation propensity on the explanatory role of such beliefs. Moreover, our theorizing addresses how employees' low confidence in the goodwill of coworkers functions as a *focal* explanatory mechanism of the link

between relationship conflict and helping behavior. We therefore do not hypothesize a direct connection between relationship conflict and helping behavior.³

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Mediating role of goodwill trust

We predict a positive link between employees' experience of relationship conflict and their beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers. According to COR theory (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000), the frustrations that arise with emotion-laded conflicts may compromise employees' sense of self-worth to such a degree that they look for a culprit; for example, they may lose confidence that their coworkers would not exploit them, had they the opportunity to do so (Kim & Beehr, 2018; Lau & Cobb, 2010). When employees sense threats to their self-worth, due to emotion-laden conflicts (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), they may formulate doubts about the goodwill of their coworkers, as a means to release their disappointment and avoid further drainage of their self-esteem resources (Bowling et al., 2010). Their low goodwill trust in coworkers, at its core, serves as a coping tactic that enables them to express their beliefs that their coworkers are at fault for the adverse relationships dynamics (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Rispens et al., 2007). Exposure to emotion-based quarrels likely feels less threatening to their positive self-image in this case, because employees are able to shift responsibility for their experienced hardships from themselves to their colleagues (Lau & Cobb, 2010). Employees who suffer emotion-based conflicts also may interpret the resource-depleting situation as evidence of limited concern among coworkers for their professional well-being (Pooja et al., 2016; Shaukat et al. 2017), which employees may associate with a high probability that the coworkers will take advantage of them, if doing so would improve the coworkers' work situation. Finally, their annoyance with

³ A direct effect hypothesis would necessitate an explication of different reasons, *other* than low goodwill trust, for why relationship conflict might escalate into low helping behavior; this is beyond the theoretical scope of this study.

emotion-laden quarrels may grow into a conviction that coworkers are not concerned about their *personal* well-being (Wong & Chan, 2020), which further generates low confidence in their goodwill (Lau & Cobb, 2010).

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between employees' experience of relationship conflict and the extent to which they have low goodwill trust in coworkers.

Employees with low goodwill trust in coworkers also should be less likely to help coworkers voluntarily. As mentioned, when employees have weaker beliefs in the goodwill of their colleagues, their self-esteem resources are threatened (Zheng et al., 2019). If they find a way to “get back” at these colleagues, by rejecting extra-role work activities, employees may find it easier to protect and maintain their remaining self-esteem, despite their low confidence in their coworkers' goodwill (Shin et al., 2015; Van Dyne et al., 2000). For example, self-damaging reflections initiated by a sense that they cannot count on the goodwill of their peers likely curtail discretionary helping activities, because the focal employees can protect their sense of self-worth by conserving their precious energy, instead of allocating it to colleagues who seemingly are not deserving of such efforts (Peng & Lin, 2017). In addition, from a COR perspective, employees' reluctance to help, as a reaction to their low goodwill trust in coworkers, might stem from their search for resource *gains*, in the form of a sense of personal fulfillment (Hobfoll et al., 2018). If they have convictions that they cannot count on the goodwill of their peers, employees may experience secret satisfaction from refusing requests for help from those colleagues (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shin et al., 2015). Likewise, employees who have low confidence in the goodwill of their coworkers likely are not motivated to support the professional success of these coworkers by contributing voluntarily help to them (Peng & Lin, 2017; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014).

Hypothesis 2: There is a negative relationship between the extent to which employees have low goodwill trust in coworkers and their helping behavior.

We integrate these considerations to predict a mediating effect of (low) goodwill trust. Experiencing emotion-based quarrels in peer relationships increases the chances that employees stop helping, *because* they hold beliefs in the low goodwill of their coworkers (Lau & Cobb, 2010). When they are upset by persistent emotion-based tensions in interpersonal interactions, the probability that employees direct personal energy to extra-role work behaviors to assist coworkers is low, as a reflection of their low confidence in the good intentions of coworkers (Rispens et al., 2007). Extant research similarly identifies a mediating role of high trust in the link between *favorable* work conditions, such as supervisory procedural justice (Yang et al., 2009), transformational leadership (Zhu & Akhtar, 2014), or authentic leadership (Hirst et al., 2016), and enhanced helping behaviors. We complement these studies by postulating a mediating role of low goodwill trust, in the presence of unfavorable conditions marked by emotion-laden quarrels.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' low goodwill trust in coworkers mediates the relationship between their experience of relationship conflict and their helping behavior.

Moderating role of innovation propensity

The probability that energy-depleting, emotion-based conflict translates into low goodwill trust should be lower if employees have a strong, intrinsic drive toward new idea development. This personal resource enables employees to find novel solutions to adverse work conditions (De Clercq, 2022). For example, employees who enjoy seeking ways to create something new may experience emotion-based quarrels as an opportunity to learn about how to deal with this unfavorable interpersonal treatment or even enhance the quality of coworker exchanges (Hormiga et al., 2013; Tierney et al., 1999). Such learning benefits then might decrease self-damaging thoughts about their work functioning in the presence of emotion-based conflict (Shaukat et al., 2017), so they experience a lower need to vent their irritation with the

conflict by exhibiting low goodwill trust in coworkers (Lau & Cobb, 2010). Moreover, employees who derive joy from generating innovative ideas tend to enjoy a sense of personal accomplishment if they can identify pertinent solutions to difficult work situations (Amabile & Pratt, 1996). For these employees, the possibility of finding ways to cope with resource-draining relationship conflict, without having to resort to expressing doubts about the goodwill of their coworkers, likely is appealing, because it grants them individual fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Hypothesis 4: The positive relationship between employees' experience of relationship conflict and the extent to which they have low goodwill trust in coworkers is moderated by their innovation propensity, such that this relationship is weaker at higher levels of innovation propensity.

Furthermore, the likelihood that employees' low goodwill trust in coworkers diminishes their helping behaviors should be subdued among employees with strong innovation propensities. The possibility of finding novel solutions to the frustrations that come with doubts about the goodwill of coworkers likely enables them to avoid self-depreciating thoughts and the corresponding hesitation to assist coworkers voluntarily (Tierney et al., 1999; Van Dyne et al., 2000). Insights and novel ideas also might help them realize that their low goodwill trust in coworkers is unwarranted and colored by personal biases (Mayer & Tomlinson, 2009), so it becomes less likely that they resort to these convictions to justify their halted helping (Shin et al., 2015). In contrast, employees who lack any strong intrinsic interest in innovation might retain the notion that their beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers are reasonable excuses for avoiding helping behaviors (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). These employees likely feel greater dismay about the possibility that their coworkers would exploit them, if they had the opportunity to do so (Gallagher et al., 2016), and thus exhibit a stronger desire not to spend significant time helping undeserving coworkers.

Hypothesis 5: The negative relationship between the extent to which employees have low goodwill trust in coworkers and their helping behavior is moderated by their innovation propensity, such that this relationship is weaker at higher levels of innovation propensity.

By combining these considerations, we predict a moderated mediation dynamic.

Employees' innovation propensity represents a personal contingency that influences the indirect negative link between relationship conflict and helping behavior, through low goodwill trust in coworkers. Among employees who can rely on the insights derived from their intrinsic motivation to develop new ideas (Tierney et al., 1999), the role of their beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers, in driving the escalation of relationship conflict into reduced helping behavior, should be subdued. This personal resource decreases the probability that employees suffer depleted self-esteem resources, as a result of their experience of emotion-laden quarrels (Kim & Beehr, 2018), and the resulting diminished sense that their coworkers would not take advantage of them, if an opportunity to do so presented itself (Zheng et al., 2019).

Hypothesis 6: The indirect negative relationship between employees' experience of relationship conflict and their helping behavior, through their low goodwill trust in coworkers, is moderated by their innovation propensity, such that this indirect relationship is weaker at higher levels of innovation propensity.

Research method

Data collection and sample

The hypotheses were tested with data collected among employees who work for an organization that operates in the protection equipment sector in Spain. The organization employs more than 300 employees and sells multiple products, such as boots, helmets, and face masks. With our focus on one organization in one specific industry, we diminish the probability of unobserved differences in terms of how external industry factors or organizational-level features that are not part of our theoretical framework might influence employees' propensities to engage in voluntary work behaviors (Hodson, 2002; Podsakoff et al., 2009). In addition, the cultural

context of Spain is interesting in light of two possible *competing* dynamics with respect to the tested theoretical framework. On the one hand, its relatively high levels of uncertainty avoidance may cause employees to experience resource-depleting, emotion-laden conflicts as especially intrusive, such that they react forcefully with beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers and a refusal to engage in helping behavior (Hofstede et al., 2010). On the other hand, its collectivistic nature might encourage employees to continue helping colleagues with their job tasks, even if the employees are not completely satisfied with these interactions (Baeza & Wang, 2016). Considering these contrasting forces, Spain offers a compelling setting in which to examine how and when employees' exposure to relationship conflict, and associated low goodwill trust in coworkers, may constrain their helping behavior.

The data were collected with a survey instrument, subjected to the well-established combination of translation and back-translation steps (Brislin, 1986). The first version, written in English, was translated into Spanish by a bilingual translator, then back-translated into English by another professional who was also fluent in the two languages. After fixing a few minor discrepancies, the final version was administered in Spanish. The list of all organizational employees served as the sample frame, and we used a random generator technique to select 250 possible participants. The contacted persons were promised full confidentiality and informed that they could fill out the survey anonymously. We also clarified that their participation was voluntary, that they could remove themselves from the research at any time, and that any reports from the 250 employees we contacted initially, we received 190 responses (response rate = 76%). This sample included 47% women, and 62% had worked for their organization for more than five years.

Measures

The constructs were assessed with measurement items from extant research that feature Likert-based statements and endpoints ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Relationship conflict. To assess employees' exposure to emotion-based quarrels in their interactions with coworkers, we applied a four-item scale of relationship or interpersonal conflict that has been used in previous studies on emotion-laden conflict situations (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2021; Pooja et al., 2016).⁴ Two example items were "There often are tensions in the relationship between my coworkers and myself" and "My coworkers and I often get angry while working together" (Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Goodwill trust. We measured employees' beliefs in the goodwill of their coworkers with a five-item scale of goodwill trust, which has been used in prior investigations of the quality of intra-firm relationships (De Clercq, 2020; De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017). The participants rated, for instance, whether "My colleagues would not take advantage of me, even if the opportunity arose" and "My coworkers are perfectly honest and truthful with me" (Cronbach's alpha = .86).

Helping behavior. Employees' propensity to exert themselves to provide voluntary assistance to their coworkers was assessed with a seven-item scale of helping behavior (Williams & Anderson, 1991). Two sample items were "I assist my coworkers with their work, even when not asked" and "I take time to listen to my coworkers' problems and worries" (Cronbach's alpha = .93). Such self-ratings align with prior research (e.g., Lin et al., 2020; Rubenstein et al., 2019) and with the logic that employees have a more complete understanding of their own specific helping activities targeted toward colleagues. Other raters, such as their supervisor or an

⁴The terms relationship conflict and interpersonal conflict have been applied interchangeably in prior research (e.g., Parayitam et al., 2010; Venz & Nesher, 2022).

individual peer, tend to have more restricted views of how much time employees allocate or the extent of activities they undertake (Chan, 2009).

Innovation propensity. To assess employees' intrinsic motivation to develop novel ideas and solutions, we applied a five-item scale of innovation propensity (Tierney et al., 1999). The respondents reported, for instance, whether "I enjoy creating new procedures for work tasks" and "I enjoy finding novel solutions to complex problems" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Control variables. The estimated models included the effects of two control variables: gender (1 = female) and organizational tenure (1 = 5 years or less, 2 = 6–10 years, 3 = 11–15 years, 4 = 16–20 years, 5 = more than 20 years). Women tend to be more helpful in the workplace than their male counterparts (Belansky & Boggiano, 1994); employees who have been employed by the organization for a longer time may exhibit a greater motivation to express their loyalty by undertaking voluntary work behaviors (Seppälä et al., 2012).

Construct validity. The validity of the focal constructs was assessed by estimating a four-factor measurement model with a confirmatory factor analysis. This model achieved good fit: $\chi^2(183) = 453.48$, comparative fit index = .92, incremental fit index = .92, Tucker-Lewis index = .90, and root mean squared error of approximation = .09. The presence of convergent validity was confirmed by the strongly significant factor loading of each item on its corresponding construct ($p < .001$) and by the average variance extracted (AVE), which consistently exceeded the cut-off of .50 (Hair et al., 2019), ranging between .61 and .79. The condition of discriminant validity also was met; each AVE was greater than the squared correlations of the associated construct pairs. Further, the fit of the six models that included unconstrained construct pairs, in which the correlations between two constructs were allowed to vary, was significantly better

($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} > 3.84, p < .05$) than the fit of the corresponding constrained construct pairs, in which these correlations were set to equal 1 (Hair et al., 2019).

Common method bias. We undertook two tests to assess whether common method bias might be a problem. First, we ran an exploratory factor analysis to check whether one factor, on which all the measurement items of the four focal constructs load, explains most of the variance in the data. The first extracted factor in this analysis explained only 41% of the total data variance, which decreases concerns about bias due to a common respondent (Biswas et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2020). Second, we undertook a confirmatory factor analysis to compare the fit of a four-factor model with that of a one-factor model. The first model generated significantly better fit than that of the second model ($\chi^2(6) = 1,572.04, p < .001$), which offered additional evidence contrary to the presence of common method bias (Hair et al., 2019). From a conceptual angle, the likelihood of such bias also is substantially mitigated when testing theoretical frameworks that include one or more moderating effects, because it is difficult for participants to predict these effects and adapt their responses accordingly (De Clercq et al., 2019b; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Empirical analysis

We tested the research hypotheses with the Process macro, as part of the SPSS software package, which estimates individual paths in combination with mediation and moderated mediation effects. With a bootstrapping technique, we explicitly accounted for a scenario in which the effects may be skewed and not normally distributed (Hayes, 2018). To assess mediation, we calculated the indirect link between relationship conflict and helping behavior through goodwill trust, as well as its corresponding confidence interval (CI), using the Process macro's Model 4 (Hayes, 2018). In this step, we also assessed the signs and significance levels

of the associated direct paths between relationship conflict and goodwill trust and between goodwill trust and helping behavior. With regard to the moderated mediation prediction, we estimated the CIs for the *conditional* indirect effects of relationship conflict at various levels of innovation propensity. In line with the theoretical framework, this estimation relied on the Process macro's Model 58 (Hayes, 2018), such that we considered the moderating effects of innovation propensity on the paths between relationship conflict and goodwill trust *and* between goodwill trust and helping behavior.

Results

The zero-order correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics are in Table 1. The mediation results generated with the Process macro are in Table 2. As they show, relationship conflict was negatively related to goodwill trust ($\beta = -.235, p < .001$, Hypothesis 1), which was positively related to helping behavior ($\beta = .239, p < .001$, Hypothesis 2). The positive sign of this second relationship aligns with our theorizing, according to which the extent to which employees have *low* goodwill trust in coworkers is negatively related to their helping behavior. The test of mediation revealed an effect size of $-.056$ for the indirect negative relationship between relationship conflict and helping behavior through (low) goodwill trust, and its CI did *not* span 0 $[-.101, -.022]$, signaling the presence of mediation, as predicted in Hypothesis 3.⁵

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here].

Table 3 reveals a positive, significant effect of the relationship conflict \times innovation propensity interaction term ($\beta = .106, p < .01$, Hypothesis 4) in predicting goodwill trust, along with a negative, significant effect of the goodwill trust \times innovation propensity interaction term ($\beta = -.120, p < .05$, Hypothesis 5) for the prediction of helping behavior. As the Process macro

⁵ Interestingly, the Process results also indicated that the CI for the direct link between relationship conflict and helping behavior did not include 0 $[-.316; -.097]$, which suggests that other mechanisms, different from low goodwill trust, underpin this link too.

results show, the negative relationship between relationship conflict and goodwill trust was subdued at increasing levels of innovation propensity (-.305 at one standard deviation [SD] below the mean, -.156 at the mean, -.029 at one SD above the mean). For the second constitutive relationship, we found diminishing effect sizes for the positive relationship between goodwill trust and helping behavior at greater levels of innovation propensity (.382 at one SD below the mean, .214 at the mean, .070 at one SD above the mean).

[Insert Table 3 about here].

The signs of the two interaction terms align with the proposed buffering effects of innovation propensity on the two relationships that constitute the mediation link, as shown in Figure 2, which feature *weaker* slopes at higher levels of innovation propensity. First, in Figure 2A, the translation of relationship conflict into lower goodwill trust is subdued at higher levels of this personal resource, in support of Hypothesis 4. Second, to make the interaction plot in Figure 2B consistent with the proposed theoretical framework, we designed it to show the effect of *decreasing* levels of goodwill trust on helping behavior. The downward slopes of the two lines indicate that lower levels of goodwill trust are associated with lower levels of helping behavior. Critically for our theorizing, the downward slope is less pronounced at higher levels of innovation propensity, consistent with a buffering role of this personal feature and Hypothesis 5.

[Insert Figures 2A–2B about here]

As an explicit assessment of moderated mediation, we compared the strength of the conditional *indirect* relationship between relationship conflict and helping behavior through low goodwill trust at various levels of innovation propensity. In Table 3, weaker effect sizes occurred at higher levels of this personal resource: from -.116 at one SD below the mean, to -.033 at the mean, to -.002 at one SD above the mean. The CIs did not include 0 at either of the two lower

levels of innovation propensity ($[-.213; -.056]$ and $[-.069; -.005]$, respectively), but the CI spanned 0 at its most elevated level ($[-.019; .025]$). That is, innovation propensity mitigated the negative indirect relationship between relationship conflict and helping behavior, through low goodwill trust, in support of Hypothesis 6 and the proposed theoretical framework.

Discussion

A first theoretical takeaway of this study is its articulation of how employees' annoyance with emotion-based conflict dampens their extra-role work efforts toward coworkers, because of the less favorable beliefs that they hold about whether they can count on the goodwill of coworkers (De Clercq, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2016). Consistent with COR theory, employees react to resource-draining coworker treatment with low confidence that coworkers would not take advantage of them, had they the opportunity to do so, and then behavioral apathy, as a way to express their dismay and decrease pertinent threats to their sense of self-worth (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). These findings are interesting in light of prior research, undertaken in the context of employee–manager dyads, that shows how perceptions of managerial trustworthy behavior may spur employees to engage in voluntary work efforts, even in the face of conflict (Korsgaard et al., 2002). Further, Kacmar and colleagues (2021) find that trust in the supervisor mediates the link between employee organizational citizenship behavior and the level of relationship conflict between employees and supervisors. The mediation link that we identify operates in the reverse direction and provides an interesting addition to the traditional understanding of COR theory. In particular, this theory tends to focus on how employees respond to resource-draining situations, in ways that enable them to *avoid* additional resource losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014). But our study pinpoints the danger of a possible *harmful* process that employees might inflict on themselves, perhaps inadvertently, whereby one unfavorable workplace condition (never-ending,

emotion-based tensions) begets another (complacency toward coworkers), which then might further undermine the quality of already strained interpersonal relations (Podsakoff et al., 2014). To the extent that their lethargic reactions are poorly received by colleagues, employees might shoot themselves in the proverbial foot, if they are victimized by additional emotion-based tensions.

Another useful insight is that this counterproductive process can be *averted* if employees feel personally driven to find novel solutions to experienced adversity (Tierney et al., 1999). When they possess a high level of innovation propensity, employees' beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers become less forceful conduits through which relationship conflict translates into the rejection of discretionary helping efforts. Consistent with the logic of COR theory (De Clercq, 2022; Hobfoll et al., 2018), depleted self-esteem resources that stem from adverse coworker relationships are less common among employees who possess personal characteristics that stimulate their drive for innovative ideas, which likely can provide pertinent solutions to the experienced frustrations. The probability that victims of relationship conflict exhibit low goodwill trust in their colleagues and then refuse to help with their work tasks decreases if they also have a strong intrinsic interest in coming up with novel ideas (Tierney et al., 1999). The resulting insights stimulate employees, irritated with emotion-laden interpersonal tensions, to maintain a certain level of helping efforts, because they believe that their colleagues would not exploit them, even if they had the opportunity to do so.

In summary, we expand previous research on work-related voluntarism by theorizing a functional role of innovation propensity in making it less likely that employees experience self-damaging thoughts in the presence of persistent emotion-based conflict and low goodwill trust in coworkers. This study thus complements prior evidence of a similar buffering role of this

personal resource in helping employees cope with self-deprecating thoughts that come with workplace bullying (De Clercq, 2022), as well as its *direct* beneficial role in spurring employees' organizational citizenship behavior (Shareef & Atan, 2019), creativity levels (Kong et al., 2019), or job crafting (Lee & Song, 2020). We pinpoint another indirect, functional role. An innovative drive limits the harmful effect of low goodwill trust in coworkers in the escalation of relationship conflict into thwarted helping behaviors. This personal boundary condition reduces the risk of a dysfunctional dynamic, in which intrusive emotion-based conflict and associated beliefs in the low goodwill of coworkers leave employees unwilling to stretch themselves to assist other members with their jobs, even if such voluntarism could improve the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

Limitations and future research

This study admittedly has some shortcomings, which suggest avenues for continued research. First, and as mentioned in the Introduction, our theorizing reflects an assumption that the *same* group of coworkers are the source of relationship conflict, evoke low goodwill trust, and ultimately receive less helping behavior from the focal employee. Because we measured the study constructs with respect to coworkers *in general* though, instead of in reference to specific coworkers, we cannot assess this assumption empirically. Our empirical approach effectively diminishes the risk of expectancy bias though—that is, the risk that employees might predict the research hypotheses and adjust their responses accordingly (Malhotra, 2010). In addition, our empirical focus on employees in general provides a *conservative* test of the proposed relationships, because the presence of different coworkers may create some statistical noise in the data pertaining to the different constructs that constitute the mediation link. From this angle, the empirical support that we find for the hypotheses, despite the noise, corroborates the validity

of our results (Hair et al., 2019). Still, experimental research designs might enable insightful matches of specific coworkers, in terms of their links across the study's focal constructs.

Second, we cannot eliminate the possibility of reverse causality completely, even if the theoretical arguments that underpin the hypotheses are anchored in the robust COR theory, which explains that resource-depleting, emotion-based quarrels tend to generate negative beliefs about coworkers and less effortful work behaviors, because employees seek to avoid additional losses in resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). But a depletion of personal energy, due to exhaustion stemming from extensive helping efforts (Eissa & Lester, 2018), arguably might translate into poor perceptions of relationship quality with coworkers. Additional studies could apply longitudinal approaches and measure *each* key construct at distinct time intervals to estimate cross-lagged effects and establish a formal check of causality (Antonakis et al., 2010). A related research path might explicitly compare the theorized role of employees' desire to protect their sense of self-worth, in the proposed mediation link, with that of their experienced stress, which is a notable outcome of relationship conflict (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Friedman et al., 2000; Huang et al., 2016).

Third, the country setting is Spain. The conceptual arguments that inform the hypotheses are country-neutral, so the theorized relationships may differ in strength across countries, but their underlying nature should be consistent. It accordingly would be useful for continued research to undertake comparative investigations and formally assess how pertinent cultural characteristics influence the strength of the tested links. As mentioned in the Method section, Spain is an interesting context. Due to its uncertainty avoidance, emotion-based quarrels, which create turmoil, may feel highly intrusive, so employees react vigorously. Yet its collectivism and associated desire for group harmony may diminish the likelihood that they limit their own

voluntary efforts to contribute to coworkers' well-being (Hofstede et al., 2010). In providing empirical evidence in support of our research hypotheses, we show that the first dynamic might be more potent than the second, but this conclusion is speculative and requires further testing.

Practical implications

This study has significant value for organizational practice. Organizational decision makers should realize that a critical source of hardship for their employees is constant exposure to emotion-laden conflicts that permeate their interactions with organizational colleagues. These experiences can be harmful for all parties, to the extent that they steer employees away from discretionary helping efforts, which likely generate even more negative feelings among everyone involved (Podsakoff et al., 2014). Employees who feel upset about how little joy they derive from their peer interactions may find it reasonable that they should not waste their valuable resources on coworkers whose goodwill they suspect. We note a challenge though: Some employees may be reluctant to complain about their experienced emotion-based hardships, to avoid impressions of being a complainer or troublemaker (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). If organizations hope to encourage work-related voluntarism among their ranks, they should be vigilant to identify conflicts marked by strong negative emotions and eradicate their sources, such as incompatible personalities or rude exchanges (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Organization-wide initiatives might give employees space to identify the presence and causes of problematic relationship dynamics (Morrison, 2011); managers should leverage such initiatives to encourage employees to avoid allowing relationship-based frustrations to escalate into low goodwill trust and negative behavioral responses that can make the situation even worse.

In addition to understanding the harmful effects of relationship conflict, and eliminating its roots, this study has perhaps the most relevant suggestions for organizations in which some

relationship conflict is unavoidable. In such settings, employees must be cognizant that they are likely to hurt themselves if their negative reflections about emotion-laden quarrels translate into beliefs in the low goodwill of other members and then refusals to extend help. The study findings indicate that this counterproductive loop can be *disrupted* by encouraging employees to leverage valuable personal resources, such as their innovative propensities (Tierney et al., 1999). To the extent that organizations can get employees enthusiastic about new ideas to address relational adversity, they are better placed to keep their employee bases motivated to stretch themselves in taking a personal interest in the professional well-being of coworkers too, even if emotion-based tensions and trust issues persist. Ultimately, employees who derive personal joy from generating novel solutions may be less likely to develop pessimistic opinions about emotion-laden quarrels and low confidence in the goodwill of coworkers, such that they remain involved in work activities that contribute to individual and collective well-being.

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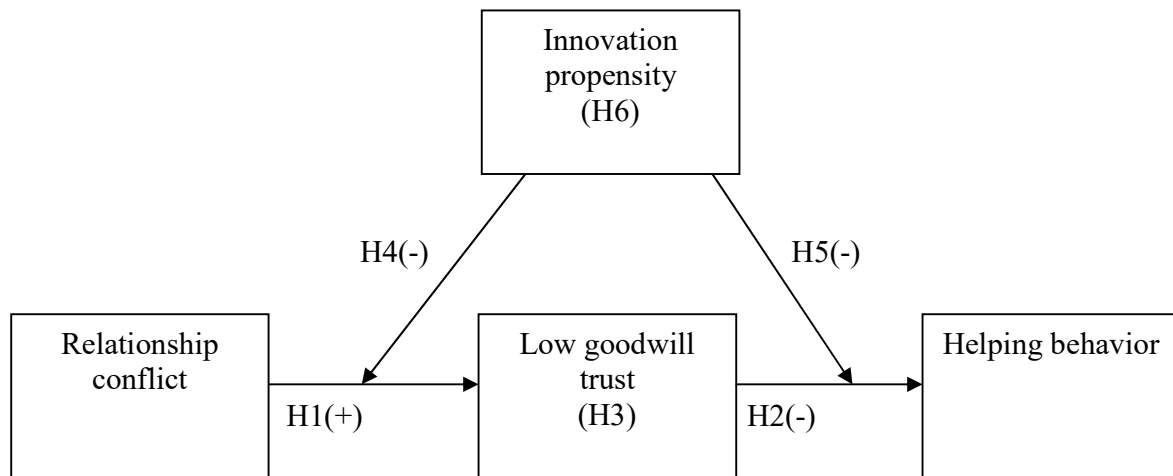
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Figure 1: Conceptual model



Notes: H3 refers to the mediating role of limited goodwill trust, and H6 captures the moderating influence of innovation propensity on this mediating effect.

Figure 2A: Moderating effect of innovation propensity on the link between *increasing* relationship conflict and goodwill trust

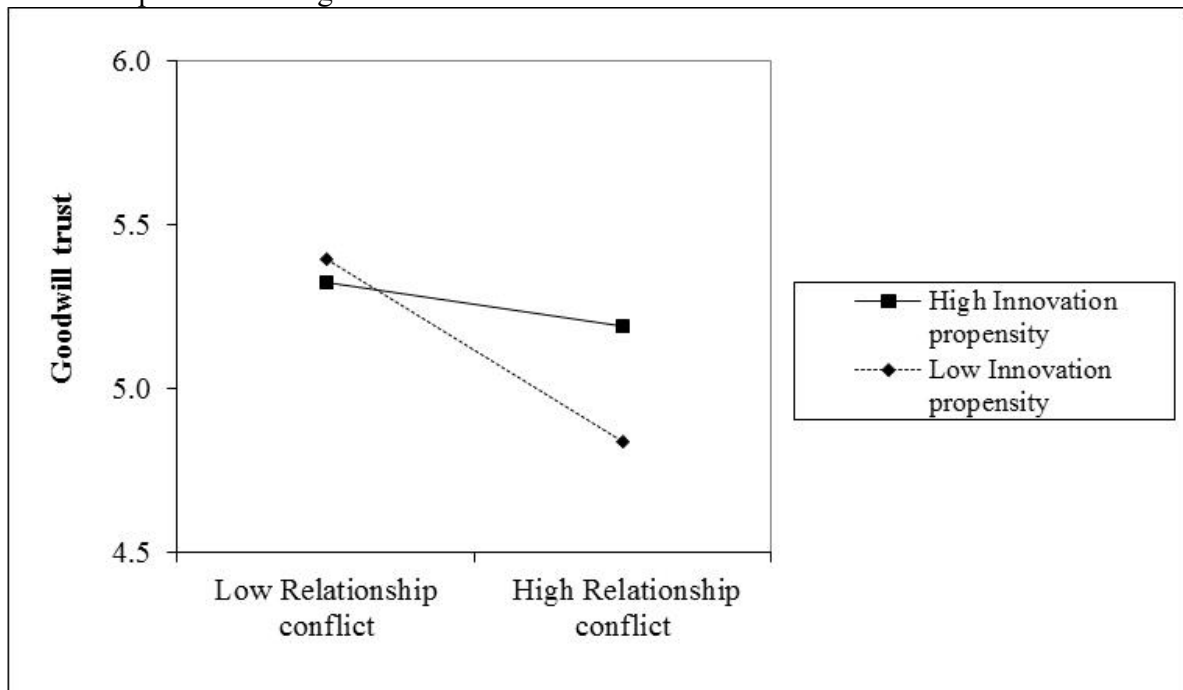


Figure 2B: Moderating effect of innovation propensity on the relationship between *decreasing* goodwill trust and helping behavior

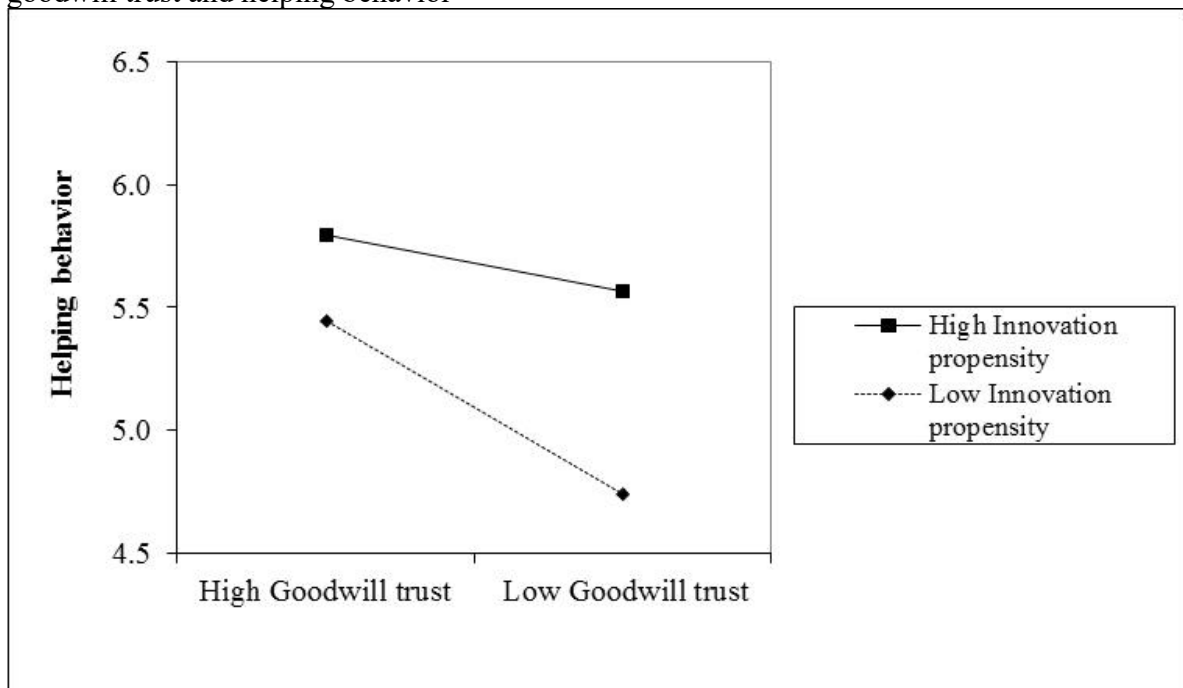


Table 1. Correlation table and descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Relationship conflict						
2. Goodwill trust	-.298**					
3. Helping behavior	-.407**	.389**				
4. Innovation propensity	-.319**	.212**	.532**			
5. Gender	-.098	-.041	.194**	.105		
6. Organizational tenure	.035	.096	.237**	.103	.039	
Mean	2.141	5.147	5.833	5.653	.474	2.174
Standard deviation	1.016	.980	1.011	1.166	.501	1.185

Notes: N = 190.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Mediation results (Process macro)

	Goodwill trust	Helping behavior		
Gender (1 = female)	-.171	.265*		
Organizational tenure	.076	.150**		
Relationship conflict	-.235***	-.207***		
Innovation propensity	.109 ⁺	.330***		
Goodwill trust		.239***		
R ²	.116	.453		
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
Indirect effect	-.056	.020	-.101	-.022

Notes: N = 190; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Moderated mediation results (Process macro)

	Goodwill trust	Helping behavior		
Gender (1 = female)	-.205	.267*		
Organizational tenure	.077	.160***		
Relationship conflict	-.172*	-.165**		
Innovation propensity	.070	.292***		
Relationship conflict × innovation propensity	.106**			
Goodwill trust		.232***		
Goodwill trust × innovation propensity		-.120*		
R ²	.149	.471		
Conditional <i>direct</i> relationship between relationship conflict and goodwill trust				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	-.305	.070	-.443	-.167
Mean	-.156	.071	-.297	-.016
+1SD	-.029	.101	-.229	.171
Conditional <i>direct</i> relationship between goodwill trust and helping behavior				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	.382	.082	.220	.543
Mean	.214	.060	.096	.332
+1SD	.070	.090	-.107	.246
Conditional <i>indirect</i> relationship between relationship conflict and helping behavior				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
-1 SD	-.116	.042	-.213	-.056
Mean	-.033	.017	-.069	-.005
+1SD	-.002	.011	-.019	.025

Notes: N = 190; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.