A Cultural Lens on Interpersonal Conflict and Creativity in Multicultural Environments

Susannah B. F. Paletz  
University of Maryland

Ella Miron-Spektor  
Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel

Chun-Chi Lin  
National Taiwan University

The literature on the effects of cultural diversity on conflict and team performance has been dominated by the information processing and social categorization theories. This article adds to the existing literature by adopting a dynamic constructivist approach detailing the effects of interpersonal conflict on cognition in multicultural environments. The fulcrum of this model is whether the conflict is interpreted as a threat. We describe the relationships between multicultural environments and perceived conflict; perceived conflict and the perception of threat; and the perception of threat on individual creativity via prevention or promotion orientations. Drawing from the dynamic constructivist approach to culture, this model highlights how culture, as shared mental models and shared meanings, may moderate these relationships. Cultural meanings may influence whether a situation is perceived as a conflict, whether conflict is interpreted as a threat, and individuals’ tolerance for conflict. This model points out how culture may be used to impact the relationship between multicultural environments and creativity.

Keywords: culture, creativity, diversity, group processes, conflict

To compete in the global market, address a growing need for innovation and creativity, and solve worldwide problems, many organizations are increasingly becoming international, integrating diverse knowledge and a multicultural workforce (e.g., Kidwell & Langholtz, 1998). This growing trend has given rise to multicultural environments, which occur when individuals from multiple cultures interact. In the United States, 17% of science and engineering workers report collaborating with individuals located in other countries during a specific week (National Science Board, 2012). Adding that to existing ethnic, geographic, religious, class, and other subculture differences within many countries, and work life and other public activities have quietly become multicultural. The opportunities and challenges of increasing multiculturalism have captured the attention of businesspeople, policymakers, and academics.

Although the challenges of multiculturalism are being addressed practically, research and theory on these issues have also grown. Over the past 20 years, research on workplace demography, including demographic and cultural value diversity, has multiplied, revealing mixed and complex findings for the effects of diversity on team performance, creativity, and conflict (e.g., Chatman, Pulzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Gonzalez & Staw, 2006; Joshi & Roh, 2009; Joshi, Liao, & Roh, 2011; Paletz, Peng, Erez, & Maslach, 2004; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010). Multicultural experiences and interactions may increase individuals’ creativity (e.g., A. K.-Y. Leung & Chiu, 2010; A.K.-Y. Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008; Maddux, Adam, & Galinsky, 2010; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009), but multicultural settings are more likely to increase interpersonal conflict (Ayub & Jehn, 2010; Stahl et al., 2010).

Despite its importance to growing workplace diversity, research on conflict and creativity in multicultural environments is scarce, with many researchers pointing out gaps in our knowledge in the broader domains of culture and creativity (e.g., Paletz & Peng, 2008; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Zhou & Su, 2010). Indeed, existing research on the effect of conflict on individual creativity has yielded inconsistent findings. On the one hand, conflict in-
crease the tendency to scrutinize and explore different alternatives, which contributes to creative thinking (e.g., Nemeth, 1986; Nemeth, Personnaz, Personnaz, & Goncalo, 2004). A sense of conflict and disorientation, resulting from exposure to different cultures and values, can foster creativity (e.g., A. K.-Y. Leung & Chiu, 2010; Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). On the other hand, conflict can be threatening and elicit a motivation to avoid similar unpleasant social interactions. Threat and a prevention regulatory focus hinder individuals’ ability to deal with complexity and to solve creative problems, even when a conflict is only observed (R. S. Friedman & Forster, 2000, 2001, 2005; Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli, & Schwartz-Cohen, 2011).

To bridge gaps in the literature and reconcile these findings, specifically in culturally diverse settings, we present a dynamic constructivist theoretical model on the effects of interpersonal conflict on individuals' creativity in multicultural environments (see Figure 1). Our model contributes to the literature on intrateam conflict and creativity by detailing an important mediator of the conflict–creativity connection, threat, and several possible moderators related to culture, here defined as mental models shared across groups (not just national groups).

Most of the existing intrateam literature has focused on heterogeneous versus homogeneous cultural team composition (e.g., Mannix & Neale, 2005; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998), leaving unknown the broader case of multicultural environments, individual perceptions of interpersonal conflict, and individual creativity. Although our model examines this broader case, teams, by their nature, involve interaction, and so the existing literature is informative to our model. The literature on team diversity has focused, perhaps too exclusively, on two theoretical traditions: information processing and social categorization (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). The information-processing approaches focus on the cognitive benefits of diversity. These approaches assume that backgrounds of almost any type (e.g., ethnic, age, disciplines) bring with them a variety of experiential information (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2006). Cultural diversity can go beyond simple surface diversity to deeper, attitudinal, value, and schema differences (e.g., Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). This “deeper” diversity (e.g., Harrison et al., 1998) of background information may, under certain circumstances, lead to greater task conflict as well (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). However, this diversity also carries the potential for greater creativity, as a broader knowledge base can result in more creative combinations (Nijstad & Stroebe, 2006; Paletz & Schunn, 2010). In contrast, social categorization approaches assume that the differences between individuals’ ethnicities and other characteristics will spark intergroup processes, such as subgrouping, generally to the detriment of team outcomes such as social cohesion (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). This theory focuses on the negative affective outcomes associated with diversity based on differences in social identity, such as more conflicts.

Although these theoretical traditions have spawned useful research (e.g., Chatman et al., 1998), the past decade has seen

![Figure 1. Dynamic constructivist model of culture, interpersonal conflict, and threat on individual creativity in multicultural settings (negative relationships are dotted lines).](image-url)
theories and variables that do not fit neatly into those two traditions (e.g., Paletz et al., 2004; Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003) or examine the interaction between them (e.g., Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007). Multicultural environments may also lead to conflict for cultural psychological reasons that have little to do with either social categorization processes or differing background knowledge, and the effects of conflict on creativity are dependent on the interpretation of that conflict.

This article thus also makes a contribution to psychological theory by proposing a broader, third model drawing on dynamic constructivist cultural theory. It helps to reconcile prior mixed findings on the impact of conflict on creativity. This model goes beyond the social categorization and information processing models, synthesizes elements from disparate topics within psychology, and explicitly blends cognitive and affective factors.

This article attempts to tackle three problems with past literature. First, research on the effect of experienced conflict on individual creativity is scarce, especially in multicultural environments (e.g., Shalley et al., 2004; Zhou & Su, 2010). Most research on conflict focuses on team conflict and team conflict management (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001). Much less is known about the effects of cultural context and related factors on different, individual-level perceptions of conflict (de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). Second, the few studies that examined the effect of conflict on creativity revealed mixed findings (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Stahl et al., 2010), suggesting that the effect of conflict on creativity can vary under different situations and conditions. We contribute to theory by going beyond team outputs to examine individual creative cognition. As has been requested (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), we identify moderating and mediating conditions and factors that shape the effect of diverse environments on experienced conflict and then on individual creativity.

Specifically, our dynamic constructivist model assumes that individuals in multicultural settings are more likely than those in unicultural settings to experience conflict, either as something they encounter directly or observe, compared with those who work in culturally homogeneous settings. Whether they will benefit from conflict or be stymied by it depends on the relevant cultural meanings, or the lens through which individuals make sense of the world. Cultural meanings influence both the extent to which individuals perceive specific social interactions as conflict and the degree to which individuals can tolerate conflicts. Greater tolerance of conflicts, regardless of heterogeneous versus homogeneous cultural setting, can mitigate against perceived conflicts becoming perceived threats. When a perceived conflict becomes a perceived threat, a prevention orientation (the motivation to avoid pain and seek security) is often a consequence. A prevention orientation then leads individuals to draw on their well-known reactions and avoid risks, resulting in less creativity. If, however, there is a high tolerance for conflict, perceived conflict may increase cognitive complexity and stimulate creative thinking. Like many social psychological models, ours crosses individual and interpersonal levels: It is a model of how a social context (multicultural environments) encourages interpersonal conflict (an interpersonal, social process), and how that interpersonal conflict affects individual cognition as moderated and mediated by individual perceptions, culture, and assumptions.

In the next section, we discuss culture as meanings. We then describe our model, after which we end with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our model.

Culture as Meanings

We draw upon cross-cultural psychology to define culture. The implicit theories of culture tradition, which examines culture as unspoken assumptions, has emphasized that culture exists psychologically within individuals’ minds (Peng, Ames, & Knowles, 2001). Culture is defined as an imperfectly shared system of learned, transmitted meanings (Rohner, 1984). Although it can include explicit knowledge, we emphasize the aspects that are implicit. By this definition, cultural differences are not limited to nations or global regions but can include differences between any subgroup (e.g., profession, ethnicity, family, organization).

The dynamic constructivist theory, an extension of this approach, goes beyond descriptions of national or ethnic differences to give a cognitive account of culture as it affects social perception generally (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Morris & Gelfand, 2004). Hong and colleagues (2000) asserted in their dynamic constructivist theory that culture acts, specifically, as shared mental models within the mind, serving as a lens through which the world is interpreted. A mental model is an internal representation of actions, situations, people, or objects (Johnson-Laird, 1980). Mental models include both the structure and relationship between knowledge constructs and the content of knowledge itself, such as unspoken assumptions and heuristics. Shared mental models occur when the mental representations of individuals overlap, with more overlap indicating greater similarity, and hence a more similar understanding of a situation (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994; Mohammed, Ferzandi, & Hamilton, 2010). Rather than being a singular fixed structure within the mind, one or more cultural meanings can be internalized as loose networks of categories and assumptions. Bicultural individuals can therefore switch frames when primed by relevant elements reminding them of the applicable culture, such as national flags and other icons (Hong, Benet-Martinez, Chiu, & Morris, 2003; Hong et al., 2000). These culture primes can activate goals, procedural knowledge (mind-sets), and/or declarative knowledge, so long as the cultural structure already exists in the mind (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). As with other mental models, cultural meanings can influence how individuals perceive the world, including social situations, and are created from learning (Rohner, 1984). Cultural meanings are thus cocreated by individuals and live within the mind, being activated by relevant information and aiding in the interpretation of experiences (Hong et al., 2000, 2003; Oyserman, 2011). The overlapping mental models that represent culture can be shared not only between individuals of the same ethnicity or nation but also by other mutual social characteristics, such as socioeconomic class, geographic region, discipline, occupation, religion, and work organization.

Past research on cultural implicit theories has demonstrated the effect of cultural meanings on social perception. For example, Nisbett and colleagues (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999) examined cognitive differences in what they termed analytic versus holistic thinking. Analytic cognitive styles involve a greater focus on objects rather than the context (field independence), and the tendency to attribute other’s behavior...
to internal traits rather than the situation (Morris & Peng, 1994). The holistic cognitive style, held more on average by East Asians, involves a greater focus on the context (field dependence) and a greater inclination, when compared with Caucasian Americans, to attribute the causes of behavior to the situation rather than the actor (I. Choi, Dalal, Kim-Prieto, & Park, 2003). For example, Morris and Peng (1994) found that participants differently anthropomorphized the behavior of an individual animated fish swimming separately from a school of fish in line with their different cultural lenses. Chinese participants were more likely to attribute the fish’s behavior to external forces, whereas Americans were more likely to make internal attributions.

Culture can also influence individuals’ ability to solve problems. Goncalo and Staw (2006) demonstrated how the activation of collectivistic or individualistic orientations can affect whether generated solutions to a given problem are creative or practical. Individualism and collectivism are cultural dimensions that reflect differences in the tendency to focus on in-groups and the power of social context. People from individualistic cultures, on average, are more likely to emphasize self-determination and autonomy, conceptualize people as independent individuals, and prioritize one’s own importance over the group’s interests when the two are in conflict. On the other hand, members of collectivistic cultures are more likely to conceptualize individuals as inherently part of collectives and prioritize groups’ interests over their own (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1983; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1990; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). When asked to be creative, teams of participants primed with an individualistic mental model generated a greater number of ideas, more unique ideas, and more creative ideas than participants primed with a collectivistic mental model (Goncalo & Staw, 2006).

Thus, cross-cultural psychological theories offer many ways in which individuals will hold different types of cultural meanings within their minds, which may then impact their cognition. When people who hold different, unshared sets of cultural meanings come together, the relevant social context is diverse teams or, more broadly, multicultural work and leisure environments. Our model examines culture from these two different perspectives: multicultural environments as a social context and as the differing cultural lenses. Chinese participants were more likely to attribute the fish’s behavior to external forces, whereas Americans were more likely to make internal attributions.

Culture can also influence individuals’ ability to solve problems. Goncalo and Staw (2006) demonstrated how the activation of collectivistic or individualistic orientations can affect whether generated solutions to a given problem are creative or practical. Individualism and collectivism are cultural dimensions that reflect differences in the tendency to focus on in-groups and the power of social context. People from individualistic cultures, on average, are more likely to emphasize self-determination and autonomy, conceptualize people as independent individuals, and prioritize one’s own importance over the group’s interests when the two are in conflict. On the other hand, members of collectivistic cultures are more likely to conceptualize individuals as inherently part of collectives and prioritize groups’ interests over their own (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 1983; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1990; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). When asked to be creative, teams of participants primed with an individualistic mental model generated a greater number of ideas, more unique ideas, and more creative ideas than participants primed with a collectivistic mental model (Goncalo & Staw, 2006).

Thus, cross-cultural psychological theories offer many ways in which individuals will hold different types of cultural meanings within their minds, which may then impact their cognition. When people who hold different, unshared sets of cultural meanings come together, the relevant social context is diverse teams or, more broadly, multicultural work and leisure environments. Our model examines culture from these two different perspectives: multicultural environments as a social context and as the differing cultural meanings encapsulated therein.

**Dynamic Constructivist Model**

In this section, we describe the theoretical model and suggested propositions (also see Table 1). The relationships, as illustrated in Figure 1, are drawn in part as a decision tree and not simply as a model of proposed relationships.

**Multicultural Environments and Perceived Conflict (Path A)**

Conflict is inherent to interaction, collaboration, and teamwork (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). The construct of conflict has been used at different levels of analysis to mean many things, from disagreement to bullying to riots and war (e.g., De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). For the purposes of this model, we focus on conflict as interpersonal disagreement, which exists when “parties think that a divergence of values, needs, interests, opinions, goals, or objectives exists” (Barki & Hartwick, 2004, p. 232), rather than intrapersonal conflict (e.g., Maslow, 1943) or intergroup conflict (e.g., Fiske, 2002). Importantly, we are examining disagreement in the context of broadly cooperative settings (e.g., work settings and teams), as opposed to in the context of competition (e.g., De Dreu & Nijstad, 2008). Conflict here can include negative affect and/or conflict-relevant expressed behavior (e.g., debate, competition, aggression, hostility; Barki & Hartwick, 2004), and should be perceived by the parties involved (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). However, individuals from different cultures might perceive conflict differently based on different cognitive frames (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2001). We focus on how conflict is experienced by individuals within multiperson settings (e.g., teams, dyads), rather than as a team-level construct, although a different model could examine conflict and collective creativity (Brophy, 1998, 2006). Our model examines the individual-level experience of conflict, assuming that asymmetries in the perception of conflict can exist within multicultural teams and settings (e.g., Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010).

A recent meta-analysis showed that although cultural diversity was positively related to creativity generated by individuals within the team, it was also positively associated with individually perceived task conflict and negatively associated with social integration within the team (Stahl et al., 2010). Individuals who work in multicultural settings are more likely to experience conflict, either as something they encounter directly or observe, compared with those who work in nationally homogeneous settings (Ayub & Jehn, 2010; Stahl et al., 2010). Interestingly, multinational diversity resulted in similar, relatively high levels of conflict, whether the diversity involved subgroups within countries or cultures between countries. We contend this finding generalizes from multicultural, diverse teams to broader multicultural settings. This finding suggests that it is culturally diverse environments in general, rather...
than multinational diversity specifically, that drive the increase in individual-level perceptions of conflict compared with culturally homogeneous settings. In other words, it is the diversity of cultural meanings, not simply national diversity, which has an impact on conflict.

To explain this more nuanced finding, we draw from the dynamic constructivist approach. We propose that multicultural environments, made up of individuals with different culturally based ways of interpreting social information, will represent a greater number of (or distance in) gaps in the individuals’ mental models than environments made up of individuals from the same cultural background. Representational gaps exist when problems are conceived of differently between team members (Cronin & Weingart, 2007). Furthermore, representational gaps and other differences in shared mental models may predict conflict (Bearman, Paletz, Otrasau, & Thomas, 2010; Cronin & Weingart, 2007). Applying this research to multicultural environments, individuals in these environments are thus more likely to have less overlap in their mental models due to differences in assumptions, heuristics, and other cultural knowledge.

The amount of conflict should depend on the size and number of these gaps and whether these gaps are on critical or relevant issues. For instance, conceptions of appropriate polite behavior will be more important to a multicultural team working on software design, or to multicultural shopkeeper–customer interactions, than would be cultural differences in color categorization (e.g., whether magenta is purple or red). As an example of how differences in specific cultural values may promote conflict, imagine a manager who decides to reward the best employee in the team (a very common policy in more individualistic companies). Coworkers who observe this behavior who originate from more collectivistic environments may feel uncomfortable or slighted. If, however, the entire team is rewarded for one individual’s success, more individualistic team members may become dissatisfied. An individualistic person who feels the success was due to his or her lone effort may be particularly irritated. The conflict here is thus the disagreement concerning how to go about rewarding effort, as well as the resulting negative affect. Thus, our proposition shares some of the elements of the information-processing approach, but uses dynamic constructivist theory to explain why such diversity can lead to conflict (Figure 1, Path A), rather than simply leading to added benefits.

**Proposition 1**: Interpersonal conflict will be more common in multicultural environments, particularly if the mental model gaps are large and about relevant issues.

### The Effect of Perceived Conflict on Prevention Orientation via Threat (Paths B1 and B2, and the Perception of Threat Decision Diamond)

Research seeking a clear effect of perceived conflict on individuals’ creative thinking has resulted in mixed findings, requiring moderators and mediators. On the one hand, a robust body of research has argued that disagreement arising from a minority opinion holder causes divergent and original thinking in other individuals (e.g., Nemeth, 1986; Nemeth & Kwan, 1983; Nemeth & Wachtler, 1983). Similarly, a sense of conflict and disorientation can enhance creativity (Miron-Spektor, Gino, et al., 2011). On the other hand, research on anger and rude behavior, which is often seen in interpersonal conflict, suggests that interacting with (or witnessing) a rude person hinders performance on creative tasks (Porath & Erez, 2007, 2009). Unfortunately, the research on the effects of conflict on individual creativity is limited to mainly these two research paradigms.

This model takes into account an important mediator: whether the perceived conflict, be it observed or engaged in by the individual, was interpreted as a threat (Rispens & Jehn, 2010). The gray diamond in Figure 1 is a decision point for whether the conflict is perceived as a threat or not. Most past research on interpersonal conflict both theoretically and methodologically confounds perception of conflicts and threat. Threat is defined here as the perception of an impending loss or cost to an individual (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). Features of the interpersonal conflict itself may affect whether the conflict is perceived as a threat. This section describes some of the ways in which features of the conflict itself may impact whether the conflict is viewed as a threat.

The team conflict literature is a rich source of complex empirical findings. Our model provides mediating variables (e.g., threat) to help explain some of the findings from that literature. In that literature, conflict is a team-level variable generally measured at the individual, perceived level and aggregated (e.g., De Dreu & West, 2001; exceptions being research on asymmetries, e.g., Jehn et al., 2010) and then associated with team-level composition inputs and/or performance outputs. In our model, interpersonal conflict is a social context within which the individual exists, perceives, and interacts. Although these two approaches examine different levels of analysis, they are relevant to each other.

A widely used categorization system in team conflict breaks conflict into (at least) three types (e.g., Jehn, 1997): task conflict, process conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict revolves around the work itself, process conflict involves scheduling and delegation, and relationship conflict is about issues of interpersonal incompatibility (Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Similarly, Amazon (1996) distinguished between cognitive conflict, or disagreements regarding tasks and how to achieve common objectives, and affective conflict, or emotional conflicts focused on personal incompatibilities. Most of the negative effects for interpersonal conflict are thought to occur in affective, process, and relationship conflict, compared with cognitive and task conflict (e.g.,Amazon, 1996; de Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1997). Whereas researchers have argued that task conflict can be beneficial, particularly for creativity and innovation (e.g., De Dreu & West, 2001; Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Kurtzberg & Mueller, 2005; Nemeth, 1986; Pelled et al. 1999; West, 2002), a famous meta-analysis suggested that even task conflict impedes team performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Although an updated meta-analysis confirmed the stable, negative relationships between process/relationship conflict and performance, it revealed no significant association between task conflict and team performance (de Wit et al., 2012). The latter relationship depended on moderators: Importantly, the association between task conflict and performance was positive when the association between task and relationship conflict was weak. That finding suggests that if task conflict can be kept separate from relationship conflict, it may have positive team outcomes (Jehn, 1997). Teams in which different members perceive and report different levels of conflict in
their group are also likely to have lower performance and creativity, mediated through social processes (e.g., Jehn et al., 2010). Thus, team-level asymmetries can also impact team creativity and performance.

What does this literature mean for individual perceptions of conflict and individual creativity? One of the reasons why affective, process, and relationship conflicts are more likely to have negative consequences may be because they are more likely to be perceived by team members as threats. Indeed, negative affect is seen as an exacerbator of the negative consequences of conflict, process conflict is thought to make individuals feel personally attacked, and relationship conflict, more so than task conflict, is thought to limit cognitive processes (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Relationship conflict is also significantly associated with destructive reactions (Ayoko, Callan, & Hartel, 2008). Thus, we contend that some of the factors that make a conflict more likely to be perceived as a threat are the content and features of the interpersonal conflict itself, namely, whether it entails relationship or process conflict or negative affect (see Figure 1, Decision Diamond for Perception of Threat).

Communication style, politeness, and perceived intentions of the conflict communication can also influence whether a conflict is perceived as a threat. Some disagreements may be longer lasting and more difficult to resolve, whereas others may be too minor or brief to register as a problem or threat (Paletz, Schunn, & Kim, 2011). Lovelace et al. (2001) found that conflict could lead to innovation positively (or at least not be negatively related) if disagreements were communicated collaboratively rather than contentiously and if team members felt free to express doubts. In his analysis of student conversations, Chiu (2008) found that whereas recent disagreements yielded greater microcreativity in student groups than agreements, rude disagreements resulted in less creativity than polite disagreements and questions. Similarly, dissent by a minority opinion holder elicits divergent thinking, whereas dissent by a majority—a more threatening and stressful situation—causes more convergent thinking (Nemeth, 1986).

Positive interpersonal processes can also prevent a conflict from being perceived as a threat. Conflict can beget conflict, creating a spiral of negative feelings and behaviors, unless trust is present (Peterson & Behfar, 2003). Just as intragroup trust helps keep task conflict from turning into relationship conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000), psychological safety may be a mediator influencing innovation (Nishii & Goncalo, 2008; Post, 2012). Effective team emotional regulation processes can lessen relationship conflict (Ayoko et al., 2008; Curseu, Boros, & Oerleman, 2012). Similarly, emotional regulation processes can keep task and relationship conflict unrelated (Curseu et al., 2012). Thus, it follows that emotional regulation, intragroup trust, and psychological safety can aid in keeping experienced interpersonal conflict from being perceived as a threat.

Proposition 2: Interpersonal conflict may be interpreted as a threat, depending on exacerbator features of the situation and the conflict itself (e.g., negative affect, relationship conflict, relationship conflict confounded with task conflict, rude communication), and minimizing features of the conflict and situation (e.g., psychological safety, trust, team emotional regulation processes).

Once a conflict is perceived as a threat, a prevention orientation may be activated (Figure 1, Path B2). A prevention orientation is defined as the motivation to avoid pain and seek security (Higgins, 1997). When under threat, individuals are likely to take a prevention motivational focus and utilize avoidance strategies. A prevention orientation is automatically activated in situations that imply a threat to safety, and call to mind one’s duties and potential losses (Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008). A prevention orientation may be activated either because an individual is directly involved in a conflict or because the individual observes a conflict between others (Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, et al., 2011).

Proposition 3: If a conflict is perceived as a threat, a prevention focus and avoidance motivation will result.

Prevention Orientation, Avoidance Motivation, and Creativity (Paths C1 and C2)

A prevention orientation helps individuals adapt to and survive in their environment by narrowing the scope of attention and focusing on information that is relevant to the task (Derryberry & Tucker, 1994). Threat-rigidity theory suggests that, when faced with a threat, individuals react by restricting information processing and behaving using their dominant response (Staw et al., 1981). Threats lead to a restricting of focus and motivate individuals and groups to respond to that threat, which can have (mainly negative) implications for creativity (Turner & Virick, 2008). When a situation is appraised as a challenge, cognitive flexibility may be the response, whereas threats may limit cognitive flexibility (Gutnick, Walter, Nijstad, & De Dreu, 2012). In other words, individuals fall back upon well-learned heuristics and expectations, attend to dominant cues, and respond in well-learned ways, even if these ways do not fit a new situation.

Creativity, which is generally tied to cognitive flexibility, is thought to have two inherent qualities: novelty/originality and usefulness, appropriateness, or relevance (Amabile, 1983, 1996; Mayer, 1999; Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow, 2004). Creativity is often operationalized as the ability to come up with many ideas, but also often incorporates the idea of originality, or rare/novel ideas. It is not sufficient for an idea to be original, however; it must also fit the situation or be appropriate in some way. These two qualities are commonly essential in the conceptualization of creativity. In a cross-cultural study of the implicit theories of creativity, novelty was seen as equally important to creativity in China, Japan, and the United States; appropriateness was seen as more important in Japan and the United States; and novel products were more appreciated generally in China than in the other countries (Paletz & Peng, 2008). Nevertheless, novelty and appropriateness were both vital to conceptions of creativity in all three countries.

Creativity has been operationalized in many different ways, including as a personality trait, feature of an environment, and a range of psychological processes such as problem finding, insight, analogy, mental simulation, and evaluation (Reiter-Palmon, Mumford, O’Connor Boes, & Runcio, 1997; Rhodes, 1961; Ward, Smith, & Finke, 1999; Ward, Smith, & Vaid, 1997). Creativity can be observed in eminent people, professional experts, part of normal learning, and in everyday process (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). For this article, we focus on
Creativity as an outcome of an everyday process. Even creative outputs can be judged on a variety of dimensions, such as fluency (number of ideas), flexibility (number of higher-level categories), originality/novelty, and elaboration (detail and richness of the idea; M. M. Mumford, 2001; Torrance, 1966). These dimensions measure divergence, whereas outcomes with one right answer, like insight tasks such as the Remote Associates Task (RAT), are related to convergent thinking (Cropyol, 2006).

In a series of experiments, Friedman and Forster (e.g., R. S. Friedman and Forster, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) found that when individuals take a prevention focus and/or are primed with avoidance heuristics, creativity suffers (Figure 1, Path C2). In conditions encouraging promotion motivational states and approach behaviors, creativity may be enhanced. These effects of a prevention focus on creativity were replicated among uninvolved third parties who merely observed a conflict between others (Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, et al., 2011). Reviews of the literature similarly suggest that threatening and avoidance cues focus attention (R. S. Friedman & Forster, 2010), and that negative activating moods with a prevention focus (e.g., fear) are associated with lower creativity (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008). Thus, a prevention focus and/or avoidance motivation may hurt creativity (Path C2).

Proposition 4: A prevention focus will hinder creativity.

This model goes beyond that finding, however, to suggest the alternate path: Conflict that is not interpreted as a threat may encourage creativity (Path C1). Dissent without threat—say, with psychological safety and trust—may be a situation of promotion and challenge, leading to free expression and creativity (Figure 1, Path C2; Gutnick et al., 2012; Nishi & Goncalo, 2008; Post, 2012; Rispens & Jehn, 2010). Even the response to threat can be complex: For instance, if anger is a response, anger may actually result in an approach, rather than an avoidance, motivation (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Indeed, under certain circumstances, conflict may be perceived not simply as a neutral interpersonal situation, but as an opportunity to solve problems collaboratively or prove one’s self-worth (e.g., Lun, Oishi, Coan, Akimoto, & Miao, 2010). These circumstances depend on the features of the conflict, individual factors, and the situation itself (as noted in Proposition 2); the cultural meanings and schema within the individual (see Paths E, F-1, and F-2); and other factors beyond the scope of this article, such as individual state and trait factors (e.g., aggression). When conflict is seen as an opportunity, it may be more likely to elicit a promotion approach and lead to high-activation, promotion-oriented emotions. This promotion, activation approach in turn increases creativity (e.g., R. S. Friedman & Forster, 2001). Similarly, a large meta-analysis suggested that promotion-related, activating moods and affect (e.g., happiness, anger) enhance creativity (Baas et al., 2008).

Proposition 5: Nonthreatening interpersonal conflict will enhance creativity, mediated by a promotion focus.

In sum, if a conflict situation, be it in a multicultural environment or not, becomes a threat (Path B1), a cascade of cognitive effects occurs such that creativity is minimized (Path C2). However, if the conflict is not perceived as a treat, it may benefit creativity (C1).
American dyads were more likely to reach an integrative solution than Hong Kong Chinese, in part because of stronger norms about expressing underlying interests and synthesizing issues (Tinsley & Brett, 2001). For Hong Kong Chinese, the norms about resolving conflict were more likely to emphasize concern for authority, which then resulted in conflicts that were more likely to appeal to upper management (Tinsley & Brett, 2001).

When faced with the “wrong” kind of manner or approach to resolving conflict, an individual may not know how to interpret the behavior, or may perceive it negatively. If an East Asian is subtly signaling to an American that she is disagreeing with something, behavior, or may perceive it negatively. If an East Asian is subtly signaling to an American that she is disagreeing with something, she may not understand that those signals indicate conflict at all.

**Proposition 6:** Culture will moderate whether a social interaction or exchange in a multicultural setting is perceived as a conflict, such that cultural norms regarding implicit theories of conflict, and the appropriate expression and manner of conflict, will enable individuals to perceive an encounter as a conflict or not (Figure 1, Path D).

**Culture Moderates the Perception of Threat in Conflict (Paths E, F1, and F2)**

Cultural meanings may also determine the perceived intensity of a conflict. Depending on cultural frames and norms, the same conflict may be perceived as more or less deeply threatening—or even as an opportunity. Cultural meanings can impact the perception of a conflict as a threat both directly, in terms of what is considered threatening to the self, due to norms surrounding face and status (i.e., Path E), and indirectly via impacting the individual’s tolerance for conflict (i.e., Path F-1, F-2).

**Culture, face, and threat.** Cultural differences in reactions to conflict are related to the concept of face (J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998; K. Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002). “Face” refers to implicit theories of what is considered personally threatening and embarrassing in social situations. Individuals’ face represents the kinds of positive social images that they want to claim, maintain, or enhance in front of others. Research suggests that individuals have a universal need toward face concern (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Ho, 1976; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Zane & Yeh, 2002) and that people often, either on purpose or not, act to threaten other people’s face. For example, a negative message (e.g., disagreement, criticism) in public may be considered a threat to the recipient’s face. Therefore, peoples’ daily face experiences can have significant psychological consequences on one’s emotions and self-esteem (Lin & Yamaguchi, 2011).

Culture also determines the types of face that are important in social interactions and, thus, the degree of sensitivity to the content of a conflict (J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998). For example, S. C. Choi and Lee (2002) argue that face in individualistic cultures (e.g., North America) is typically associated with a person’s personal achievement, whereas face in collectivistic cultures (e.g., China) is particularly focused on a person’s social hierarchy. Conflicts concerning a person’s ability or achievement may therefore be perceived as more threatening in individualistic cultures. On the other hand, conflicts related to one’s status or social position may be more threatening in collectivistic cultures.

Y. H. Kim, Cohen, and colleagues have detailed three types of cultural mind-sets that may influence how individuals respond to face threats (Y. H. Kim & Cohen, 2010; Y. H. Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010; A. K.-Y. Leung & Cohen, 2010). In face-oriented cultures (e.g., harmony-focused, hierarchical, collectivistic cultures), face is based on personal external attributes, such as one’s role (Ho, 1976) and how closely individuals cleave to socially accepted norms (J. Y. Kim & Nam, 1998). Individuals from face cultures change their self-definitions based on how others see them (Y. H. Kim et al., 2010). On the other hand, individuals from a culture of dignity (which tends to be individualistic) change their self-definitions based on internal factors, with others’ judgments seen as a threat to autonomy (Y. H. Kim et al., 2010). Both of these cultural mind-sets are differentiated from a culture of honor, in which individuals gain face through challenge and thus claim their face from others (A. K.-Y. Leung & Cohen, 2010).

These different cultural meanings—both the dimensions of individualism and collectivism, and the cultural mind-sets of face, honor, and dignity cultures— influence whether a conflict is threatening by regulating the focus of face concerns and strategies of facework. For example, people who are from individualistic cultures and high in independent self-construal tend to focus on their own face, and thus assert their interests when handling conflict, whereas people who are from collectivistic cultures and high in interdependent self-construal tend to focus on other people’s face or mutually shared face (and the relationship), and thus tend to compromise or to avoid conflict (R. Friedman, Chi, & Liu, 2006; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Certain types of conflict may be seen as opportunities for people from dignity cultures to individuate themselves, or for people from honor cultures to demonstrate their knowledge or talents. It is plausible that a conflict that endangers someone else’s face is more threatening in some collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures. As a specific example, Brett (2010) describes an American student in Thailand who purchased defective speakers. Instead of confronting the shop owner directly, she told him she was having trouble understanding how to set them up. When he tried to show her, it was obvious to him that they did not work, and he offered her another set in exchange. Her American and Thai friends had told the student that there was no way to make the seller take back defective speakers, but by using indirect, face-saving (and face-giving) tactics, she both enabled the seller to demonstrate his integrity and expertise, and she ended up working with speakers.

Further, individuals from honor cultures are more likely to react with assertiveness, whereas individuals from face cultures may try to maintain harmony and feel shame, even if they are both threatened by the loss of face (Y. H. Kim et al., 2010; Leung & Cohen, 2010). For instance, Miron-Spektor, Lin, and Paletz (2013) found a complex relationship between face threat and creativity, moderated by culture and mediated by prevention focus. In their Study 3, participants from an honor culture (Israel) responded with less prevention focus and more creativity to experimentally manipulated face threat, whereas Japanese responded with greater prevention focus, and Americans (a dignity culture) did not experience an effect of face threat on prevention focus at all.

Thus, whether the conflict is viewed as a threat, and whether the conflict is viewed as an opportunity to rise to the challenge or not, will influence whether a prevention orientation will result. In sum, an individual’s implicit theory of face, which is inherently a set of cultural meanings, may influence the perception of conflict as
threatening or not (e.g., neutral, or even an opportunity) by determining whether the content of conflict is sensitive (in other words, whether it is relevant to face) and by what kinds of negotiation strategies would be adopted.

**Culture and the context of conflict with regards to status.** The context of a conflict can also have an effect, particularly when different cultural frames “read” different contexts differently. A disagreement coming from someone higher or lower within a status hierarchy may be perceived differently, depending on how important hierarchy is within one’s culture (e.g., depending on the horizontal and vertical elements of individualism–collectivism; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In aviation, for example, it was noted that some major accidents could have been averted if the first officer (junior pilot) could have been able to successfully challenge the captain (Kanki, Helmreich, & Anca, 2010). As a result, aviation companies trained their junior pilots to raise problems to senior pilots and to challenge them (Kanki et al., 2010). Unfortunately, this training was not as well received outside the United States in cultural contexts that value status and hierarchy (Helmreich & Merritt, 1988; Helmreich, Merritt, & Wilhelm, 1999). A context that values status and hierarchy (e.g., high on power distance; Hofstede, 1980; Merritt, 2000) makes it more difficult for a low-status employee to question and challenge the senior employee, and more likely for a senior employee to perceive questions coming from low-status employees as threats. Furthermore, in such a context, individuals in higher status positions may be less likely to accept information that is perceived as a challenge from individuals in lower status positions.

**Proposition 7:** Culture will moderate whether a conflict is viewed as a threat, specifically via cultural norms involving face and/or status: Counternormative conflicts, conflicts that make individuals lose face, and conflicts that arise from individuals of lower status are more likely to be viewed as threats, particularly in face cultures and cultures that value hierarchy, respectively.

**Culture and tolerance of conflict.** Cultural meanings can also filter and impact one’s tolerance for conflict (Path F-1), which then can moderate whether a conflict is interpreted as a threat (Path F-2). An individual with a high tolerance for conflict may perceive an event as a conflict, but not feel personally threatened by most disagreements coming from someone higher or lower within a status hierarchy. Cross-cultural research has examined cultural differences in the tolerance of conflict, often via examining cultural differences and approaches in conflict management styles (e.g., Morris et al., 1998; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). In East Asia (e.g., China), conflict is less tolerated in general, in that a broad range of avoidant conflict disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement, Chinese scored higher on both than did Anglo-Australians (K. Leung, Brew, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011). Further, Gelfand and colleagues’ (2001) finding that Americans, but not Japanese, conceptualized a dimension of intellectual versus emotional conflict suggests that affective/relationship conflicts and cognitive/task conflicts may be more confounded for Japanese than for Americans, such that conflict may be more threatening for Japanese. These studies imply that in a hypothetical multicultural setting involving East Asians and North Americans or Anglo-Australians, the Westerners will be more likely to tolerate or overlook conflict in general, making it less threatening, but that East Asians will be more threatened by the conflict and attempt to smooth over differences they do perceive. Even within the same country, there are often cultural differences in the tolerance of conflict and disagreement, based on different organizational or disciplinary norms.

**Proposition 8:** The moderation effect of culture (Proposition 7) will be mediated by a tolerance for conflict.

**Summary**

In summary (see Table 1), cultural meanings may affect the perception of conflict (Path E), whether conflict is a threat (Path E), and the tolerance of conflict (Path F-1), which then may influence how threatening a conflict seems (Path F-2). As a way to make sense of the world and social situations, culture impacts the experience of conflict via expectations regarding the manner by which the conflict is communicated, the context within which it occurs, and the content of what is under disagreement. In a multicultural setting, all of these differences in cultural meaning may differentially influence the experience of conflict and threat within individuals.

**Discussion**

Multicultural teamwork is becoming an increasingly normal part of work and leisure life. Scholars have called for diversity research to learn from cross-cultural psychology research and vice versa (Ferdman & Sagiv, 2012). Our model extends previous literature by utilizing the dynamic constructivist theory from cross-cultural psychology to explain how observed or experienced conflict in multicultural environments may inhibit creativity in individuals. First, we highlight the importance of cultural meanings and the tolerance of conflict as potential moderators to reconcile mixed findings of the conflict–creativity relationship. By emphasizing the perception and tolerance of conflict, this model helps to explain differences between studies on conflict and creativity based on self-report surveys and research on dissent and creativity. We maintain that conflict can cause trouble in multicultural environments, but it is how that conflict is reacted to and interpreted that may have direct, immediate cognitive consequences for individuals. Second, we bring in mediating psychological mechanisms (i.e., perception of threat, prevention orientation) that can explain the different effects of the perception and tolerance of conflict on creativity in multicultural settings. Third, our model advances existing literature by going beyond the typical social categorization/information-processing perspectives of the effects of diversity on creativity. By drawing on research on cross-cultural psychology, we propose a nuanced approach to culture and creativity. Indeed, we make a
novel connection between cross-cultural psychology and the conflict and cognition literature. Finally, by focusing on multicultural environments broadly, rather than simply as heterogeneous or homogeneous team composition, we provide a model with greater reach.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

This model suggests some immediate practical and theoretical implications for individuals in multicultural settings. With regard to developing theory, by integrating disparate literatures, we capitalize on established psychological findings to unpack possible psychological processes in individuals in multicultural settings. Tying face theory to creativity has only rarely been done theoretically, let alone empirically (e.g., Chiu, 2008; Miron-Spektor et al., 2013). In fact, regulatory focus can be culturally moderated effects of regulatory focus are taken into account.

We also provide a novel link between culture and creativity. Although there exists a broad literature on creativity cross-culturally, it has focused either on differences between cultures on creativity tests and tasks (e.g., Khaleefa, Erdos, & Ashria, 1996; Torrance, 1968; Torrance & Sato, 1979), differences in how creativity may be valued in different cultures (e.g., Khaleefa, Erdos, & Ashria, 1997), differences in lay theories of what it means to be creative, or differences in representations of creativity. Thus, we extend the reach of cross-cultural psychology into theories of the antecedents of creativity.

In addition, this model goes beyond prior research on team conflict and creativity to encompass multicultural settings and interactions more generally. A relevant situation could be, for example, an interaction between a customer service representative and a customer from a different culture (Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, et al., 2011). Given the increased reliance on offshored services and geographically remote service centers, multicultural interactions and conflicts are not limited to teams. This model conceptualizes culture as shared mental models, and not simply as ethnic or national differences (even though the literature currently focuses on these differences). Pilots versus academic economists versus design engineers in different organizations may also have different cultural norms and meanings regarding the proper expression, tolerance, and interpretation of conflict.

Further, this model has broader theoretical implications about the nature of the conflict-creativity relationship. Although this model focuses on multicultural settings, it has implications for homogenous settings as well. A homogenous group of individuals from an honor versus a face culture may respond differently to conflict, in terms of their prevention focus, based on whether that conflict is perceived to be a threat and culture-specific responses to threat.

Taking this logic even further, this model has implications for the conflict to creativity relationship more generally. Additional factors may influence whether individuals interpret a conflict as a threat and how they respond. For example, low-income boys were more aggressive when they had lower verbal intelligence and/or ineffective self-regulatory skills, with these two factors interacting with each other (Ayduk, Rodriguez, Mischel, Shoda, & Wright, 2007). In addition to personality traits that may express across situations, individuals can also consistently react to certain situations more aggressively than other situations (e.g., a child who tends to respond to adults with aggression vs. less aggression with peers, e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994). These more individual factors may represent individual mental models, but they may be created by factors above and beyond culture.

Practically, the combination of the broadening global economy and economic turmoil means that creativity in multicultural settings has become a pressing issue. Rather than taking emotional conflict in multinational teams as inevitable (von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004), our model suggests that the key points of leverage in multicultural groups are preventing individuals within those groups from feeling threatened by conflict. Different types of discourse can change conflict from destructive to productive (Ayoko, Hartel, & Callan, 2002). The success of specific communication techniques such as checking understanding (Ayoko et al., 2002) may well be because they lessen the likelihood that a disagreement will be interpreted as a threat. Once a conflict has been perceived as a threat and becomes emotional, some argue that talking about the conflict may not be an effective strategy in multicultural teams (von Glinow et al., 2004). On the other hand, suggestions for sensitizing members of multicultural teams to conflict (e.g., von Glinow et al., 2004) may have the effect of promoting a tolerance for any sort of conflict, be it task or emotional, such that threat does not occur.

Learning new cultural schema may not be easy, but managers can be well motivated to avoid having their employees turn conflict into threat. We recommend that rather than attempting to erase previous schema (which may not be possible), new cultural meanings could be introduced via training and organizational norms with the goal of creating, essentially, bicultural with regard to conflict. Much as national biculturals can shift their cultural frames (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002), a newly learned system of meanings regarding conflict may be activated instead of an older schema. These new meanings should be designed to decrease a sense of threat and increase tolerance of conflict. The greater diversity of background knowledge that researchers assume is held by multicultural teams may then help creativity (e.g., van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). The implication is that interpersonal disagreement without threat would lead to even greater creativity than in homogeneous settings. In short, if these key aspects of culture are indeed leverage points for turning team conflict into threats, we have identified areas in which interventions can be useful in preventing the interpretation of threat.
Future Research and Theorizing

Scholars of multicultural settings are right in ending their articles with calls for more empirical studies (Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2011). Research on naturalistic multicultural environments is rare because it is so difficult. Diversity itself is not a unitary construct. For instance, heterogeneous groups can differ in terms of which cultures are numerically or socially dominant (e.g., Paletz et al., 2008), nuanced interpretations of scenarios (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2001; Paletz & Peng, 2008), and actual multicultural interactions in the field. Retrospective self-report surveys using standard instruments, such as those often used in conflict studies (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), will not likely unpack nuanced cultural differences in the perception and tolerance of conflict alone. To take cultural differences into account, researchers should compare self-reported perceived conflict impressions with observable conflict interactions, assuming that self-reports themselves are trustworthy representations of perceptions. Such comparisons can tease apart what types of behaviors are considered normal conflict behaviors to which participants. In real-world situations, the relevant cultural schemas will be complex, numerous, and nuanced.

For instance, a heterogeneous work group that includes individuals from face, honor, and dignity cultures, all of whom have different tolerances for conflict, triggers for face loss, and norms for expressing conflict, may all respond differently to the same exchange, with some exchanges increasing prevention and others decreasing it. The challenge for such studies is to document the relevant schema using a combination of retrospective (perhaps open-ended) self-report and observational methods coded by cultural experts. Scenario methods can also shed light on what individuals think are appropriate responses to a range of situations. Parts of this model (not including the conditional if–then piece; Figure 1) could also be tested using structural equation modeling.

This article focused on the effects of experienced and perceived conflict on perceptions threat and on individual creativity, but not on intrapersonal conflict (e.g., Maslow, 1943), intergroup conflict (e.g., Fiske, 2002), or how this affects interactions with others in multicultural environments. Any two given individuals, even from different cultures, may have face concern, and both the level of face concern and the multicultural setting will affect how they interact. For instance, Liu, Friedman, Barry, Gelfand, and Zhang (2012) found that high levels of aggregated, dyadic concern for face resulted in greater consensus (bringing together of mental models) and joint gains in intercultural negotiators from China and the United States compared with intracultural negotiators. Thus, high team levels of face sensitivity can motivate team members to come to a consensus.

Even more importantly, this model relies on existing research with creativity as a dependent variable, which, in these studies, has been operationalized in different and incoherent ways. Research testing this model can also unpack different types of creativity more systematically. Friedman and Forster’s experiments (e.g., R. S. Friedman & Forster, 2000, 2005) did not distinguish between that many types of creativity. Creative ideas can vary in the extent to which they deviate from existing knowledge and solutions, ranging from radical to incremental (Dewar & Dutton, 1986; Madjar, Greenberg, & Chen, 2011; M. D. Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). Given that Friedman and Forster operationalized creativity using insight and alternate uses tasks, even incremental creativity may be harmed by a prevention orientation. It is reasonable to predict that a prevention orientation may have an even stronger suppression effect on radical creativity. In addition, a prevention orientation may have a different impact on different types of creative processes—for example, idea generation versus idea evaluation versus problem structuring and finding (e.g., Herman & Reiter-Palmon, 2011).

In addition, this model focused on individual creativity, not collective creativity (e.g., Brophy, 1998, 2006). Different creativity tasks have different implications for individual- versus team-level creativity (Brophy, 1998). Individual efforts within a team versus collective team efforts may be further affected by cultural norms such as individualism and collectivism, and by how those norms dictate conflict and disagreement in those different task settings. Even within individual creativity, creativity can arise from different levels of eminence and expertise (Kauffman & Beghetto, 2009). Future research could continue to examine whether the type of creativity and creative tasks serve as a moderator for the effects of a prevention orientation.

Further, as noted previously, there are cultural differences (and similarities) in conceptions of creativity (Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Paletz & Peng, 2008; Paletz, Peng, et al., 2011; Runco & Johnson, 2002) and how creativity may be valued in different cultures (e.g., Khaleefa et al., 1997). These provide potential additional cultural moderators in the conflict to creativity link. Even if disparate cultures find both novelty and appropriateness important to creativity (Paletz & Peng, 2008), if the particular activities considered to be creative differ across cultures (e.g., Khaleefa et al., 1997; Paletz, Peng, et al., 2011), then creative responses to a lower prevention and greater promotion focus may also differ. These differences in approaches to creativity highlight the need for broader, cross-cultural research.

Taking this point further, there is a deeper, but unfortunately common, limitation in this model: Although several of the propositions are informed by cross-cultural research (e.g., face threat and culture), much of the research cited here is limited to Western and/or student samples. The model itself focuses on individual creativity, which portrays a possible Western bias toward focusing on the individual (e.g., Triandis, 1989, 1990; although see Paletz, Peng, et al., 2011, for no East–West differences in implicit theories of group vs. individual creativity). Although this model draws on the current literature, as with other theoretical models, it will need to change as additional studies provide better cultural generalizability—and any other additional caveats, moderators, and mediators.

Conclusions

As the global economy develops, more and more individuals are required to be productive and creative within multicultural environments. The issues discussed in this article will only grow more pressing. Innovation is important for growing economies and creating jobs (e.g., Ahlstrom, 2010). Social interactions in multicultur-
tural settings often involve conflicts that limit individuals’ ability to think creatively. We suggest that the positive and negative effects of conflict on creativity can be stifled or enhanced depending on the cultural meanings individuals hold. Cultural meanings determine whether individuals will interpret a social interaction as a conflict and feel threatened by it. By understanding possible differences in individual’s cultural meanings, conflict can be managed and leveraged to the benefit of anyone who engages in multicultural settings.

References


This document is copyrighted by the American Psychological Association or one of its allied publishers. This article is intended solely for the personal use of the individual user and is not to be disseminated broadly.


CULTURE, INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT, AND CREATIVITY


