

Workplace conflict and employee well-being

The moderating role of detachment from work during off-job time

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of this study is to address the relation between task and relationship conflicts at work and employee well being. It seeks to examine psychological detachment from work during off job time as a moderator in the relation between conflicts and well being.

Design/methodology/approach In a field study, 291 white collar employees completed survey measures of task conflicts, relationship conflicts, psychological detachment from work during off job time, and well being. Control variables included workload and job control.

Findings Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that employees experiencing high levels of task conflicts and high levels of relationship conflicts report poorer well being. As predicted, psychological detachment from work mitigated the negative relation between relationship conflicts and well being. Contrary to expectations, psychological detachment failed to moderate the relation between task conflicts and well being.

Practical implications The study suggests that employees should be encouraged to disengage mentally from work during leisure time.

Originality/value This study links research on workplace conflicts with research on recovery processes. It tests the moderator effect of psychological detachment from work on the association between workplace conflicts and well being.

Keywords Task conflicts, Relationship conflicts, Well being, Psychological detachment, Conflict management, Employees, Germany

Paper type Research paper

Workplace conflicts are a widespread phenomenon in organisational life. Empirical research has shown that employees who experience workplace conflicts suffer from strain symptoms (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004) such as depression (Spector and Jex, 1998), burnout (Richardson *et al.*, 1992), and somatic complaints (Frone, 2000). Thus, workplace conflicts may constitute a serious threat to employees' well-being. Despite this empirical evidence, crucial questions remain unanswered. First, most studies on the association between workplace conflicts and well-being used rather general measures of conflict and did not differentiate task conflicts and relationship conflicts. Thus, until now we know only very little about the specific relations between task versus relationship conflicts on the one hand and employee well-being on the other

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hand (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004). This paucity of research is unfortunate, because the use of overall conflict measures may mask differences in the patterns for task versus relationship conflicts. The differentiation between task and relationship conflict has been proved useful with respect to, for instance, teamwork processes (Gamero *et al.*, 2008).

Second, it remains largely unanswered whether these assumed associations between workplace conflicts and impaired well-being hold for all employees and under all circumstances. There is first evidence that personality is a moderator in the relation between workplace conflicts and employee well-being (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2005a, b; Spector and Bruk-Lee, 2008). However, other moderators, particularly moderators that are more malleable, remain largely unexplored (De Dreu and Beersma, 2005). In this paper, we focus on psychological detachment from work during non-work time as a potential moderator (Sonnentag and Bayer, 2005). Specifically, we argue that the association between workplace conflicts and poor well-being will be weaker when employees mentally disengage from work during non-work time. However, when employees do not detach from work during non-work time, conflicts experienced at work may be more detrimental to their well-being.

Taken together, we pursue three specific goals with our study. First, we test whether the negative relation between workplace conflicts and well-being holds for both task and relationship conflicts. Second, we examine whether psychological detachment from work during non-work time attenuates the assumed negative relation between task and relationship conflicts on the one hand and well-being on the other hand. Third, we examine possible differences between task and relationship conflicts with respect to their bivariate associations with well-being and the moderation effect of psychological detachment.

Our study adds to the growing number of studies that address well-being issues in the context of workplace conflicts (Spector and Bruk-Lee, 2008), by using the differentiation between task and relationship conflicts (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995). With this differentiation we bring more light into the conflict aspects that might be most detrimental for employee well-being. Moreover, we respond to calls for studies on moderators of the association between workplace conflicts and well-being (De Dreu and Beersma, 2005). We focus on one moderator that is not necessarily rooted in employees' personality, but potentially can be influenced by interventions (Brosschot and Van der Doef, 2006). Specifically, we address psychological detachment from work during non-work time as a potential moderator and thereby shift the focus from conflict-related processes that occur at the workplace (De Dreu and van Vianen, 2001) to processes taking place in the non-work domain. Therefore, this study can have implications for practice as it points to additional options how to intervene when employees experience workplace conflicts.

Workplace conflicts as job stressors

De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) defined conflict as a "process that begins when an individual or group perceives differences and opposition between itself and another individual or group about interests and resources, beliefs, values, or practices that matter to them" (p. 6). Conflicts can be examined at different organisational levels; here, we focus on conflicts as they are perceived by the individual employee.

Workplace conflicts are severe job stressors (Spector and Bruk-Lee, 2008). Generally, stressors are stimuli in the environment that cause strain reactions in the person exposed to the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). These reactions occur at

the physiological (e.g. increased heart rate) and the psychological (e.g. anger, fatigue) level. Normally, such strain reactions are short-lived, but may eventually develop into more longer-term strain reaction (including health problems) if the stressor persists for a long time or if no recovery from the stressor occurs (McEwen, 1998). According to cognitive stress theories such as the transactional stress model (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), stressors impact on the individual not only while the stressors are physically present in the situation, but as long as they are mentally represented. Moreover, it is important to note that stressors do not lead to negative effects in all situations. Particularly the way a person deals (i.e. cope) with the specific stressors influences possible consequences. With respect to workplace conflicts, these assumptions imply that just thinking about a conflict might cause strain reactions, and that mentally disengaging from the conflict situation for a while might alleviate the strain reaction.

Workplace conflicts and well-being

Many scholars agree that task conflicts must be differentiated from relationship conflicts (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). Task conflicts (also known as cognitive conflicts) refer to disagreements among two or more persons about the task to be performed. These disagreements can include “differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions” (Jehn, 1995, p. 258). Also, disagreements about the “distribution of resources, procedures and policies, and judgments and interpretation of facts” (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003, p. 741) can be subsumed under task conflicts. For example, two persons who have to coordinate their efforts in order to get a task completed and suggest different approaches about how to come to the best task solution, experience task conflict. Relationship conflicts (also known as affective or socio-emotional conflicts) originate from interpersonal incompatibilities among two or more persons and often include tension, animosity, and annoyance (Jehn, 1995). Incompatibilities may refer to personal taste, political preferences, values, and interpersonal style (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). For example, two persons who do not get along with each other may experience a relationship conflict. Meta-analytical evidence shows that both types of conflict are negatively related to team performance and team member satisfaction (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003).

We suggest that task conflicts and relationship conflicts are negatively related to employee well-being. In line with Warr (2007), we conceptualise well-being as a subjective experience characterised by varying degrees of pleasantness and arousal. Generally, conflicts at work can be seen as social stressors (Frone, 2000; Spector and Jex, 1998). Social stressors are known to be negatively related to well-being indicators, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Dormann and Zapf, 1999, 2002). We argue that this negative relation also holds for the two specific types of social stressors at work, namely task conflicts and relationship conflicts.

Task conflicts – as disagreements about how to accomplish the task – increase tension and anxiety (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). They are an additional burden on employees’ daily work processes because time and cognitive effort is needed in order to come up with agreed-upon solutions for the conflict. Extra time and effort spent on the conflict and solution development reduce the time available for working on the task (cf. Schwartz and Stone, 1993). Not having enough time available for the task is associated with impaired well-being, as has been shown in numerous studies (Crawford *et al.*, 2010; De Lange *et al.*, 2003). Cognitive effort spent on resolving the task conflict contributes to cognitive load. Carnevale and Probst (1998) have argued that dealing with task conflicts requires substantial cognitive activity, including

planning, developing tactics, assessing strategies that “may result in limiting the amount of attentional resources that are available for additional tasks” (p. 1301). As a consequence, fewer cognitive resources are available that could otherwise be spent on coping processes. Coping is important for dealing with workplace stressors and for protecting well-being (De Rijk *et al.*, 1998). Spending resources on conflict management might deplete cognitive and affective resources, which, according to the conservation of resources framework, will result in a deterioration of well-being (Hobfoll, 1998).

Relationship conflicts are accompanied with stress and tension that impair employee well-being at work (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004; Giebels and Janssen, 2005). Similar to task conflicts, dealing with relationship conflicts implies misspent time and misspent effort and may consume cognitive resources (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003) that are subsequently lacking for task accomplishment processes and therefore increase the overall stress level at work. Importantly, relationship conflicts threaten employees’ embeddedness and social attachment in their work environment (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Leary *et al.*, 1995). Feeling positively related to others, however, is a basic human need (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and when this need is not satisfied, well-being decreases (Reis *et al.*, 2000). Thus, relationship conflicts increase the likelihood that basic human needs are not fulfilled at work. More specifically, facing relationship conflicts may reduce the availability of social support (Emmons and Colby, 1995). Because social support is an important protective factor for employee well-being (Halbesleben, 2006), high levels of relationship conflicts and associated low levels of social support at work will additionally impair employee well-being.

De Dreu *et al.* (2004) have argued that task conflicts and relationship conflicts differ in their relevance for well-being. Relationship conflicts tend “to be more interpersonal and emotional” (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003, p. 747) and imply a greater threat to one’s personal identity and self-esteem (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004). Because negative job-related experiences that are linked to one’s self have detrimental outcomes (Semmer *et al.*, 2010), relationship conflicts should be associated with more negative affective responses and imply a greater risk to one’s well-being. Empirical evidence supporting this differentiation with respect to well-being indicators is still very limited (De Dreu *et al.*, 2003) and partly inconsistent (Guerra *et al.*, 2005), but tends to speak for the assumption that the association between relationship conflicts and impaired well-being is stronger than the association between task conflicts and impaired well-being.

Based on these considerations, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1. Task conflicts at work are negatively related to psychological well-being.
- H2. Relationship conflicts at work are negatively related to psychological well-being.
- H3. The negative association between relationship conflicts and well-being is stronger than the negative association between task conflicts and well-being.

Psychological detachment and well-being

Often, employees do not leave all their workplace issues and work experiences at work. Job-related matters intrude into their non-work lives (Ilies *et al.*, 2007; Song *et al.*, 2008). For example, at night employees may still think and ruminate about what was going on at work during the day. These cognitions may also include thoughts about conflicts encountered while at work. Etzion *et al.* (1998) coined the term “psychological detachment” to characterise the experience of employees mentally disengaging from

their jobs when they are in another life domain (e.g. at home). Psychological detachment from work during non-work time implies not engaging in work-related activities and also refraining from job-related thoughts. While psychological detachment from work when being at work is an undesired state (Kahn, 1990), psychologically detaching from work when being at home is an important prerequisite for recovering from strain experiences originating from work (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). When mentally disconnecting from work during non-work time, employees can forget about stressful work experiences such as workplace conflicts and can therefore get more fully immersed into non-work life activities and enjoy their non-work lives.

Recent studies have provided increasing evidence that psychological detachment from work during non-work time is associated with positive aspects of well-being, whereas a lack of detachment is associated with strain symptoms such as emotional exhaustion and health complaints (Moreno-Jiménez *et al.*, 2009; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007; Taris *et al.*, 2008). In our study, we extend these findings by examining psychological detachment in the context of workplace conflicts. We propose the following hypothesis:

- H4.* Psychological detachment from work during non-work time is positively related to psychological well-being.

Interaction effects between workplace conflicts and psychological detachment

Job stressors lead to short-term strain reactions such as anger or anxiety (Rodell and Judge, 2009). These short-term strain reactions may develop into more severe longer-term impairments of well-being, particularly if no recovery from the stressors occurs (Geurts and Sonnentag, 2006; Meijman and Mulder, 1998). Research on recovery has identified psychological detachment from work during off-job time as a highly powerful recovery experience (Binnewies *et al.*, 2009; Ragsdale *et al.*, 2011). Sonnentag *et al.* (2010a) have argued that psychological detachment is a moderator in the association between job stressors and longer-term strain reactions. By mentally disengaging from work during after-work hours, employees gain distance from the stressors encountered at work and thereby disrupt the process through which stressors and short-term strains develop into longer-term impairments of well-being.

Hence, psychological detachment should also play a moderating role in the relation between workplace conflicts and well-being. Specifically, we propose that psychological detachment attenuates the relation between workplace conflicts and impaired well-being. The association between conflicts and poor well-being will be weaker when employees psychologically detach from work during their non-work time than when they do not detach.

When employees experience a conflict at work and do not mentally detach from work during non-work time, it is likely that they continue thinking about this conflict when being at home. They may ponder about the conflict issue, the opponent or specific unfavourable social interactions that have been taken place. Such reflections may develop into perseverative thoughts (Brosschot *et al.*, 2006) that prolong the strain response and may impair the employee's physiological functioning (Brosschot *et al.*, 2007). As a consequence, well-being will suffer. However, when employees succeed in detaching from work during non-work time, they can temporarily forget about the conflict encountered at work. Then, during non-work time, they can concentrate on

other aspects of life and can engage in pleasant experiences, which in turn will increase well-being (Gable *et al.*, 2004).

In addition to the overall moderator effect of psychological detachment, we propose that psychological detachment is more important for relationship conflicts than for task conflicts. Thus, it should have a stronger moderator effect on the association between relationship conflicts and impaired well-being than on the association between task conflicts and impaired well-being. Relationship conflicts are more self-relevant than are task conflicts and impose a greater threat to one's self-esteem (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, it is more important to gain distance from them when being off the job. Although not detaching from task conflicts will also impair well-being, we assume that the benefit of detaching in the case of task conflicts is less pronounced because there can be instances when thinking about task conflicts can be experienced as a positive intellectual challenge. Moreover, thinking about task conflicts when being at home might help to come up with new ideas about how to solve the conflict. Such ideas will help to develop an integrative solution for the conflict (Pruitt and Lewis, 1975), which in turn might improve well-being.

Specifically, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H5. Psychological detachment from work during non-work time moderates the negative relation between task conflicts and psychological well-being. The relation is stronger when psychological detachment is low than when it is high.
- H6. Psychological detachment from work during non-work time moderates the negative relation between relationship conflicts and psychological well-being. The relation is stronger when psychological detachment is low than when it is high.
- H7. The moderator effect of psychological detachment on the relation between relationship conflicts and psychological well-being is stronger than the moderator effect of psychological detachment on the relation between task conflicts and psychological well-being.

Method

Sample

We collected our data from white-collar employees in the regional headquarters of a large company operating in the construction sector in Germany. E-mail links to an online survey hosted at a commercial server external to the company were sent to 612 employees. A total of 291 employees (25.1 per cent female) provided complete data sets (response rate 47.5 per cent). The average age of study participants was 40.8 years (SD 10.4), and the average company tenure was 12.8 years (SD 7.7). Participants mainly came from service departments (40.5 per cent from sales and marketing; 26.8 per cent from the company's administration departments, including accounting, finance, controlling, logistics, personnel; 22.8 per cent from technical development, safety, quality assurance and environmental protection; 5.5 per cent from information technology; 4 per cent did not report their department). Participants were fairly well educated (18.2 per cent had completed a two- to three-year vocational training; 28.5 per cent had a university degree; 29.6 per cent had completed vocational training and had received a university degree; and 24.4 per cent had followed a

continued education courses after having completed vocational training). Among all the study participants, 34.7 per cent held a leadership position.

Measures

Table I displays means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations between study variables. All items were in German. For the specific measures that were not available in German (e.g. task conflicts, relationship conflicts), we translated the items from English and used an independent back-translation procedure to ensure that the meaning of the items was retained in the translated version.

Workplace conflicts. We assessed task conflicts and relationship conflicts with the measure developed by Giebels and Janssen (2005). Specifically, we assessed task conflicts with four items using a response format ranging from 1 never to 5 very often (sample item: "How often do you and your colleagues or supervisor have divergent ideas on the execution of tasks?"). Cronbach's α was 0.86. For assessing relationship conflicts, we also used four items with the same response format (sample item: "How often are there personal clashes between you and your colleagues or your supervisor?"). Cronbach's α was 0.89.

Psychological detachment. We measured psychological detachment from work during non-work time with four items from the measure introduced by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). A sample item is "During after-work hours I do not think about work at all". We used a five-point response format ranging from 1 I do not agree to 5 I fully agree. Cronbach's α was 0.91.

Well-being. We assessed well-being with 12 items from the German version (Linden *et al.*, 1996) of the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1978). Participants had to indicate on a four-point Likert scale whether they experienced specific strain symptoms during the past weeks. Sample items are "Did you lose much sleep over worry?" and "Did you feel constantly under strain?". Cronbach's α was 0.90. We recoded the original GHQ measure so that high scores indicate good well-being.

Control variables. Because well-being might not only be contingent on workplace conflicts and psychological detachment from work, but also on other work situation factors such as job control and workload (De Lange *et al.*, 2003) and because these other factors may also be related to workplace conflicts (Spector *et al.*, 1988; Spector and Jex, 1998), we controlled for job control and workload. The inclusion of these variables will help to rule out alternative explanations when finding significant associations between workplace conflicts and psychological detachment on the one hand and poor employee well-being on the other hand. We measured job control with four items from the measure developed by Semmer (1984; cf. Zapf, 1993), using a five-point response format ranging from 1 very little to 5 very much. A sample item is "To what extent can you influence how you accomplish your tasks?". Cronbach's α was 0.80. We assessed workload with five items from the measure suggested by Spector and Jex (1998). A sample item is "How often does your job require you to work very fast?". Study participants had to indicate their answers on a five-point scale ranging from 1 less than once per month or never to 5 several times per day. Cronbach's α was 0.84. As additional control variables, we assessed gender, age, and leadership position with single items.

Confirmatory factor analyses. To examine whether the core variables in our study (task conflicts, relationship conflicts, psychological detachment, workload, job control, and well-being) represent six distinct constructs, we ran a set of confirmatory factor analyses. A six-factor model with all items loading on their respective factors fit the

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender ^a	0.75	0.44								
2. Age	40.83	10.38	0.10							
3. Leadership position ^b	0.35	0.48	0.24	0.31						
4. Workload	3.56	0.83	0.13	0.11	0.13					
5. Job control	3.58	0.69	0.12	0.21	0.27	0.05				
6. Task conflict	2.65	0.69	0.04	0.01	0.06	0.16	0.27			
7. Relationship conflict	2.08	0.74	0.06	0.00	0.07	0.07	0.22	0.53		
8. Psychological detachment	2.66	0.98	0.21	0.14	0.20	0.27	0.03	0.12	0.13	
9. Well being	3.07	0.46	0.14	0.01	0.07	0.13	0.31	0.35	0.31	0.25

Notes $n = 291$; $r \geq 0.12$ are significant at $p < 0.05$; $r \geq 0.15$ are significant at $p < 0.01$; *0 = female, 1 = male; ^b0 = no leadership position, 1 = leadership position

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations between study variables

data well (χ^2 1,218.17; df 480; $p < 0.001$; RMSEA 0.073; CFI 0.94; NNFI 0.93). Importantly, this model fit the data better than a five-factor model with task-conflict and relationship-conflict items loading on one common factor (χ^2 1,615.66; df 485; $p < 0.001$; RMSEA 0.090; CFI 0.91; NNFI 0.90; $\Delta\chi^2$ 397.98; Δdf 5; $p < 0.001$) and a number of other alternative models, including a one-factor model (χ^2 5,209.86; df 495; $p < 0.001$; RMSEA 0.018; CFI 0.68; NNFI 0.66; $\Delta\chi^2$ 3,991.69; Δdf 15; $p < 0.001$).

Results

We tested our hypotheses with hierarchical regression analyses. In Model 1, we entered gender, age, and leadership position as a first set of control variables. In Model 2, we entered workload and job control as additional control variables. In Model 3, we entered task conflicts, relationship conflicts, and psychological detachment from work during non-work time as our core predictor variables. In Model 4, we included the interaction terms between conflicts and psychological detachment (task conflicts \times psychological detachment, relationship conflicts \times psychological detachment). Results of these analyses can be found in Table II.

The three demographic variables as a whole did not contribute to the prediction of well-being. Workload and job control entered in Model 2 added to the prediction of well-being. Workload was a significant negative predictor of well-being and job control was a significant positive predictor. Workplace conflicts and psychological detachment from work during non-work time entered in Model 3 significantly contributed to the prediction of well-being. Employees who experienced a high level of task conflicts and a high level of relationship conflicts at work reported poorer well-being than employees experiencing low levels of conflicts. Moreover, high levels of psychological detachment from work during non-work time were positively associated with well-being.

We tested whether the relation between task conflicts and poor well-being differed from the relation between relationship conflicts and poor well-being by comparing the 95 per cent confidence intervals. The confidence intervals of task conflicts [0.075; 0.313] and relationship conflicts [0.011; 0.247] were largely overlapping. Thus, the strength of the relation between the two types of conflict and poor well-being did not differ. Overall, our data support *H1*, *H2*, and *H4*, but not *H3*.

After entering the interaction terms between workplace conflicts and psychological detachment in Model 4, the proportion of explained variance increased further. An inspection of the regression weights revealed that only the interaction between relationship conflicts and psychological detachment was significant. Figure 1 displays the pattern of this interaction effect. Additional simple slope tests (Aiken and West, 1991) indicated that in case of low psychological detachment, relationship conflicts showed a strong negative association with well-being (β 0.17; SE 0.06; t 2.97; $p < 0.01$). In the case of high psychological detachment, however, relationship conflicts were unrelated to well-being (β 0.05; SE 0.06; t 0.86; NS). This pattern fully corresponds to what we had expected in *H6*. The interaction effect between psychological detachment and task conflicts on well-being was not significant. This finding does not support *H5*, but tends to speak for *H7*. In an additional step, we examined the 95 per cent confidence intervals of the interaction terms. The confidence interval of the interaction term between relationship conflicts and detachment [0.048; 0.282] and the confidence interval of the interaction term between task conflicts and detachment [0.118; 0.111] did slightly overlap, implying

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
Gender	0.13	2.14*	0.12	2.15*	0.14	2.53*	0.15	2.69**
Age	0.04	0.58	0.06	1.16	0.05	0.87	0.03	0.60
Leadership position	0.05	0.78	0.00	0.05	0.07	1.23	0.07	1.14
Workload			0.12	2.19*	0.04	0.79	0.03	0.48
Job control			0.30	5.15***	0.19	3.38**	0.17	2.98**
Task conflict (TC)					0.19	3.10**	0.20	3.28**
Relationship conflict (RC)					0.13	2.09*	0.10	1.54
Psychological detachment (DET)					0.23	4.10***	0.25	4.52***
TC \times DET							0.00	0.06
RC \times DET							0.16	2.62**
R^2				0.13		0.25		0.28
F		2.086		8.240***		11.932***		10.693***
ΔR^2		0.02		0.11		0.13		0.02
F		2.086		17.120***		15.928***		4.539*

Notes: $n = 291$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table II.
Results from hierarchical regression analysis predicting well-being from task conflict, relationship conflict, and psychological detachment

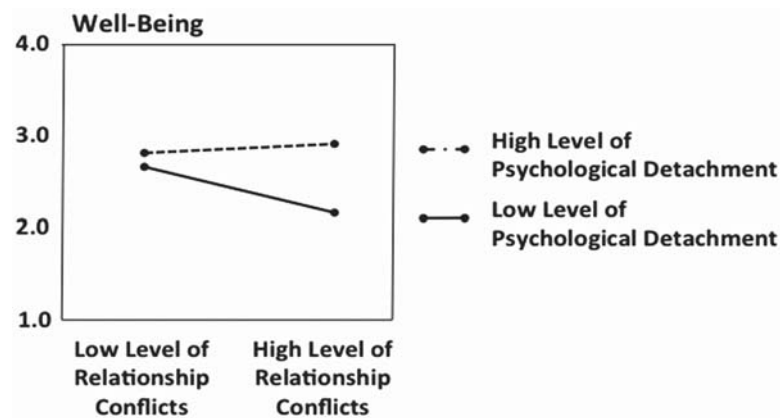


Figure 1. Interaction effect between relationship conflicts and psychological detachment

that the effect sizes of the interaction terms did not differ significantly, although only the interaction term including relationship conflicts was significant.

Discussion

Our study showed that both task and relationship conflicts were negatively related to employee well-being. Moreover, psychological detachment from work during off-job time was positively related to employee well-being. Importantly, psychological detachment moderated the relation between relationship conflicts and well-being. The well-being of employees who were successful in mentally detaching from their jobs during off-job time did not suffer from relationship conflicts encountered at work, whereas employees who stayed mentally attached to their job experienced poor well-being when experiencing relationship conflicts at work. Thus, psychological detachment from work not only shows direct associations with well-being indicators (Moreno-Jiménez *et al.*, 2009; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007), it also buffers the negative effects of relationship conflicts.

Our analyses demonstrated that the bivariate associations between task and relationship conflicts and impaired well-being were rather similar. Thus, our results do not support the assumption that relationship conflicts are a more severe threat to employee well-being than are task conflicts (De Dreu *et al.*, 2003). A recent meta-analysis has shown that relationship and task conflicts differ with respect to their associations with satisfaction. However, with respect to more affective outcomes (i.e. positive affect), the difference is less clear, with largely overlapping confidence intervals (De Wit *et al.*, 2012). This pattern of findings might imply that one has to differentiate between satisfaction and other well-being implications of task and relationship conflicts.

With respect to the hypothesised moderator effects, we found that psychological detachment buffered the relation between relationship conflicts and poor well-being, but not the relation between task conflicts and poor well-being. This pattern of findings might imply that relationship conflicts lose part of its personal relevance when employees mentally disengage from work during off-job time. Task conflicts, however, because they are closely intertwined with the accomplishment of work goals, remain relevant for employee well-being – also when temporarily disengaging from work. Although gaining mental distance is probably relieving during the evening when

detachment occurs, employees might feel that they are not well-prepared for addressing task conflicts when they return to work on the next day. This experience may reduce the initially positive buffer effects. Moreover, not detaching from work in case of task conflicts might even have benefits in some instances. For example, thinking about work when being at home might lead to new ideas about how to reconcile diverse perspectives present in task conflicts (cf. Binnewies *et al.*, 2009). A day-level study on workplace conflicts and creativity has shown that task conflicts are negatively related to creativity on the same day, but that they are positively related to creativity on the next day – no such pattern was found for relationship conflicts (Kurtzberg and Mueller, 2005). Thus, this study suggests that the dynamics stimulated by task conflicts in-between single workdays differ from the dynamics stimulated by relationship conflicts.

Psychological detachment from work during off-job time attenuated the relation between relationship conflicts and impaired well-being. This finding highlights the benefit of not thinking about a work-related relationship conflict when being at home, and seems to contradict findings on conflict management strategies. For example, earlier research has indicated that active conflict management strategies are superior in terms of well-being than flight and other more passive behaviours (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2005a, b; Dijkstra, 2009). Findings from the present research can be reconciled with results from earlier studies when considering that these earlier studies referred to conflict management while being at work (Park and Park, 2008) and focused on rather passive conflict management behaviours that are unhealthy in themselves (e.g. drinking alcohol; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2005a, b). Maybe, it is most beneficial to address conflicts actively while being at work, but to detach from them mentally when being at home. Thus, psychological detachment from work must not be equated with avoidance coping (Folkman *et al.*, 1986), although the concepts appear to be similar at first sight. Avoidance coping implies a passive orientation towards a stressor when in fact some action should be taken. Detachment, in contrast, refers to a mental state when being off the job where usually no action is needed and continued rumination would have negative effects (for the empirical distinction between avoidance coping and psychological detachment, cf. Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007).

Although our data speak for a moderator effect of psychological detachment, we would like to add a caveat. Fully detaching from work when being at home might have also a downside. If one does not talk about job-related issues at home, one misses the opportunity to receive social support from one's partner or other family members and friends. Social support plays an important role in the stress process (Carlson and Perrewé, 1999), and has been shown to buffer the negative effects of job stressors (Frese, 1999).

Limitations and directions for future research

Our study is not without limitations. First, because of our cross-sectional design we cannot draw causal inferences. Although there are good reasons to assume that workplace conflicts, lack of psychological detachment and their interaction cause poor well-being, we cannot rule out other causal interpretations. For example, employees suffering from poor well-being may be involved in more workplace conflicts. However, earlier longitudinal research with overall conflict measures tends to support the pathway from conflicts to impaired well-being (Bültmann *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, it might be that workplace conflicts and poor well-being share a common cause. To partially address this concern we controlled for other workplace factors such as

workload and job control. Importantly, workplace conflicts and lack of psychological detachment from work during non-work time predicted poor well-being, also when including these control variables. Thereby, a rival explanation can be partially ruled out. However, there might be other workplace factors such as role conflict that might have influenced workplace conflicts and poor well-being. Future studies should use longitudinal designs in order to bring more light in the causal linkages between workplace conflicts, psychological detachment, and employee well-being. Moreover, more control variables (e.g. role conflict, personality variables) should be taken into account.

A second limitation refers to the use of self-report measures and the associated problem of common method bias. Although we admit that it would have been preferable to assess data from multiple sources, we are confident that our findings cannot be reduced to common method bias. For example, a study that used spouse-ratings and self-rating of psychological detachment from work arrived at very similar findings for the two rating sources (Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010b). In addition, although common method bias can account for bivariate associations between two variables, this explanation does not hold for interaction effects (Barling *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, it is unlikely that our findings can be exclusively explained by common method variance.

Our measures of task and relationship conflicts did not differentiate between conflicts with supervisors as opposed to conflicts with co-workers. Scholars have argued that the consequences of workplace conflicts may differ between conflicts with supervisors versus conflicts with co-workers (Frone, 2000). Therefore, future studies should assess both conflicts with supervisors and conflicts with co-workers separately. In work settings that involve a high degree of interaction with customers, conflicts with customers should also be measured (Dormann and Zapf, 2004).

Our study identified psychological detachment from work during off-job time as a moderator in the relation between relationship conflicts and impaired well-being. However, psychological detachment did not attenuate the relation between task conflicts and well-being. Therefore, future research should try to identify moderators that buffer the relation between task conflicts and poor employee well-being. An important moderator could be active conflict management at the workplace.

At the descriptive level, psychological detachment from work was negatively related to workplace conflicts, although the correlations were small in size. It might be that psychological detachment helps to reduce conflicts because detachment makes such conflicts less emotionally laden. Our cross-sectional design does not allow for testing such a dynamic process that operates over the course of time. Future studies might want to use a day-level approach (Ilies *et al.*, 2011) and examine whether detaching from work during the evening reduces (the perception of) workplace conflicts during the next day.

Practical implications

Our study has implications for the management of conflicts in organisations. Although causal conclusions in a strict sense are still premature, addressing workplace conflicts and psychological detachment from work during non-work time may have the potential to increase employee well-being. First, because task and relationship conflicts were found to be negatively related to employee well-being, it seems reasonable to develop effective conflict management strategies. Second, because psychological detachment from work during off-job time predicted well-being and moderated the

association between relationship conflicts and well-being, employees should be encouraged to detach from work when being at home. Psychological detachment may be achieved by refraining from job-related activities (including checking of emails and making job-related phone calls). Moreover, employees may be advised to segment their work life from their home by erecting mental boundaries between the two life domains (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Inspection of the correlations displayed in Table I and findings from other studies (e.g. Siltaloppi *et al.*, 2009) suggest that psychological detachment from work during off-job time is particularly difficult when workload is high, for instance, because a high workload triggers prolonged activation of job-related thoughts. Thus, assuming that the association between a high workload and lack of detachment reflects at least partially a causal process, a reduction of workload is needed when aiming at a higher degree of psychological detachment from work during after-work hours.

Conclusion

Overall, our study showed that workplace conflicts are negatively related to employee well-being. Importantly, workplace conflicts may not only be dealt with at the workplace, but may be also addressed during non-work life. Our data demonstrated that detaching from work during off-job time is an effective strategy to protect one's well-being when facing relationship conflicts at work.

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