Abstract

Three studies investigated the moderating effect of relational self-construal on zero-sum thinking during conflicts of interest. In Studies 1 (n = 161) and 2 (n = 294), participants completed a measure of relational self-construal, read hypothetical conflicts of interest then evaluated courses of action based on the degree to which doing so would benefit or harm to each person involved. Results indicated that zero-sum perceptions were stronger among people with a low relational self-construal than for high relationalists. In Study 3, 173 participants described and evaluated their own conflict of interest with either a close or a distant other. Results revealed that high relationalists evaluated the outcome positively when their decision was in favor of the close other.

Conflicts of Interest: Relational Self-Construal and Decision-Making in Interpersonal Contexts

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Introduction

Zero-sum perceptions involve an either-or strategy of conflict resolution. If one person benefits, then the other must make a sacrifice. Classical theories of rational choice depict humans as both primarily driven by self-interest motives and optimally making choices on the basis of self-interest. Yet many individuals sacrifice their own interests for the sake of an important relationship.

For individuals who have constructed a highly relational self-construal, relationships are essential for self-expression, self-verification, and self-enhancement. There is also evidence that high relationalists integrate interests within relationship contexts rather than perceiving them as at odds with each other. Thus, people with a highly relational self-construal tend to integrate close others' interests without feeling coerced.

These studies examined associations between individuals' level of relational self-construal and their perceptions of choices and decisions that serve the self or a relationship partner. We expected that people with a low relational self-construal would be more likely than highly relationalists to perceive conflicts of interest as having zero-sum outcomes (i.e., either one relationship partner benefits or the other gains). In contrast, we expected that high relationalists would be more likely than lows to perceive win-win outcomes during conflicts of interest (i.e., both relationship partners can benefit).

Method

Studies 1 and 2 involved participants reading vignettes of hypothetical conflicts of interest (see below). In Study 1, we examined the perceptions of other people’s decisions during a conflict of interest as either helpful or harmful for the decision-maker and either helpful or harmful for the other person involved.

In Study 2, we measured specific perceptions of personal benefit. In addition, we asked the participants to place themselves in the situation rather than act as an outside observer when responding to the items, and we examined the choices they believed they would make in those circumstances.

Sample vignette: Since you’ve gone to college, you’ve reconsidered the religious beliefs you were raised with. You’ve come to strongly hold beliefs that differ from those you grew up with. Your parents also hold their religious beliefs very strongly, and it is very important to them that when the family is together, everyone in the family should observe the religious practices they raised you with. But you are very uncomfortable with these religious practices now, and you’d feel like a hypocrite if you engaged in them while at home.

Study 3 involved participants evaluating a past experience they had that included a conflict of interest with another person. Participants were randomly assigned to write about a conflict with a close other or with a distant other.

Study 1 Results

The results of hierarchical linear regression analyses showed that people who define themselves in terms of their close relationships do not view conflicts of interest as having zero-sum outcomes. Zero-sum perceptions were much more prevalent among low relationalists than highs, whereas win-win perceptions appeared to be no more pronounced among high relationalists than among lows. This suggests that most people can see the benefit to both the person and to the relationship, although low relationalists appear to be more ambivalent toward these conflicts.

Study 2 Results

The results of these analyses provided further evidence that low relationalists perceived conflicts of interest in terms of zero-sum outcomes, whereas high relationalists did not show this tendency.

Study 3 Results

These results showed that low relationalists perceived conflicts of interest as having zero-sum outcomes. These results also showed that high relationalists evaluated the outcome of choosing a self-serving decision over a close other as ultimately harming themselves.

Conclusions

People who have a highly relational self-construal perceive conflicts of interests differently than others. Whereas some people evaluate the situation in terms of win-lose outcomes ("only one of us can get what he or she wants"), highly relational individuals are better able to integrate their own interests with the interests of the relationship. Despite the abundance of research on how people evaluate conflicts of interest, it is clear that the self influences how these evaluations are formed. Applying the concepts formulated in self research to investigate processes within close relationships can reveal new dimensions of behavior, challenge the assumptions about people’s perceptions, and ultimately provide a better understanding of how to have more positive relationship experiences.