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A psychological approach to third-party side-taking in interpersonal conflicts

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Abstract

Third parties often react to an interpersonal conflict by taking sides. However, under the assumption that third parties are to help disputants resolve their problems, the topic of side-taking has been overlooked in the literature of conflict management. In this theoretical paper, we propose self-interest, moral, and relationship motives to explain the psychological mechanism of side-taking. We then discuss how disputant-related factors (in terms of the effects of status differences between third parties and disputants), dispute-related factors (in terms of conflict types), and contextual factors (in terms of individualism/collectivism) have an influence on the three types of side-taking motives to gain a deeper and broader understanding of side-taking. By focusing on side-taking and analyzing its motives, our theoretical framework connects and extends the literatures on third-party intervention and coalition formation. It also bridges the gap between individuals, dyads, groups, and organizations at different levels of conflict processes.

Keywords

interpersonal conflicts, side-taking motives, third parties

In organizational life, employees from workers on the front line to directors in the management board, all observe and experience interpersonal conflicts between others. Interpersonal conflicts may take various forms, ranging from minor disagreements to physical assaults, and

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can be covert (e.g., spreading rumors about a coworker) or overt (e.g., quarreling with each other; Weingart, Behfar, Bendersky, Todorova, & Jehn, 2015). When faced with an interpersonal conflict, third-party observers are often thought to play a role as arbiters or witnesses who de-escalate conflicts. However, what we tend to overlook is that those third-party observers also have a host of interests and considerations themselves, many of which will lead to taking sides—a response that favors one disputant over the other.

The consequences of side-taking by third-party observers can be severe: they may change the power structure of disputants, thus influencing the conflict outcomes; they can escalate a two-party dispute into a multiparty conflict; they may even transform third-party observers from a kind of bystanders into the partisans of disputants. A better understanding of third-party side-taking will thus pave a new avenue for third-party conflict intervention. As a first step towards theorizing third-party side-taking, in this paper we focus on clarifying the underlying psychological motives and the situational factors that aggravate or alleviate side-taking motives. By analyzing the psychological considerations underlying side-taking, our overarching goal is to expand the scope of conflict intervention.

Side-taking refers to a set of actions with which individuals help fight other people's battles by favoring one disputant over the other. Side-taking can be executed implicitly (e.g., keep silence and acquiesce) or explicitly (e.g., cover one side's wrongdoing, openly show support to the favorite side, or conspire against the unfavored party). In theory, any "third" party who is not part of the conflict can take sides. However, professional third parties, such as arbitrators and mediators, who are required by their job role to be impartial (Elangovan, 1995; Ross & Conlon, 2000; Sheppard, 1984), are often consciously and deliberately against taking sides in a conflict. We thus excluded them from the third parties being analyzed in this paper. More specifically, we focus on third

parties who are observers, originally not part of a conflict, and have little obligation towards conflict resolutions. A good example of a non-professional third-party observer is a colleague who is confronted with a conflict between two superiors when both sides signal a need for support.

In what follows, we begin by highlighting the potential contributions of studying side-taking to the field of conflict management, and then propose three psychological considerations or motives that third parties may have regarding side-taking. Next, we discuss how party-related factors (in terms of status differences between third parties and disputants), dispute-related factors (in terms of conflict types), and context-related factors (in terms of national culture of individualism/collectivism) can have an influence on third parties' side-taking motives. The paper concludes with a discussion on three critical issues related to side-taking and some suggestions for future third-party side-taking theoretical and empirical research.

Potential contributions of research on side-taking to conflict management

Research on side-taking can have important theoretical contributions. To begin with, studying side-taking will bridge the gap between studies on ambivalence in work roles and studies on disagreements in social conflicts. Despite their common denominator of conflict, the role-conflict school (e.g., Carnes, 2017; Gross, Mason, & McEachern, 1958; Miller & Shull, 1962) and the social-conflict school (e.g., Pruitt & Kim, 2004; van de Vliert, 1997) have developed in almost total isolation from each other. This disconnection between the two schools is unfortunate, not only because role conflicts and social conflicts feed on each other (van de Vliert, 2010), but also because intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict do not differ in basic modes of conflict handling—avoiding, accommodating, compromising,

problem solving, and fighting (van de Vliert, 1981, 1997). The topic of third-party side-taking bridges the divide between research on employee role ambivalence and research on disagreements in organizational networks.

Second, besides connecting research on ambivalences and disagreements as a way of understanding conflicts, studying side-taking also bridges the gap between individuals, dyads, groups, and organizations at different levels of conflict processes. Conflicts have been traditionally approached at different levels: *intrapersonal* role conflict (e.g., Carnes, 2017), *interpersonal* conflict (e.g., van de Vliert, 1997), team or group conflict (e.g., Jehn, 1997), and organizational, including labor management, conflict (e.g., Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988). Analyzing conflicts across levels is crucially relevant, yet rare. Side-taking offers a unique opportunity to integrate conflict knowledge across levels.

Third, by studying side-taking, we also shift the research focus from coalition founders to coalition targets in the literature on coalition formation. In the social-psychological approach to coalition formation, coalition founders have been conventionally distinguished from coalition targets or coalition members who are considered optimal coalition partners (e.g., Murnighan & Brass, 1991). The majority of the work in this field, however, has been conducted from the perspective of coalition founders (e.g., Caplow, 1956; van Beest & van Dijk, 2007; Wilke, 1985). We believe that whether a coalition can be successfully formalized depends on the targets' decision. Research on sides-taking will provide some answers to the question of why coalition targets would accept or reject the coalition requests.

Fourth, studying side-taking may contribute to our understanding of employees' political behavior in organizations. Taking sides in conflicts is a good example of how employees participate in organizational politics. By taking sides in others' conflict, employees can demonstrate their downward or upward influence (Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1983). In comparison with other types of

political behavior (e.g., whistle-blowing, indirect lobbying), side-taking has not received sufficient attention in the field of organizational politics. An exploration of side-taking may thus benefit both theoretical understanding and practical use of employees' influence attempts and political behavior.

Besides its theoretical importance, side-taking can also have implications for management practices. First, side-taking may change the likely results of the conflict and the power structure between disputants. For instance, when groups use voting or consensus-building to make decisions, side-taking will have tangible consequences for conflicting parties. The more votes a party gets, the better chance it will win out. In addition, side-taking may also have an intangible effect for conflicting parties: the side who gains the support from third parties may get more recognition and acquire extra status and informal influence, which further leads to more credibility and prestige, and thus a better outlook for successful coalitions in the future (Murnighan & Brass, 1991).

Second, side-taking intertwines with conflict intervention and coalition formation. Side-taking will get third-party observers involved in the conflict of others. From the perspective of the third-party observers, side-taking can be considered a type of intervention, regardless of their active or passive involvement. However, from the perspective of the disputants, side-taking may imply a success or failure in building up a coalition. Side-taking in the eyes of disputants can thus be interpreted as a promising step towards coalition formation. Understanding side-taking is therefore not only useful for conflict intervention but also for coalition formation.

Third, side-taking is almost inevitably a self-serving behavior for third parties, especially when they are confronted with a conflict between disputants who have higher status or power over them (Bendersky & Hays, 2012). By taking the "correct" side, third parties as part of a coalition are entitled to claim the winning outcomes (e.g., promotion, fast-track career).

On the other hand, they may have to suffer the consequences of taking the “wrong” side (e.g., promotion opportunities and career development may be blocked).

Self-interest, moral, and relationship motives for side-taking

Building on the theories of coalition formation in triads (e.g., Caplow, 1956; Gamson, 1961), social motives in terms of belongingness and affiliation (Fiske, 2009) and social identity (Hogg, 2005), and the moral judgement hypothesis regarding side-taking (DeScioli, 2016; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013), we propose *self-interest*, *relationship*, and *moral motives* to explain third parties’ side-taking reactions. These three motives cover third parties’ considerations of the self (self-interests), others (relationships), and external standards (moral concerns), which represent the universe of possible motives in conflict handling. In addition, these three motives are in line with dominant research trends—rational models (e.g., Caplow, 1956; Gamson, 1961), social relationship models (e.g., De Dreu & van Lange, 1995; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O’Brien, 2006), and justice models (Lewicki & Sheppard, 1985; Tyler, 1990) on third-party intervention and conflict resolution.

Self-interest motives

Self-interest motives refer to third parties’ concerns about what they may lose or gain by taking sides with each of the disputants. The economic models of coalition formation in triads (Caplow, 1956; Gamson, 1961) set the foundation for this type of motives and posited that third parties, like disputants, try to maximize their own outcomes when they are either actively or passively involved in a conflict. Wilke (1985) framed the principle of self-interests as “minimum-effort-for-maximum-gains” in coalition formation. Regarding side-taking, we suggest that third parties can

take two approaches to maximize their own outcomes: They can either side with the disputant who has the power to execute punishments or with the one who can provide rewards.

Imagine Subordinate C is faced with a disagreement between Supervisors A and B. If C anticipates a heavy sanction for going against Supervisor B (e.g., lose promotion opportunity or salary increase), C may have to side with B to protect his/her self-interests. In a different approach, C may be tempted by the opportunity of job recommendation offered by Supervisor A; C will thus side with A to maximize his/her own gains. Whether avoiding sanctions or seeking rewards, third parties’ side-taking motives’ nature lies in their self-interests—what they can lose or gain by taking the side of each disputant. We use *self-interest motives* to refer to the desire of moving away from losses or toward gains when taking sides in an interpersonal conflict.

Relationship motives

Humans are group animals. Belongingness and affiliation are core social motives of human beings (Fiske, 2009). They drive individuals to establish, maintain, or restore a positive and affective relationships with another person or group in order to satisfy individual desires of interacting with others and of being accepted (Koestner & McClelland, 1992). By taking sides, third parties join a camp and acquire group membership, which satisfies their need for belongingness. Certainly, by taking sides, third parties may be also faced with the threat of being socially excluded by the side they are against, which in turn could further deteriorate their existing relationship. However, in comparison to non-side-taking, which could possibly result in third parties being embraced by neither disputant or even rejected by both disputants, side-taking at least provides more assurance to third parties’ belongingness.

In addition, in a side-taking situation, the presence of the opponents will translate into an

“us versus them” situation, which will trigger a social identity process (Hogg, 2005). As a result, the cohesiveness between third parties and the disputant with whom they have a rapport becomes stronger. Put differently, without the presence of the opponent as a contrast, third parties may not feel the necessity to side with the closer party. But the presence of the opponent will certainly help third parties clarify the issue of who is in-group and who is out-group. The “us versus them” feeling not only strengthens the camaraderie between the third parties and the party closer to them, but also buffers third parties against becoming the target of denigration from the distant disputant. As a result, third parties are more likely to side with the closer party and against the distant one.

Third, the principle of the relationship balance theory (Heider 1958)—“my friend’s enemy is my enemy”—also explains how relationship motives for side-taking work. According to Heider (1958), tripartite relationships are often asymmetric: Third parties are psychosocially closer to one party than the other. Given this relational asymmetry and given that two disputants usually have a negative attitude towards each other, the principle of “my friend’s enemy is my enemy” suggests that third parties tend to develop a negative attitude towards the psychologically distant party in order to keep their internal psychological state balanced. When applying this principle to side-taking situations, it suggests that relationship motives drive third parties to back the closer disputant and side against the distant one.

Moral motives

Moral motives in our theoretical model refer to third parties’ concerns about whether disputants’ claims or actions are right or wrong, reasonable or unreasonable, fair or unfair. It is worth noticing that the moral concerns in our model are analyzed from a psychological perspective. They are what third parties perceive as right or wrong and do not necessarily refer to an

objective moral code that everyone ascribes to. Thus, there is variation regarding moral concerns among third parties. Different from other animals, humans assign moral values to actions (Wright, 1994). Third parties are thought to judge actions such as lying, theft, cheating, or bullying to be morally wrong even when these actions can achieve better outcomes (Baron & Spranca, 1997). This means that third parties have the tendency to evaluate disputants’ claims and actions through the lens of morality. DeScioli’s work on moral judgment (2016; DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013) may explain why third parties are willing to join alliances and help fight other people’s battles. Moral judgment focuses on actions rather than their consequences. For side-taking, it means that third parties can support the right action (or the right side) and oppose the wrong action (or the wrong side) all the time without necessarily supporting/opposing the same party. The benefit of moral judgment is that it is a flexible and cost-effective choice for third parties to react to a conflict. At least it protects them from possible retribution. In addition, moral rules are usually determined by the majority. Siding with the “right” side (often the “majority” side) and against the “wrong” side (most likely the “minority” side) might also satisfy third parties’ needs for belongingness and affiliation indirectly.

Back to the example in which Subordinate C is faced with a conflict between Supervisors A and B, if C perceives B’s arguments or actions right and reasonable, it will trigger C’s moral motives for side-taking. By the same token, if A holds the same arguments or actions, C’s moral motives for side-taking with A will become salient. All in all, moral concerns drive third parties to side with the “right” side and against the “wrong” one. We refer to the psychological drives of third parties supporting the “right” side and opposing the “wrong” one based on their moral judgment of right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair, moral integrity or immorality as *moral motives* for side-taking.

To summarize, based on the three psychological motives for side-taking discussed before, we propose:

Proposition 1: When third parties are faced with an interpersonal conflict between two disputants, self-interest, relationship, and moral motives will trigger third parties' side-taking responses.

Relationships among the three side-taking motives

Although we treat the three types of side-taking motives as separate and independent considerations in theory, it is likely that in real life, a third party faced with a side-taking dilemma will consider all three motives simultaneously (e.g., How does this benefit me? How will this influence my personal relationships with the disputants? And which side is right or wrong?). This suggests that the three types of motives for side-taking are connected and intertwined, and together shape the overall motives for side-taking. In what follows, we first take a simpler approach to demonstrate how situational factors influence each of the three motives for side-taking. Our assumption is that a given situation will trigger a specific type of motives and make it salient and dominant in the overall motive system (van Kippenberg, 2000). We will then discuss the interplay of the three motives in more detail in the Discussion section.

Disputant-, dispute-, and context-related effects on side-taking motives

Literature on third-party intervention suggests that a third party needs to examine at least three questions for dispute intervention: Who are having the dispute? What is the dispute about? And in which situation/context is the dispute taking place? (Elangovan, 1995; Lewicki & Sheppard, 1985; Yang & Yousaf, 2018). Following this suggestion, we believe that these

three aspects also need to be examined when analyzing third-party side-taking.

As for the disputant-related factors, we focus on the status differences between third parties and disputants, as status issues permeate social and organizational life (Chen, Peterson, Phillips, Podolny, & Ridgeway, 2012) and most interpersonal conflicts stem from disagreements over the amount of dominance exerted in social relations (Gould, 2003). For the dispute-related factors, our focus is on types of conflict because they meaningfully characterize the conflict dilemma (Jehn, 1997). For the context-related factors, our choice is to concentrate on the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism at the national level because national culture as a contextual factor plays an important role in third parties' conflict handling (Carnevale, Cha, Wan, & Fraidin, 2004).

Effects of status differences on side-taking motives

Status in organizational settings is defined as the ranked relationship among employees that takes place in practice by means of differences in deference or influence (Piazza & Castellucci, 2014; Skvoretz & Fararo, 1996). It is worth noting that it is not our intention to make a theoretical distinction between status and power—which they tend to be coupled (Bunderson & Reagans, 2011). However, we prefer status over power in that status is more a property of observers, while power is more a property of the actor (Blader & Chen, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In a side-taking situation, the initial position of third parties is more of an “observer” than an “actor.” Next, we will use the ranking relationship between the third party (C) and the disputants (A and B) to demonstrate how status influences third parties' side-taking motives.

The Appendix lists all 27 possible configurations regarding status differences among three parties: A, B, and C. In our analysis, we simplify these 27 configurations into eight

cases given that (a) statuses of the two disputants (A and B) are interchangeable ($A > B$ is the same as $B > A$) and (b) our focus is on the relative status between third party (C) and two disputants (A and B), thus the combination 2-1-1 is the same as the combination 1-0-0. In the following lines, we analyze how C's side-taking motives change as a response to the status differences between third party (C) and two disputants (A and B).

Third Party C has a higher status than both Disputants A and B. Disputants A and B have an equal status ($C > A = B$; see Case 1 in configurations column in the Appendix). An example is that a supervisor is confronted with a dispute between two peer subordinates.

Third Party C has a higher status than both Disputants A and B. Disputants A and B have an unequal status ($C > A > B$ or $C > B > A$; see Case 2 in the configurations column in the Appendix). Take, for instance, a managing director (C) who is faced with a dispute between a line manager (A) and A's subordinate (B).

In both cases, Third Party C has a higher status than the two disputants (A and B). Research on status has shown that higher status parties tend to be self-sustaining and maintain the established status hierarchy (Blader & Chen, 2011; Bunderson & Reagans, 2011; Chen, Brockner, & Greenberg, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This has a direct implication for higher versus lower status parties' concern about issues of morality (e.g., legitimacy, fairness, and justice). Higher status parties tend to notice and react to fairness issues more strongly than lower status parties do (Chen et al., 2003; Diekmann, Sondak, & Barsness, 2007). By means of self-deservingness, self-esteem, and good reputation, higher status parties maintain and defend their status. In addition, when the issues are handled in a fair, just, and morally accepted way, individuals will tend to make more self rather than external attributions (e.g., "If something is done right, it is because of me"). This psychological mechanism satisfies high-status parties' concerns about their reputation

and self-deservingness, thus contributing to maintain their status (Blader & Chen, 2011; van Prooijen, van den Bos, & Wilke, 2002).

Following this reasoning, Supervisor C's primary concern in both the aforementioned cases will be maintaining his/her status. From C's own perspective, if C handles the issues in a morally accepted way, it will be more likely that C will attribute the "success" to him-/herself than to external situations. This will help C's self-deservingness while maintaining their good reputation and higher status. From the disputants' perspective, if C's side-taking decision is perceived as fair and just, it is more likely that the two subordinates (A and B) will accept, or at least not challenge, C's decision, which in a way can be seen as acknowledging C's status. We then expect that third parties with a higher status (than both disputants) will demonstrate stronger moral motives for side-taking.

Proposition 2a: If Third Party C has a higher status than both Disputants A and B (either $C > [A = B]$, or $C > A > B$, or $C > B > A$), C will demonstrate strong moral motives for side-taking.

Third Party C has a lower status than both Disputants A and B. Disputants A and B have an equal status ($C < [A = B]$; see Case 7 in the configurations column in the Appendix). A case in point is when a subordinate (C) is confronted with a dispute between two superiors (A and B), as is often the case in matrix-like organizations.

Third Party C has a lower status than both Disputants A and B. Disputants A and B have an unequal status ($C < A < B$ or $C < B < A$; see Case 8 in the configurations column in the Appendix). Here, an example is a subordinate confronted with a conflict between his/her line manager and the managing director.

In these two cases, Third Party C has a lower status than both disputants. Lower status parties (Third Party C, in this case) are often endowed with less social advantages, such as tangible and intangible resources, than higher status

parties are (in this case the two disputants, A and B; Bendersky & Shah, 2012; Pearce & Xu, 2012). This has implications for lower versus higher status parties' concern about issues such as outcomes and self-interests. In comparison to higher status parties, those with a low status are more concerned about not being exploited and unfavorably treated (Diekmann et al., 2007; Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993). They routinely experience both vulnerability and uncertainty (Kramer, 1996). It is thus likely that these concerns will narrow down the focus of low status parties to self-interests and payoffs.

C's lower status in the two cases suggests that C has less control over tangible and/or intangible resources than Disputants A and B have. In response, C's primary concern will be avoiding being treated unfavorably. It is thus highly possible that C will prioritize his/her own outcomes and benefits. Self-interest motives for side-taking are thus activated. For example, in the case where a subordinate (C) is faced with a conflict between two supervisors (A and B), their higher status means that both disputants (A and B) have the capacity to offer rewards (e.g., salary increase, favorable performance appraisal) or apply punishments (e.g., block promotion opportunities, increase workload) to the lower status Third Party C. Third Party C's concerns will be about how to avoid unfavorable treatment or being taken advantage of by the two disputants, which is likely to trigger his/her self-interest motives for side-taking. We thus propose:

Proposition 2b: If Third Party C has a lower status than both Disputants A and B (either $C < [A = B]$, $C < A < B$, or $C < B < A$), C will demonstrate strong self-interest motives for side-taking.

Third party has an equal status to that of both disputants ($C = A = B$; see Case 4 in the configurations column in the Appendix). This happens when an employee is confronted with a dispute between two peers in the organization.

Peers with an equal status (e.g., teammates) tend to have more informal interactions and develop more personal relationships with each other than with those across hierarchical statuses (e.g., supervisors or subordinates) in the workplace (Sias, 2014). As we explained earlier, the personal relationships in a triad are often unbalanced as employees engage in informal social interactions with each other both in and outside work (e.g., C and A may get along with each other because they go to the same sports club; C and B may be closer to each other because they are from the same country). The unbalanced relationships—the third party is closer to one disputant than to the other—in turn may lead third parties to process information selectively (Heider, 1958; Hopmann, 1996): they may tend to pay more attention to and interpret information more positively if it comes from the disputant with whom they have a closer relationship.

In addition, some empirical evidence suggests that people's concern about promoting justice or protecting their self-interests will be lower in an equal-status condition than in an unequal-status condition. For example, in one of their experimental studies, Chen et al. (2003) showed that when participants have relatively equal status, neither moral concerns (in terms of fairness or justice) nor self-interest concerns (in terms of outcome favorability) would influence participants' reactions (in terms of interacting with others in the future). Assuming their findings are reliable, we argue that third parties' moral or self-interest motives in an equal-status situation may not be as pronounced as they are in unequal-status situations. As a result, this may activate relationship motives. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 2c: If Third Party C has an equal status to that of both Disputants A and B ($C = A = B$), C will demonstrate strong relationship motives for side-taking.

Apart from the five cases mentioned before, status differences between Third Party C and

the two Disputants A and B can also be formed in the following three ways:

- Third Party C has an equal status to that of one disputant and a higher status than the other ($C = A > B$ or $C = B > A$; see Case 3 in the cases column in the Appendix).
- Third Party C has an equal status to that of one disputant and a lower status than the other ($C = A < B$ or $C = B < A$; see Case 6 in the cases column in the Appendix).
- Third Party C has a higher status than one disputant and a lower status than the other ($A < C < B$ or $A > C > B$; see Case 5 in the cases column in the Appendix).

Side-taking motives in these three cases involve combinations of motives that are derivable from the initial motives stated in Propositions 2a, 2b, and 2c. For example, in Case 3 in the Appendix, C's higher status than that of one of the disputants may activate his/her moral motives for side-taking, and C's equal status to that of the other disputant may trigger his/her relationship motives for side-taking. Thus, a combination of moral and relationship motives will be strong in Case 3 (see the Appendix). Predictions about Cases 6, 7, and 8 can be found in the Appendix.

Effects of conflict types on side-taking motives

Conflict types meaningfully capture what a dispute is about. We use this concept to illustrate how dispute-related factors can influence the side-taking motives of third parties. Two disputants (A and B) can disagree on many issues: They may debate diverging ideas about how to accomplish their tasks (task conflict); have a disagreement on resource distribution (e.g., how to effectively organize and utilize group resources to accomplish tasks—logistical conflict); disagree on member contributions

(how to handle people who do not complete their assignments on time, free ride, or do not perform the duties as agreed—contribution conflict); or have an interpersonal friction, animosity, or tension (relationship conflict; Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, & Trochim, 2011; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Here we focus on contribution conflict and relationship conflict because they are difficult to resolve and often need third-party intervention. They are thus particularly relevant to third-party side-taking motives.

Contribution conflict refers to issues of disputants' responsibilities. In a contribution conflict, all parties, including third parties, focus on each disputant's value. There are reasons to assume that these concerns are interpreted in the sense of (un)fair or (un)just. For example, disputants may accuse each other of "free-riding." Under this circumstance, justice, especially procedural justice, becomes a main concern in parties' conflict perceptions (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980; Tyler, 1990). Third parties are more likely to consider what is "good or bad" or "right or wrong" in order to be fair and just. We thus believe that contribution conflict is connected to moral motives for side-taking.

Proposition 3a: Contribution conflict between disputants is positively related to third parties' moral motives for side-taking.

A relationship conflict involves information that is irrelevant to the task, involves negative emotions, and threatens one's personal identity and feelings of self-worth (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). A study by De Dreu and van Vianen (2001) suggests that disputants tend to use avoidance more than confrontational and collaborating responses in relationship conflicts. Avoidance, however, does not resolve a relationship conflict. Actually, disputants often ask for help from third parties in relationship conflicts (Yang & Yousaf, 2018). We argue that disputants' tension and frustration in a relationship conflict are rooted in discrepant personal

norms and values, which are closely related to one's personal identity. It is thus difficult for third parties to settle such identity-related conflicts to the disputants' satisfaction. It is highly possible that third parties, especially nonprofessional third parties, react to a relationship conflict by taking sides. When third parties are surrounded by information that focuses on personal liking/disliking and identity and value clashes between disputants, their attention will be directed more to the social and interpersonal domain. Social motives, such as belongingness and affiliation, will become more relevant and easily triggered when deciding whose side to take. We then propose:

Proposition 3b: Relationship conflict between disputants is positively related to third parties' relationship motives for side-taking.

Effects of cultural individualism/collectivism on side-taking motives

National culture as a contextual factor plays an important role in third parties' conflict handling (Carnevale et al., 2004). We thus see no reason why national culture would not be relevant to third parties' side-taking motives. For this analysis, we focus on the well-known cultural dimension of individualism/collectivism. Hofstede describes this bipolar dimension of individualism versus collectivism as "the relationship between the individual and the collectivity which prevails in a given society" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 6).

In individualistic cultures, individuals tend to identify themselves as independent and unique entities. Self-interests are considered more important than social motives (e.g., belongingness and affiliation) in decision making. Individualists consider social relationships impermanent and nonintensive (Triandis, 1995). By contrast, collectivism is characterized by ingroup harmony and tight group bonds (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Social motives such as belongingness and affiliation are given top priority by

collectivists when making decisions. Research on cross-cultural conflict handling has generally concluded that interest-based approaches and concerns for transaction costs are more emphasized by third parties in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures. For example, American managers showed a stronger preference for interest-based conflict management than their Japanese counterparts did (Tinsley, 1998).

By contrast, in collectivistic cultures, concerns for maintaining harmonious relationships between parties are given priority. For example, a survey among 392 employees from 59 organizations in Turkey (a collectivistic culture) showed that concern for maintaining harmonious relationships was significantly related to all third-party intervention strategies (i.e., mediational, educational, restructuring, and inquisitorial strategies; Kozan, Ergin, & Varoglu, 2007). Although side-taking was not included in their study, their results suggest a high possibility that third parties in collectivistic cultures would prioritize relationships when choosing sides in a conflict. In a cross-cultural study on how respondents react to a fictitious conflict situation by taking sides, Chinese participants (collectivistic culture) on average reported a stronger concern about interpersonal relationships with the two disputants than Dutch participants did (individualistic culture; Yang, van de Vliert, & Shi, 2007). We thus propose:

Proposition 4a: Third parties in individualistic cultures will demonstrate stronger self-interest motives for side-taking than those in collectivistic cultures.

Proposition 4b: Third parties in collectivistic cultures will demonstrate stronger relationship motives for side-taking than those in individualistic cultures.

Discussion

Side-taking is a well-recognized phenomenon in the workplace; however, it has been understudied in the conflict management literature.

Here, we take a psychological perspective to theorize on the three types of motives that influence third parties to take sides in an interpersonal conflict and discuss how status differences, conflict types, and national culture influence self-interest, relationship, and moral motives for side-taking. The purpose of this paper is to expand our current perspective on conflict handling in the workplace and to stimulate integration of the literature from different research areas such as coalition formation, third-party intervention, status and power, social motives, and justice to have a better understanding of employee workplace behavior. In the following section, we further elaborate on the issues of side-taking motives in the hope of encouraging more research on this topic.

Interplay of the three side-taking motives

In previous sections we took a parsimonious approach to build up our side-taking propositions and treat the three types of side-taking motives as independent. To fully understand the complexity of side-taking motives, we need to pay attention to their interplay as well. From our point of view, the three types of motives for side-taking are expected to interact in at least three ways: they may reinforce, counterbalance, or disguise each other.

The side-taking motives may work consistently by additively or interactively reinforcing each other. As a result, third parties will demonstrate a strong and overall motive for side-taking. For example, when faced with a dispute between two supervisors (A and B), a subordinate (C) may consider that A's arguments are better than B's, which will trigger C's moral motives for side-taking. Additionally, C may have a closer relationship with A than with B, thus C's relationship motives will be activated. Moreover, C might also expect more benefits from supporting A than B; thus, his/her self-interest motives will come into effect. All in all, the three motives reinforce each other

and produce a strong overall motive to side with A and against B.

Sometimes, the three motives may work against each other and increase the third-party's choice dilemma. For example, in the aforementioned situation, Third Party C may have strong moral motives for taking A's side, but B is a very close friend of C, which triggers C's relationship motives (for taking B's side). To make things even more complicated, C may fear retribution for siding against B; self-interest motives for side-taking are then also activated. Whose side will C take? Future research needs to pay special attention to different scenarios as the motives for side-taking become dynamic and fluid.

Besides reinforcement and counterbalance, the three motives can also disguise each other, which makes it difficult to interpret third-parties' true motives for side-taking. For instance, in the previous case, where A and B are supervisors, C may have strong self-interest motives for taking sides if he/she is tempted by a promise of promotion offered by B. However, C may use a disguise strategy to show that A is morally wrong (disguising their true motives for side-taking as moral motives). It is this disguise of motives for side-taking that results in a negative image of side-takers. They are often seen as dishonest, liars, and free-riders. This is another direction for future research on side-taking to explore. By studying the process of disguise around side-taking motives, we may eventually reveal the "fundamental" factors underlying the three motives.

From side-taking motives to side-taking behaviors

In this paper, we highlight the three psychological motives for side-taking and leave open the question of the extent to which side-taking motives will lead to side-taking behaviors. We made this choice as we believe that the relationships between side-taking motives and side-taking behaviors are not straightforward. We

need to move step by step to unveil these complex relationships. In what follows, we address three key issues to understand the transition from side-taking motives to behaviors with the purpose of encouraging more work in this direction.

First, side-taking behaviors in themselves are complex. They do not often manifest themselves in a straightforward way. Although taking sides is considered part of the natural human instincts for conflict handling (Mesterton-Gibbons, Gavrillets, Gravner, & Akçay, 2011), humans tend not to express this instinct in an explicit way. Third parties often show their side-taking behaviors implicitly in different ways (e.g., keeping silence, acquiescing, or saying one thing and doing another). The implicit nature of side-taking behaviors makes it difficult to observe or assess them. Side-taking behaviors may sometimes be misinterpreted as avoiding or even as problem-solving attempts. Before we can establish meaningful relationships between motives for side-taking and actual side-taking behaviors, we first need to clarify a range of verbal and nonverbal side-taking behaviors.

Second, as discussed, the three motives interplay with each other, which leads to another difficulty to understand the relationships between side-taking motives and side-taking behaviors. Because the three motives reinforce, counterbalance, or disguise each other, the motive system for side-taking becomes much more complicated. For instance, the extent to which moral motives lead to siding with the “right” disputant may become less significant when moral motives are counterbalanced by relationship and self-interest motives. Disguise processes may deceive not only disputants but also the third parties themselves when trying to understand their “true” motivations for taking sides.

Third, side-taking motives and behaviors may perpetuate each other. Not only do side-taking motives cause side-taking responses, the motives in turn are often reinforced or modified by side-taking behaviors. It is likely that the perpetuation of side-taking motives and

behaviors turns third parties increasingly away from their initial observer role into a partisan role that eventually escalates the conflict. All in all, our point is that the transition from side-taking motives to side-taking behaviors is more complicated than usually expected. More research that focuses on the relation between side-taking motives and behaviors is needed.

Side-taking as a way of understanding how conflict escalates across levels

Our model on third parties’ side-taking motives may offer some hints for how conflict escalates across levels. First, by taking sides, third-party observers become disputants’ partisans. A conflict escalates from few to many; an interpersonal conflict upgrades into a group conflict. Disputants in an interpersonal conflict usually realize the importance of interdependency between themselves and their opponents. The mixed motive of cooperation versus competition influences the development of conflict (De Dreu & van Lange, 1995). However, in a group conflict, the underlying dynamics will manifest in terms of one’s social identity (“to be or not to be”; Ellemers et al., 1993). In this sense, side-taking changes the underlying conflict dynamics. Second, self-interest motives imply that third-party observers will bring their own interests to the debate, which will translate into the proliferation of issues on the table. A single-issue debate may thus easily escalate into a multi-issue conflict. Third, in a typical side-taking situation, each disputant tends to see him/herself as the personification of all good characteristics and the opponent as the representation of many negative features. This polarized process (e.g., good–bad or right–wrong) can quite naturally ignite third-parties’ moral motives for side-taking. With moral motives activated, a minor issue is now examined in terms of good versus bad; thus, a solvable dispute may turn into a right-or-wrong fight. Compromise can hardly exist for all parties, including third parties, as one cannot compromise in matters of truth itself (Glasl,

1980). When a conflict transforms itself from specific to general, from “doing well for self” to “trying to hurt the other,” cross-level escalation has become a reality.

Limitations

Besides the theoretical and practical contributions of our framework, we acknowledge some shortcomings in our theorizing on side-taking in triads. First, we take a psychological perspective to analyze the side-taking motives of third parties in an interpersonal conflict. One needs to be aware that this is only one way to study side-taking. Besides this psychological perspective, there are other pathways to understand third-party side-taking behaviors. For example, from an evolutionary perspective, side-taking is viewed as an instinctive characteristic of primates and of human beings (Mesterton-Gibbons et al., 2011), suggesting that taking sides (rather than helping disputants resolve a conflict) has genetic roots. From a political and institutional perspective, side-taking can be viewed as a survival strategy that a weak party has to use in an asymmetric power situation (Schlee, 2004). Thus, side-taking needs to be analyzed not only at the individual level but also at the organizational or even national level. Linking side-taking research with research on organizational mergers and acquisitions might create another direction for the field to move to.

Second, to build a sound theoretical model we need to strike a balance between parsimony and accuracy. As a first step towards theory building, our current framework may have tipped a bit far in the direction of simplicity. Future empirical studies need to develop these “simple” propositions into “testable” hypotheses. For example, we discuss the antecedents of side-taking motives through the factors related to disputants (in terms of status differences), disputes (conflict types), and contexts (national culture) separately. It is possible that side-taking motives are influenced by all those factors simultaneously. Empirical studies may

focus on a particular configuration to test our research propositions in more detail. For instance, we only discuss that status differences between third party (C) and two disputants (A and B) will influence C’s side-taking motives. Future research can further explore how status symmetry between A and B may impact C’s side-taking motives. In a similar vein, we only analyze the simplest form of side-taking (i.e., a third party takes sides in a conflict between two disputants). However, side-taking in real organizational life is more complicated than the form of triads. Empirical studies can adjust the ratio of third parties to disputants and add relative status into the ratio differences. For example, how would an employee take sides if three superiors are in conflict? How would employees choose sides if a superior is in a conflict with a group of subordinates? These configurational characteristics may increase not only the accuracy of predictions of side-taking reactions, but also their organizational relevance and applicability. All in all, our theoretical framework of side-taking motives identifies an understudied topic in conflict handling and calls for more empirical studies to further enrich and improve our understanding of how and why third parties take sides in a conflict.

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Appendix

Side-taking motives for 27 configurations and eight cases of status differences between third party (C) and two disputants (A and B).

C's status	A's status	B's status	Combinations	Configurations	Cases	C's side-taking motives
2	0	0	2-0-0	$C > (A = B)$	Case 1: Third Party C has a <i>higher</i> status than both Disputants A and B. Two disputants have an <i>equal</i> status.	Moral motives.
		1	2-0-1	$C > B > A$	Case 2: Third party has a <i>higher</i> status than both disputants. One disputant has a higher status than the other.	Moral motives.
		2	2-0-2	$(C = B) > A$	Case 3: Third party has an <i>equal</i> status to that of one disputant and a <i>higher</i> status than the other.	Moral and relationship motives.
		0	2-1-0	$C > A > B$	Case 2	
	1	1	2-1-1	$C > (A = B)$	Case 1	
		2	2-1-2	$(C = B) > A$	Case 3	
		0	2-2-0	$(C = A) > B$	Case 3	
	2	1	2-2-1	$(C = A) > B$	Case 3	

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

C's status	A's status	B's status	Combinations	Configurations	Cases	C's side-taking motives		
I	0	2	2-2-2	$C = (A = B)$	Case 4: Third party has an equal status to that of both disputants.	Relationship motives for side-taking.		
		0	1-0-0	$C > (A = B)$	Case 1	Self-interest and moral motives for side-taking.		
		1	1-0-1	$(C = B) > A$	Case 3			
		2	1-0-2	$B > C > A$	Case 5: Third party has a higher status than one disputant and a lower status than the other.			
		1	0	1-1-0	$(C = A) > B$	Case 3	Self-interest and relationship motives for side-taking.	
		1	1-1-1	$C = A = B$	Case 4			
	2	1-1-2	$(C = A) < B$	Case 6. Third party has an equal status to that of one disputant and a lower status than the other.				
	0	2	0	1-2-0	$B < C < A$	Case 5	Self-interest motives for side-taking.	
			1	1-2-1	$(C = B) < A$	Case 6		
			2	1-2-2	$C < (A = B)$	Case 7: Third party has a lower status than that of both disputants. Two disputants have an equal status.		
		0	0	0	0-0-0	$C = A = B$	Case 4	Self-interest motives for side-taking.
				1	0-0-1	$(C = A) < B$	Case 6	
2				0-0-2	$(C = A) < B$	Case 6		
1	0		0-1-0	$(C = B) < A$	Case 6			
	1		0-1-1	$C < (A = B)$	Case 7			
	2		0-1-2	$C < A < B$	Case 8: Third party has a lower status than both disputants. One disputant has a lower status than the other.			
2	0	0-2-0	$(C = B) < A$	Case 6				
	1	0-2-1	$C < A < B$	Case 8				
	2	0-2-2	$C < (A = B)$	Case 7				

Note. C = third-party; A and B = two disputants. 0 = low rank; 1 = medium rank; 2 = high rank. The statuses of the two disputants (A and B) are interchangeable; that is, $A > B$ is the same as $B > A$. Status differences make sense in terms of the relative values but not the absolute values. For instance, the combination 1-0-1 is the same as the combination 2-1-2. The total 27 configurations are simplified into eight cases to represent status differences between third party (C) and disputants (A and B).