Friend and Foe? the Paradoxical Dynamics of Intergroup Conflict in a Consumption Association

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This research explored a collective consumption environment (a natural foods co-op) in which members act as both managers and consumers. We found that inter-group conflict is a key construct for understanding collective consumption. While strong forces against conflict were present (strong organizational identity, shared consumption values, frequent interpersonal interactions), there still existed intense conflict between two groups. This paradox lead us to three research questions: (1) why does intergroup conflict persist despite an environment that should mitigate conflict, (2) how does intergroup conflict unfold and (3) in the face of conflict, how do collective consumption goals continue to be met?

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in luck was regressed on, and significantly predicted: desire to purchase, the extent to which subjects could visualize a win, had fantasies that centered on hedonic items (car, clothes, house, vacation, and what they’d spend their winnings on). Participants’ thoughts also centered more on themselves than on the protagonist in the ad if they believed in luck and reported more positive affect, consistent with transportation.

A third study further examines the relationship between transportation motivation, and manipulates how lucky subjects feel about luck by first reading a gender-matched story for an ostensibly unrelated experiment about a protagonist that has everything go his or her way (fortunate), or against him or her (unfortunate). The story did not affect participants emotions, as there were no significant differences across a battery of 14 positively and negatively-valenced items, ruling out mood effects as an explanation for our results. This was crossed with size of prize (large or small) in a 2x2 between subjects factorial. Transportation was shown to be highest in the large prize/feel fortunate condition, as compared to the average of the other 3 cells, and subjects in this condition imagined themselves winning more so than the main character in this cell. They also reported significantly higher willingness to pay (in $, log transformed) for a lottery ticket of the same expected value (1 in 1000 odds in the $1000 prize and 1 in 10,000,000 odds in the large condition) in the big/fortunate condition (all p’s <.05).

Across four studies, we show that ads that encourage subjects to imagine an outcome are effective in persuading via transportation, and that this effect is stronger when consumers are motivated to process with themselves as the protagonist. When people lack sufficient motivation, how the ad is processed is shown to make little difference. Intrinsic (belief in luck) motivation is more stable than extrinsic (large prize) in influencing this effect, however a synergistic effect is shown for ads, where ads that appeal to consumers’ imagination work best under both high intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Future research should consider motivation to transport in other domains: potential companions (dating services), changing their look (elective surgery), or a more general improved life (soap operas, romance novels).

References

Friend and Foe? The paradoxical Dynamics of Intergroup Conflict in a Cooperative
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While there are many examples of groups of consumers coming together to pursue shared consumption goals (e.g. neighborhood associations, collector’s societies, co-ops, etc.) these types of groups remain relatively unexplored in the consumption literature. Consumption associations are characterized by members that not only consume the focal product/experience but also help to co-produce the experience. While members initially come together to join/form the group in order to meet a common consumption goal, subsequent division into subgroups often becomes inevitable. For this reason, one particularly compelling avenue of investigation is the role that conflict plays in consumption associations. Given the virtual inevitability of conflict within organizations (Kramer, 1991), it does not at first seem surprising that conflict would exist in consumption associations. However, when one considers that many of the solutions commonly prescribed to mitigate and minimize conflict (strong organizational identity, member agreement on core organizational values, frequent interpersonal interactions across group lines) tend to be present in these types of organizations, the pervasiveness and intensity of conflict within the consumption associations is rather arresting.

This paradox of intense conflict existing in an environment that theoretically should be relatively conflict free is what leads us to our research questions. We first ask: why does strong intergroup conflict persist when the structural and social-psychological conditions that supposedly mitigate conflict appear favorable? This paradox begs our second research question: how does such paradoxical intergroup conflict play out? Finally, we ask: what keeps the consumption associations together and functioning reasonably effectively?

In answering these questions, we found an exploration of the role of collective identity to be particularly fruitful. While an organization’s overarching identity is often fairly abstract (cf. meta-identity; Pratt & Foreman, 2000), smaller subunits that tend to focus on more concrete facets of the overarching identity are nested within the organization. In order to enhance group member distinctiveness and self-esteem while reducing uncertainty about social structure and members’ place within it, these sub-units will seek to differentiate themselves by maximizing intergroup differences and minimizing intragroup differences (cf. self-categorization theory; Turner, 1985;
Brewer and Gaertner, 2001). This suggests that at least part of why different groups emerge is precisely so that they can act as foils to one another.

**Method**

To explore these issues we investigated a natural foods co-op in a large southwestern city. The co-op offered a particularly compelling environment for exploring a consumption association since members explicitly act as both consumers and managers of the consumption experience. Within the co-op two groups—“idealists” and “pragmatists”—formed around different emphases on certain values leading to ongoing and intense conflict. The first phase of investigation was a year long ethnography. Notes from participant observation, meeting transcriptions, and archival data were all analyzed. Throughout this process emerging insights were discussed with a co-author and member checks were performed.

As the research questions crystallized, a questionnaire was developed to measure an array of constructs related to intragroup and intergroup dynamics. This survey was given to 24 individuals identified as highly active in the co-op’s governance. Twenty participants returned completed questionnaires.

**Major Findings**

In broad terms the two groups, “pragmatists” and “idealists”, coalesced around shared beliefs concerning either business practices or cooperative ideals respectively. Much of the conflict centered on how to insure that the co-op continued to meet communal consumption needs while remaining economically viable in the face of increased competition from the opening of “supernatural” chain stores. The idealists felt that the best way to preserve the co-op was to focus on communal consumption needs by staying true to the founding ideals: non-hierarchical management, stocking only healthy, ethically produced foods, and providing extensive services for member’s education and alternative lifestyles. The pragmatists, while also valuing these ideals, were more concerned about continued economic viability and as such felt that some compromise—e.g. more power for the store manager, more non-organic produce, and reinventing some cash flow—was warranted.

In answering the first research question— why does strong intergroup conflict persist when conditions that should mitigate conflict exist?—values were quantitatively examined. This analysis revealed all value clusters were shared. The difference that emerged was the relative weight that was given to each value cluster. In other words, both groups felt that meeting communal consumption needs took precedence over profitability, however the pragmatist still gave more relative importance to profitability than did the idealists. Interestingly this indicates that the two groups were much more alike than they were different, allowing for strong overarching group identity when the boundary between outsiders and group members was salient. However, when “outsiders” were not salient, small between group differences lead to intense conflict. Thus, following optimal distinctiveness theory, inclusiveness may, ironically, actually encourage subgroup differences.

In answering the second research question— how does such paradoxical intergroup conflict play out?—we examined perceptions of the in- versus out-group members. As social identity theory argues, identities are relational and comparative (Tajfel & Turner, 1986); much of how one group identifies itself is how it differs from the other group. This was supported by the finding that in general, perceptions of the values of the out-group tended to be more extreme than was actually the case. In other words, intergroup conflict plays out through the mutually reinforcing mechanism of value polarization.

Finally, in answering our third research question—what keeps the co-op together and functioning reasonably effectively?—we examined organizational rituals. Three rituals in particular were observed that seemed to keep members united despite the divisive conflict: reaffirmation of members’ belief in cooperation, appointment of “vibes watcher” to interrupt debates that became too heated, and expression of regret and shock about behavior. At a deeper level, part of what allows the co-op to continue functioning in a relatively stable manner is the tension between these two groups. In other words, in order to continue to meet group consumption needs, the co-op does need to stay true to the founding ideals, however if it doesn’t remain economically viable it will not be able to meet the consumption needs of anyone.

**Works Cited**


