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**Does Relationship Conflict Reduce Novel Idea Communication Through Perceived Leader Openness? Power Distance Orientation as a Moderator**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This paper aims to investigate why followers have low perceptions of leader openness and thus feel reluctant to communicate novel ideas by examining leader-follower relationship conflict (i.e., interpersonal incompatibility) and a follower's power distance orientation (i.e., an acceptance of uneven power distribution in organizations) as antecedents.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

The research administrators conducted a three-wave work behavior survey in Study 1, a laboratory experiment in Study 2, and an online experiment in Study 3.

### **Findings**

The results demonstrated that leader-follower relationship conflict reduced followers' perceptions of leader openness. However, the negative impact of relationship conflict became non-significant when followers have high power distance orientations (i.e., an acceptance of uneven power distribution in organizations). The findings also showed an indirect interaction effect of leader-follower relationship conflict and followers' power distance orientation on the followers' communication of novel ideas via the followers' perceptions of leader openness.

### **Originality/value**

The research suggests that followers with higher power distance orientations are more likely to communicate novel ideas consistently because their relationship conflicts with their leaders do not negatively influence their perceptions of leader openness. Although researchers traditionally view cultures with a high level of power distance value as an obstacle to employee creativity, the present study reveals the benefits of an individual-level power distance orientation.

**Keywords:** leader-follower relationship conflict, perceived leader openness, novel idea communication, power distance orientation

## **Does Relationship Conflict Reduce Novel Idea Communication Through Perceived Leader Openness? Power Distance Orientation as a Moderator**

Organizations require novel ideas to improve their efficiency and likelihood of survival in an uncertain environment (Shalley et al., 2004; Amabile, 1996), but organizational leaders or decision-makers tend to discount others' novel ideas (Mueller et al., 2012). Moreover, followers' perceptions of a leader's openness determine whether the followers will share their novel ideas regarding work-related issues (Tröster and van Knippenberg, 2012). For instance, when Steve Wozniak was working as an engineer for Hewlett-Packard (HP), he completed the Apple I design in 1976. However, his managers were not open to the idea of the Apple I design and this idea was rejected by HP five times (Karkaria, 2013). Later, Wozniak left HP to work with Steve Jobs to sell the Apple I product, and they established the technology company – Apple Computer Company which has now evolved into the well-known Apple Incorporated. This example demonstrates how an organization can fail to capitalize on lucrative opportunities if leaders are not open to novel ideas from employees.

In the present research, we investigate why followers form a low perception of a leader's openness and thus become reluctant to share their novel ideas based on Krueger et al.'s conflict experience framework (2022). This framework assumes that conflict affects perceivers' communication behavior via perceptions of others' characteristics, such as perceptions of other group members' openness (Tsai and Bendersky, 2016). We propose leader-follower relationship conflict as an antecedent that reduces followers' perceptions of a leader's openness; thus, discouraging the followers from sharing their novel ideas. Leader-follower relationship conflict refers to a follower's perception of interpersonal incompatibility between a leader and the follower (Jehn, 1995). Krueger et al. (2022) have also proposed that individual differences

influence how people interpret conflict situations. Given that power distance orientation (i.e., an acceptance of an unequal distribution of power in organizations, Hofstede, 2001) is an individual difference that affects an interpretation of the interactions with people with high power (Lian et al., 2012), we examine a follower's power distance orientation as a boundary condition of the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness.

Specifically, when followers have higher power distance orientations, leader-follower relationship conflict may be less likely to reduce their perceptions of a leader's openness and thus their novel idea communication (see predicted relationships between variables in Figure 1).

The current research offers at least two important contributions to research on conflict and individual differences. First, we explore the factors that influence the perceptions of how receptive a leader is to alternative ideas and suggestions; thus enhancing followers' novel idea communication. This approach answers an important call regarding why leaders are not perceived to be receptive to alternative perspectives from researchers in the field of management and psychology (Fast et al., 2014; Ashford et al., 2009). Specifically, the current investigation identifies leader-follower relationship conflict as a major reason why leaders are not perceived to be receptive to alternative perspectives. Moreover, previous research only examined the association between relationship conflict and perceived openness in a non-leadership situation, such as the perceptions of relationship conflict with coworkers and of the coworkers' openness (e.g., Tsai, 2023a). Thus, the current research offers the first evidence of the corresponding association during the interactions between a leader and a follower. Second, we investigate a follower's power distance orientation as an important boundary condition of the associations between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness. Despite the stable negative associations between relationship conflict and various beneficial outcomes based on a

meta-analytical report (De Wit et al., 2012), the current research suggests that the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness becomes non-significant when followers have a higher power distance orientation. Thus, we broaden the scope of the conflict experience framework (Krueger et al., 2022) by examining power distance orientation as a novel individual difference variable and leader-follower interactions as a unique study context.

### **Leader-Follower Relationship Conflict and Perceived Leader Openness**

Leader-follower relationship conflict may decrease perceived leader openness. Perceived leader openness indicates the extent to which *followers perceive* that their leader considers alternative ideas and suggestions in an open-minded manner (Tröster and van Knippenberg, 2012; Detert and Burris, 2007). This openness construct assesses followers' perceptions of how their leader responds to others' suggestions, which is different from an openness trait measured by a self-reported willingness to engage in unconventional ideas and experiences (Homan et al., 2008). Krueger et al.'s (2022) conflict experience framework suggests that relationship conflict elicits perceivers' negative assessments of others' openness and thus reduces unique information sharing because this conflict conveys threats to the perceivers, including criticisms and dismissals of the perceivers' beliefs and proposals. Moreover, relationship conflict reduces feelings of safety to express different ideas (Gerlach and Gockel, 2018) and discourages individuals from openly discussing ideas (Jehn, 1997). Furthermore, leader-follower relationship conflict influences a leader to express hostility toward his or her followers (Tepper et al., 2011), which may create perceptions of a leader's low openness to viewpoints from the followers. Relationship conflict in leader-follower dyads also decreases the followers' perceptions of the

leader's trustworthiness (Kacmar et al., 2012) and openness is considered a core component of trustworthiness perceptions (Mayer et al., 1995).

Although there is no empirical study on the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness, previous studies supported the negative association between relationship conflict and perceived openness in a non-leadership context. For example, relationship conflict with coworkers negatively predicted perceptions of coworkers' openness (Tsai, 2023a). A meta-analytical report indicated a significant negative association between relationship conflict within groups and perceived group openness (DeChurch et al., 2013). Thus, we propose:

*Hypothesis 1: Leader-follower relationship conflict is negatively associated with perceived leader openness.*

#### **Follower Power Distance Orientation as a Moderator**

We propose that a follower's power distance orientation moderates the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness. To recapitulate, the construct of power distance orientation indicates the level to which the follower accepts an unequal distribution of power in organizations (Hofstede, 2001). This orientation is an individual-level concept (Kirkman et al., 2009) and is different from a national-level construct of power distance value, which indicates the level to which societies accept inequalities (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, power distance orientation is a personal belief that influences how individuals interpret their conflict experience with those in high-power positions (Adamovic, 2023). Specifically, followers with a higher power distance orientation believe that they should agree with their leader in a conflict and thus avoid challenging their leader (Adamovic, 2023). Moreover, these followers tend to perceive their leader as an authority figure (Shao et al., 2011),

rely on their leader's guidance (Wang et al., 2012), and accept their leader's decisions (Bochner and Hesketh, 1994). Thus, they may accommodate any interpersonal incompatibilities with their leader and thus reduce the negative impact of leader-follower relationship conflict. Consistent with this viewpoint, Lian et al. (2012) found that when a supervisor engaged in conflict-relevant activities with followers, such as unfairly criticizing or mistreating them, the followers with a higher power distance orientation were less likely to rate the supervisor as unfair. The fairness and openness perceptions may overlap because the openness construct involves whether an individual can *fairly* evaluate others' suggestions (Tsai and Li, 2023; Tsai and Li, 2020). Accordingly, followers' high power distance orientation may weaken the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and the followers' evaluation of the leader's openness.

Conversely, followers with a lower power distance orientation believe that they should question their leader in a conflict (Adamovic, 2023). They perceive their and their leader's opinions as equally important (Adamovic, 2023) and expect their leader to be receptive to their different viewpoints (Sagie and Aycan, 2003). They also have more courage to confront their leader (Liu et al., 2013) and are more sensitive to unfair treatment from their leader (Daniels and Greguras, 2014). When relationship conflict occurs between a leader and followers with lower power distance orientation, the followers may regard this conflict experience as more threatening to their equality expectation and thus evaluate their leader as less open or fair to others' opinions. Research also showed that when a supervisor created a conflict experience with followers, such as blaming and expressing anger at them, the followers with a lower power distance orientation rated the supervisor as less fair (Lian et al., 2012). Thus, followers' low power distance



orientation may strengthen the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness. Together, we propose:

*Hypothesis 2: A follower's power distance orientation weakens the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness.*

### **Perceived Leader Openness and Followers' Novel Idea Communication**

Furthermore, followers' perceptions of a leader's openness may be positively associated with the followers' novel idea communication via a sense-making process (Krueger et al., 2022). This process involves how the followers interpret what their leader attempts to accomplish, which determines the followers' reactions. Perceived leader openness characterizes instances in which followers perceive their leader as seriously considering others' valuable suggestions and fairly evaluating alternative ideas (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert and Burris, 2007). These examples may convey the leader's intention to use the followers' beneficial suggestions rather than implement existing solutions. Consequently, the followers feel motivated to share their novel ideas. Moreover, Tröster and van Knippenberg (2012) proposed that followers' perceptions of a leader's openness motivated the followers to share novel ideas to improve existing work situations because followers perceived low interpersonal risks from expressing novel ideas (Edmondson, 2003).

Research has demonstrated that when followers perceived their leader as having openness-relevant characteristics, they were more likely to communicate their novel ideas. For instance, a follower's perception of a leader's openness strengthened the follower's willingness to share novel ideas that are used to improve organizational functions (Tröster and van Knippenberg, 2012). Relatedly, employees' perceptions of supervisor inclusiveness, comprising *openness to discussing new ideas* as one of the core components, were positively associated with

the employees' engagement in creative work, such as generating and using new ideas at work (Choi et al., 2015). These findings supported the positive association between perceived leader openness and followers' novel idea communication. Jointly, we posit:

*Hypothesis 3: A follower's power distance orientation weakens the indirect, negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and a follower's novel idea communication via perceived leader openness.*

### **Overview of the Studies**

The purpose of Studies 1-3 was to examine whether leader-follower relationship conflict would be negatively associated with a follower's perception of a leader's openness. We also examined a follower's power distance orientation as a moderator of the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness. Furthermore, we tested whether leader-follower relationship conflict and a follower's power distance orientation would jointly and indirectly influence the follower's novel idea communication via perceived leadership openness. To enhance the generalizability of our results, we employed different research methods (i.e., field surveys and experiments) and recruited different convenience samples (e.g., working adults and university students). Moreover, we used a power analysis to estimate our minimum sample size with a statistical power of 0.80 (Alpha = 5%, two-tailed) and an average effect size ( $|\rho| = 0.44$ ). The effect size was based on the association between relationship conflict and openness in a meta-analysis (DeChurch et al., 2013). We obtained 35 participants as our minimum sample size, suggesting sufficient power in the current studies with at least 198 participants. We also analyzed the data only after the completion of data collection, and thus these analyses did not influence the plan of data collection.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All the study data can be accessed at: [https://osf.io/8hs9v/?view\\_only=a45c26eb89e84408b61c4ccc4bac695b](https://osf.io/8hs9v/?view_only=a45c26eb89e84408b61c4ccc4bac695b).

### **Study 1: Time-Lagged Work Behavior Surveys**

To test our predicted associations between variables, we surveyed working adults in Study 1.

#### **Participants and Design**

We initially recruited 216 working adults who completed a three-wave survey via the Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website (Buhrmester et al., 2011). To improve our data quality, we removed five participants' responses because they did not provide consistent information about their direct supervisors' initials or genders across different waves of the survey. The inconsistency indicated that the participants had different supervisors during the course of the survey or failed to recall the correct supervisors because we requested participants to evaluate their interactions with the same supervisor across different waves of the surveys. Thus, the final sample consisted of 211 participants (46.92% female; age:  $M = 37.57$ ,  $SD = 10.49$ ; organizational tenure:  $M = 6.39$  years,  $SD = 5.26$ ). We also examined whether the responses were from repeated IP addresses in the final sample based on existing research (Porter et al., 2019). We found that all the responses were from different IP addresses, which alleviated the issue of repeated participation. The respondents resided in the United States and participated in the survey regarding their work behavior with their supervisor for monetary compensation (Wave I: \$0.56; Wave II: \$0.78; Wave III: \$0.78). The sample included working adults from different industries, such as education, healthcare, retail sales, and finance.

We used a time-lagged design (approximately a two-week time interval between waves) based on previous conflict research (e.g., Tsai, 2023a). The time-lagged design reduces the inflated relationships caused by the priming effect of a predictor measure (i.e., memory retrieval of constructs related to the predictor measure) on an outcome measure (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We measured different study variables during different waves of the survey based on the order of the variables specified in our predictions. Specifically, participants indicated their demographics, power distance orientation, and their levels of conflicts with their work supervisors during the first wave of the survey. During the second and third waves of the survey, participants rated their supervisors' openness and reported their levels of novel idea communication, respectively.

## Measures

**Leader-follower relationship conflict.** We used a 4-item relationship conflict (1 = very little; 7 = very much;  $\alpha = .90$ ) adapted from Pelled et al. (1999). Sample items were: "How much are personality clashes evident between you and your supervisor?" and "How much tension is there between you and your supervisor?"

**Power distance orientation.** We used a 6-item power distance orientation scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .75$ ) from Farh, Hackett, and Liang (2007). A sample item was: "It is frequently necessary for a manager to use authority and power when dealing with subordinates."

**Leader openness.** We used a 3-item openness scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .94$ ) adapted from existing research (Tsai et al., 2020; Tsai, 2023b). A sample item was: "Good ideas get serious consideration from [Supervisor's Initials]."

**Novel idea communication.** We used three items (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = .93$ ) from Zhou and George's (2001) creativity scale because these items explicitly assessed novel idea communication in a workplace. The items were presented in the past tense, and therefore participants indicated their behaviors of novel idea communication, retrospectively. The instructions for the scale were: "Under [Supervisor's Initials]'s leadership, please indicate

your behavior.” The items included: “I suggested new ways to achieve goals or objectives,” “I suggested new ways to increase quality,” and “I suggested new ways of performing work tasks.”

**Control variable.** We used leader-follower task conflict (i.e., disagreement regarding work-related issues, Jehn, 1995) as a control variable because task conflict has been found to reduce perceptions of others’ openness (Tsai, 2023a; Tsai and Bendersky, 2016). Task conflict and relationship conflict were also empirically and positively correlated (e.g., Jehn, 1995; Tsai and Bendersky, 2016). A sample item (1 = very little; 7= very much;  $\alpha = .80$ ) was: “How often do you and your supervisor disagree about how things should be done?”

**Discriminant validity of measures.** To examine the discriminant validity of self-reported measures, we conducted CFAs. According to Kline’s (2011) thresholds, CFA results should include a higher comparative fit index ( $CFI \geq 0.90$ ) and a lower root mean square error of approximation ( $SRMR < 0.10$ ). The CFA results confirmed that leader-follower task conflict and relationship conflict, power distance orientation, leader openness, and novel idea communication were five separate constructs. Fit statistics for the unconstrained five-factor model met acceptable criteria:  $\chi^2(160) = 243.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CFI = 0.97$ ,  $SRMR = 0.06$ . The results of chi-square difference tests showed that the five-factor model achieved a more acceptable fit than did other alternative models, including the one-, two-, three- and four-factor models, all  $ps < .001$ .

## Results

Table 1 indicates descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables in Studies 1-3.

**Tests of predicted associations.** We used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses to examine our predicted associations between variables in Study 1. Table 2 presents all

the regression models<sup>2</sup> with standardized coefficients. Leader-follower relationship conflict was significantly and negatively associated with leader openness (Model 1:  $b = -0.27$ ,  $p = .003$ ), which supported Hypothesis 1. Leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation also had an interaction effect on leader openness (Model 2:  $b = 0.23$ ,  $p = .004$ ). We used the technique of Johnson-Neyman to plot the interaction effect based on the full range of power distance orientation (Johnson and Neyman, 1936). Figure 2 presents the associations between leader-follower relationship conflict and leadership openness using 95% confidence intervals at different levels of power distance orientation in Studies 1-3. The results of Study 1 demonstrated that when power distance orientation was lower (range = [1.00, 3.65]), the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness was significant. However, when power distance orientation was higher (range = [3.70, 5.30]), the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness was non-significant. The findings supported Hypothesis 2.

The results of regression analyses also demonstrated that leader openness subsequently and positively predicted novel idea communication (Model 3:  $b = 0.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ). To evaluate whether leader openness would mediate the interaction effect of leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation on novel idea communication, we also used a confidence interval (CI) method recommended by Tofighi and MacKinnon (2011). The results demonstrated a significant indirect interaction effect of leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation on novel idea communication via leader openness ( $b = 0.11$ , 95% CI = [0.04, 0.20]). When power distance orientation was lower (range = [1.00, 3.65]), leader-follower

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<sup>2</sup> We conducted additional analyses without task conflict as a control variable, and the results replicated all the significant results reported in the text, which suggested that the use of the control variable did not influence the significance of the findings in Study 1.

relationship conflict significantly and negatively predicted novel idea communication via decreased leader openness (i.e., all 95% CIs did not contain zero). However, when power distance orientation was higher (range = [3.70, 5.30]), leader-follower relationship conflict did not significantly predict novel idea communication via leader openness (i.e., all 95% CIs contained zero).<sup>3</sup> The results supported Hypothesis 3.

In summary, Study 1 offered external validity and supported our predicted associations. Specifically, leader-follower relationship conflict was negatively associated with a follower's perception of leader openness based on working adults' assessments of direct supervisors. However, this negative association became non-significant when a follower had a higher power distance orientation. Thus, when a follower had a higher power distance orientation, leader-follower relationship conflict was also not negatively associated with a follower's novel idea communication via the follower's perception of leader openness.

### **Study 2: A Laboratory Experiment**

To examine the replicability of the significant findings of Study 1 with the causal effects of leader-follower relationship conflict, we conducted a study with a manipulation of leader-follower relationship conflict. To strengthen the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings in a standardized environment, we conducted a laboratory experiment by recruiting participants residing in a different cultural context with a high power distance value (i.e., Singapore). Researchers have proposed that when followers have a higher power distance orientation in a cultural context with a higher power distance value, they are more likely to defer to their leaders and therefore less likely to engage in creativity-related activities (Yuan and Zhou, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> We tested the interaction effect of relationship conflict and a follower's power distance orientation on the follower's novel idea communication and did not consistently find a significant interaction effect across the three studies. Please see the detailed results in the file titled "Interaction effect" from the weblink in Footnote 1.

However, other researchers have found non-significant moderating effects of power distance value at a national level on the association between individual-level power distance orientation and its outcomes, such as a consistent association between power distance orientation and perceptions of justice in countries with different levels of power distance value (Kirkman et al., 2009). Thus, we used a sample from a cultural context with a high level of power distance value in Study 2 to examine whether the findings of Study 1 (i.e., participants residing in the United States or from a cultural context with a low power distance value) would be replicable in a different cultural context. Lastly, we used a behavioral measure of novel idea communication in Study 2.

### **Participants and Design**

One hundred and ninety-eight students (73.23% female; age:  $M = 21.30$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) from a university in Singapore participated in a laboratory study for monetary incentives (i.e., 5 Singapore Dollars). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (i.e., control:  $N = 98$ ; relationship conflict:  $N = 100$ ). Following an existing paradigm (Tsai and Bendersky, 2016), a conflict perception was manipulated using a message received from an online counterpart.

### **Procedure**

As participants arrived at the laboratory, they were instructed to sit in separate cubicles, which made it more believable that they would be working with an assigned supervisor in another cubicle. Participants first completed a scale to indicate their power distance orientation. Then participants read a task scenario in which they would work with their assigned supervisor to determine the name of a new smartphone product for their company. Next, participants read four ideas, selected the most creative idea from them, provided a reason for their selection, and



indicated their initials. Then participants read that they would be paired with “RT” as their supervisor for the task and that RT would review their selections and reasons. To differentiate between the roles of a leader and a follower, participants also read that RT would be responsible for determining the final task idea. To improve realism during the online interactions, participants viewed animations that demonstrated a waiting process for the supervisor assignment and the message from the supervisor.

Afterward, participants in the relationship conflict condition read the message: “Hi [Participant’s Initials], We have different selections. I think that we have a personality clash.” For those in the control condition, they read the same message without the last sentence that involved the information regarding relationship conflict. Next, participants engaged in an idea generation and sharing task so that they could share up to four ideas with their supervisor. Then participants indicated their perceptions of relationship conflict as a manipulation check. Lastly, they reported their demographic information.

## Measures

**Manipulation check (leader-follower relationship conflict).** We used the same 4-item scale from Study 1 with a minor modification to fit the study context of relationship conflict ( $\alpha = .86$ ; e.g., How much tension would there be between you and RT?).

**Power distance orientation.** We used the same power distance orientation scale ( $\alpha = .60$ ) as in Study 1.

**Leader openness.** We used the same openness scale as in Study 1 with a slight modification to fit the supervisor’s initials ( $\alpha = .87$ ; e.g., “Good ideas would get serious consideration from RT”).

**Novel idea communication.** To create an objective assessment of novel idea communication, we used participants' quantity and novelty of shared ideas as an indicator of novel idea communication. Specifically, the score of novel idea communication was calculated by summing up the novelty scores of all the ideas shared by a specific participant. To rate the novelty of the ideas generated by participants, two independent coders were blinded to the data of other variables and used a scale from 1 (not novel) to 5 (very novel). We conducted two-way random intra-class correlations (ICCs) from Shrout and Fleiss (1979) to assess the consistency of the ratings because these analyses specified situations in which the two evaluators rated all the ideas and were randomly selected from a population. The ICC results supported the use of the average ratings from the two independent coders ( $ICC[2, 1] = 0.45$ ,  $ICC[2, 2] = 0.62$ ,  $F[264, 264] = 2.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, we used the average rating to indicate the novelty of each idea.

## **Results and Discussion**

**Effectiveness of manipulation check.** We conducted a t-test to examine whether the manipulation was effective. The results showed that participants in the relationship conflict condition ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) perceived a significantly higher level of relationship conflict with their leaders than those in the control condition ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $|t| = 5.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which supported the effectiveness of the manipulation.

**Tests of predicted associations.** We used the same regression analyses and tests of an indirect effect as in Study 1 to examine our predicted associations between variables in Study 2. Table 2 presents all the regression models<sup>4</sup> with standardized coefficients. Leader-follower relationship conflict significantly decreased leader openness (Model 1:  $b = -0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation also had an interaction

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<sup>4</sup> For the variable of relationship conflict, the number "1" or "0" indicates the condition of "relationship conflict" or "control" in the correlational and regression analyses of Studies 2 and 3.

effect on leader openness (Model 2:  $b = 0.14$ ,  $p = .035$ ; see the interaction effect in Figure 2). The results demonstrated that when power distance orientation was lower (range = [1.00, 3.70]), the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness was significant. However, when power distance orientation was higher (range = [3.75, 4.80]), the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness was non-significant.

The results of regression analyses also demonstrated that leader openness subsequently and positively predicted novel idea communication (Model 3:  $b = 0.24$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Furthermore, the results demonstrated a significant indirect interaction effect of leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation on novel idea communication via leader openness ( $b = 0.03$ , 95% CI = [0.002, 0.078]). When power distance orientation was lower (range = [1.00, 3.70]), leader-follower relationship conflict significantly reduced novel idea communication via decreased leader openness (i.e., all 95% CIs did not contain zero). However, when power distance orientation was higher (range = [3.75, 4.80]), leader-follower relationship conflict did not significantly predict novel idea communication via leader openness (i.e., all 95% CIs contained zero). To conclude, the results of Study 2 confirmed Hypotheses 1-3 and strengthened the causal inference regarding the effect of leader-follower relationship conflict.

### **Study 3: An Online Experiment**

To replicate and extend the significant findings of Studies 1 and 2 with the causal effects of leader-follower relationship conflict, we conducted another experiment with a different task scenario and sample from those in Study 2. In contrast to the idea generation and sharing task in Study 2, we used an idea selection and sharing task in Study 3 based on existing research (Rietzschel et al., 2010), which allowed for generalization into decisions of whether people

would share ideas provided by others with their leaders.

### **Participants and Design**

We used the Mturk website to recruit 202 adults (54.46% female; age:  $M = 35.84$ ,  $SD = 12.45$ ; all participants residing in the United States) who completed an online study for monetary compensation (i.e., \$0.7). Given that screening Mturk participants based on past approval rate (i.e., at least 95 % past approval rate) improves the quality of data (Peer et al., 2014), we recruited participants with at least a 96% past approval rate. The study consisted of the same two-condition design as in Study 2 (i.e., control:  $N = 100$ ; relationship conflict:  $N = 102$ ).

### **Procedure and Task Scenario**

We used the same procedure, manipulation, and measures in Study 3 as those in Study 2, but included a different task scenario, supervisor's initials (i.e., "ND"), and idea sharing task in Study 3 from those in Study 2. The task scenario of Study 3 was modified from previous research (i.e., Study 1; Tsai and Li, 2020). The scenario indicated that participants would work with their assigned supervisor to determine an idea for a new business in a school district. Moreover, participants engaged in an idea selection and sharing task from a list of seven ideas (e.g., a store renting office wear and a cinema). Based on the list, participants could decide whether and what ideas they would share with their supervisor.

### **Measures**

**Manipulation check (leader-follow relationship conflict).** We used the same 4-item scale from Study 2 with a minor modification to fit the leader's initials study ( $\alpha = .89$ ; e.g., How much tension would there be between you and ND?).

**Power distance orientation.** We used the same power distance orientation scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ) as in Studies 1 and 2.

**Leader openness.** We used the same openness scale as in Study 2 with a slight modification to fit the supervisor's initials ( $\alpha = .90$ ; e.g., "Good ideas would get serious consideration from ND.>").

**Novel idea communication.** We used the same way as in Study 2 to compute scores of novel idea communication by summing up the novelty scores of all the shared ideas for a specific participant. Ten independent evaluators with experience in launching a new business used the same scale as in Study 2 to rate the novelty of the seven ideas in the task. The ICC results achieved an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability ( $ICC[2, 1] = 0.29$ ,  $ICC[2, 10] = 0.80$ ,  $F[6, 54] = 5.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, we used the average scores of the evaluators to indicate each idea's novelty.

## Results and Discussion

We use the same statistical methods as in Study 2 to demonstrate the results in Study 3.

**Effectiveness of manipulation check.** The results of a t-test showed that participants in the relationship conflict condition ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) perceived a significantly higher level of relationship conflict with their leaders than did those in the control condition ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ,  $|t| = 5.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation.

**Tests of predicted associations.** We used the same regression analyses and tests of an indirect effect as in Studies 1 and 2 to examine our predicted associations between variables in Study 3 (see the results in Table 2). Leader-follower relationship conflict significantly decreased leader openness (Model 1:  $b = -0.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation also had an interaction effect on leader openness (Model 2:  $b = 0.13$ ,  $p = .047$ ; see the interaction effect in Figure 2). The results demonstrated that when power distance orientation was lower (range = [1.17, 4.32]), the negative association between leader-follower

relationship conflict and leader openness was significant. However, when power distance orientation was higher (range = [4.37, 5.97]), the association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness was non-significant.

The results of regression analyses also demonstrated that leader openness subsequently and positively predicted novel idea communication (Model 3:  $b = 0.23$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Furthermore, the results demonstrated a significant indirect interaction effect of leader-follower relationship conflict and power distance orientation on novel idea communication via leader openness ( $b = 0.03$ , 95% CI = [0.0003, 0.0739]). When power distance orientation was lower (range = [1.17, 4.32]), leader-follower relationship conflict significantly reduced novel idea communication via decreased leader openness (i.e., all 95% CIs did not contain zero). However, when power distance orientation was higher (range = [4.37, 5.97]), leader-follower relationship conflict did not significantly predict novel idea communication via leader openness (i.e., all 95% CIs contained zero). The results confirmed Hypotheses 1-3 (see a review of all the hypotheses and results in Figure 3). In summary, the results of Study 3 replicated the significant results of Studies 1 and 2 with the manipulation of leader-follower relationship conflict in a different task scenario and idea sharing task from those in Study 2.

### **General Discussion**

We examine previously unexplored precursors of perceived leader openness and followers' novel idea communication and offered convergent evidence in three studies: leader-follower relationship conflict is negatively associated with perceived leader openness. Moreover, a follower's high power distance orientation eliminates the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness. Therefore, the follower's high orientation of power distance weakens the indirect, negative association between leader-follower

relationship conflict and the follower's novel idea communication via perceived leader openness. Accordingly, we extend the conflict experience framework (Krueger et al., 2022) to the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and novel idea communication by identifying perceived leader openness and power distance orientation as a mediator and moderator, respectively.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The present investigation advances the literature on leader openness by exploring why employees perceive their leaders as having different levels of openness to employees' suggestions. To our knowledge, Zhu and Akhtar's work is the only previous study that examined a cause of perceived leader openness and they found a work supervisor's learning goal orientation as a significant predictor of perceived leader openness (Zhu and Akhtar, 2019). Relatedly, research demonstrated that a leader's mastery goal orientation was more likely to increase the leader's willingness to discuss and develop creative input from a subordinate than was a leader's performance goal orientation (Sijbom et al., 2015), which suggested a positive association between an organizational leader's mastery goal orientation and leader openness. Our investigation shifts the focus from a leader's trait (i.e., learning goal orientation) to leader-follower relationship conflict as a predictor of leader openness based on the conflict experience framework (Krueger et al., 2022). This framework also echoes the perspective of conflict personalization where interpersonal incompatibilities cause *threatening reactions* (Hoogenboom et al., 2023), which may explain the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and leader openness.

The current research also illuminates the associations between leadership styles and engagement in creativity-related activities. Previous research regards openness as an important

component of leadership style that can foster a follower's creativity-related engagement. For instance, both inclusive leadership (i.e., a leader's openness, accessibility, and availability, Carmeli et al., 2010) and humility leadership (i.e., a leader's openness to admitting one's own limitations and accepting others' suggestions, Hu et al., 2018) promotes a follower's creativity-related engagement and their common key component involves openness. Furthermore, the current research demonstrates a positive association between a follower's perception of the leader's openness and the follower's creativity-related engagement, which suggests that perceived leader openness *alone* constitutes an effective precursor of a follower's novel idea communication. To clarify the specificity of openness-relevant leadership styles, researchers can further examine the utility of broad leadership constructs by investigating separate effects of different leader characteristics, such as a leader's openness, accessibility, availability, and act of admitting personal limitations, on a follower's creativity-related engagement.

Although researchers traditionally view cultures with a high level of power distance value as an obstacle to employee creativity, our research reveals the benefits of an individual-level power distance orientation. Cultures with a high power distance value often involve group agreement without idea integration (Yuan and Zhou, 2015), avoidance of disagreement expression in front of others with high status (Hofstede, 2001), and difficulty in communication due to status differences (van der Vegt et al., 2005). These ineffective processes may hamper idea exchange and thus prevent people from engaging in creative processes. In contrast to the disadvantages of cultures with high power distance value, the current research demonstrates that a follower's individual-level orientation of power distance decreases the negative effect of leader-follower relationship conflict on perceived leader openness which is in turn positively associated with a follower's novel



idea communication. The present research advances the literature by suggesting a benefit of a high power distance orientation regarding employee creativity in organizations.

Moreover, relationship conflict is regarded as universally detrimental to work outcomes (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012; Hinds and Bailey, 2003), and therefore previous research and our research explore moderators to mitigate the negative effects of relationship conflict. Past research shows that the negative effect of relationship conflict on team-level helping behavior emerges when groups have relational distance rather than closeness (Rispens et al., 2011). The negative impact of relationship conflict on knowledge-sharing is also magnified when employees perceive good interpersonal relationships as being related to promotions (Leung et al., 2011). Furthermore, the negative effect of relationship conflict on team cohesion is attenuated when team members openly discuss differences and attempt to resolve their conflicts (Tekleab et al., 2009). Teams with high early-stage relationship conflict can reduce its negative effects on team processes over time when team members re-evaluated difficult affective events and regulate perceptions of threat associated with the events (Thiel et al., 2019). In contrast to these studies in a non-hierarchical context, the current investigation demonstrates follower power distance orientation as a moderator that buffers the negative impact of leader-follower relationship conflict on perceived leader openness and followers' novel idea communication. Consequently, the present research offers evidence of when the negative effect of relationship conflict is minimal in a hierarchical relationship.

### **Practical Implications**

The current findings suggest that organizational leaders should mitigate relationship conflict to promote perceptions of a leader's openness and foster followers' novel idea communication. Managers and subordinates can receive conflict management training to resolve

the personal incompatibility. Given that opinion differences regarding work-related issues can transform into relationship conflict (Jimmieson et al., 2017), employees should be discouraged from taking opinion differences personally. A manager and a subordinate should keep each other informed of any updates on work issues to avoid misinterpretation of disagreements that can lead to personal attacks. They should be encouraged to debate over their different viewpoints based on objective information to improve their open mindset (Tsai and Bendersky, 2016).

Furthermore, managers and subordinates need to be educated on how they can actively manage relationship conflict to prevent detrimental consequences, including a loss of perceived leader openness and a decrease in followers' novel idea communication.

The current findings also indicate that a follower's high orientation of power distance buffers the negative impact of relationship conflict on leader openness and followers' novel idea communication. Accordingly, a manager should identify his or her subordinates' power distance orientation and manage their relationship conflict with the subordinates depending on their orientation. To evaluate levels of power distance orientation, managers can use the measure of the current study during the processes of hiring, training, and evaluation. For subordinates with a lower orientation of power distance, managers should spend more effort on resolving their relationship conflicts with their subordinates. We hope that these practical suggestions can promote the communication of novel ideas in organizations by facilitating an open-minded culture and preventing the occurrence of counterproductive conflict.

### **Potential Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the contributions of the current research, this investigation has potential limitations that offer opportunities for future research. Although we used an experiment to strengthen the causal effects of leader-follower conflict on perceived leader openness, reverse

causality remains possible. Specifically, a perception of a leader's openness may decrease leader-follower relationship conflict. Research has demonstrated that a perception of procedural injustice is a precursor of leader-follower conflict (Liu et al., 2013). Future research could employ a longitudinal study or manipulate a perception of a leader's openness to explore the possibility of reverse causality. Moreover, recent research identifies different aspects of power distance orientation, such as power perceptions of an authority figure and conflict expectations with an authority figure (Adamovic, 2023). Subsequent studies can examine whether various aspects of power distance orientation will have differential moderating effects on the associations between leader-follower relationship conflict and its outcomes. Furthermore, a self-rated scale of novel idea communication may limit the validity of the Study 1 results because the study participants may rate themselves favorably to maintain their positive image. To overcome this limitation, Studies 2 and 3 employed behavioral measures of novel idea communication by using the number of shared ideas and independent raters' assessments of idea novelty.

Future research can also examine alternative mediators in our theoretical model. Research has demonstrated a positive association between leader-follower relationship conflict and abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2011) and a negative association between abusive supervision and employees' engagement in creativity-related activities (Liu et al., 2012). In addition, openness is one of the core trust concepts (Butler, 1991). Future research could focus on other trust concepts, such as followers' perceptions of a leader's integrity, competence, and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995). These examples illustrate other mediating processes for the negative impact of leader-follower relationship conflict on followers' novel idea communication. Furthermore, a follower's deference to leaders may serve as an alternative explanation for the interaction effects of leader-follower relationship conflict and the follower's power distance

orientation and the follower's novel idea communication. Followers with a higher power distance orientation are more likely to defer to their leaders and therefore less likely to engage in creativity-related activities (Yuan and Zhou, 2015). Consequently, when relationship conflict occurs between a leader and a follower, the follower with a higher power distance orientation may be more likely to show their deference and thus reduce their novel idea communication. This proposition presents a potential negative consequence of power distance orientation regarding engagement in creative work during the conflict.

### **Conclusion**

The current research elucidates the effects of leader-follower relationship conflict on a follower's novel idea communication via the follower's perception of a leader's openness and identifies the follower's power distance orientation as a moderator that mitigates the negative impact of leader-follower relationship conflict. The current research provides significant theoretical insights and feasible practical suggestions for managing relationship conflict and improving perceptions of leader openness. We hope that the current investigation promotes the goals of mitigating disruptive conflict and fostering openness and novel ideas in organizations.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in Studies 1-3*

Study 1	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Task Conflict	2.56	1.20				
2. Relationship Conflict	1.69	1.03	0.70***			
3. Power Distance Orientation	3.04	0.91	-0.07	0.10		
4. Openness	5.57	1.22	-0.37***	-0.42***	-0.17*	
5. Novel Idea Communication	5.06	1.35	0.04	-0.09	-0.15*	0.44***
Study 2	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	
1. Relationship Conflict	0.51	0.50				
2. Power Distance Orientation	2.81	0.66	0.12			
3. Openness	3.66	1.23	-0.42***	-0.03		
4. Novel Idea Communication	3.07	2.88	-0.09	0.03	0.22**	
Study 3	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	
1. Relationship Conflict	0.50	0.50				
2. Power Distance Orientation	3.34	0.88	0.08			
3. Openness	3.52	1.43	-0.34***	0.10		
4. Novel Idea Communication	7.29	6.65	-0.17*	-0.05	0.26***	

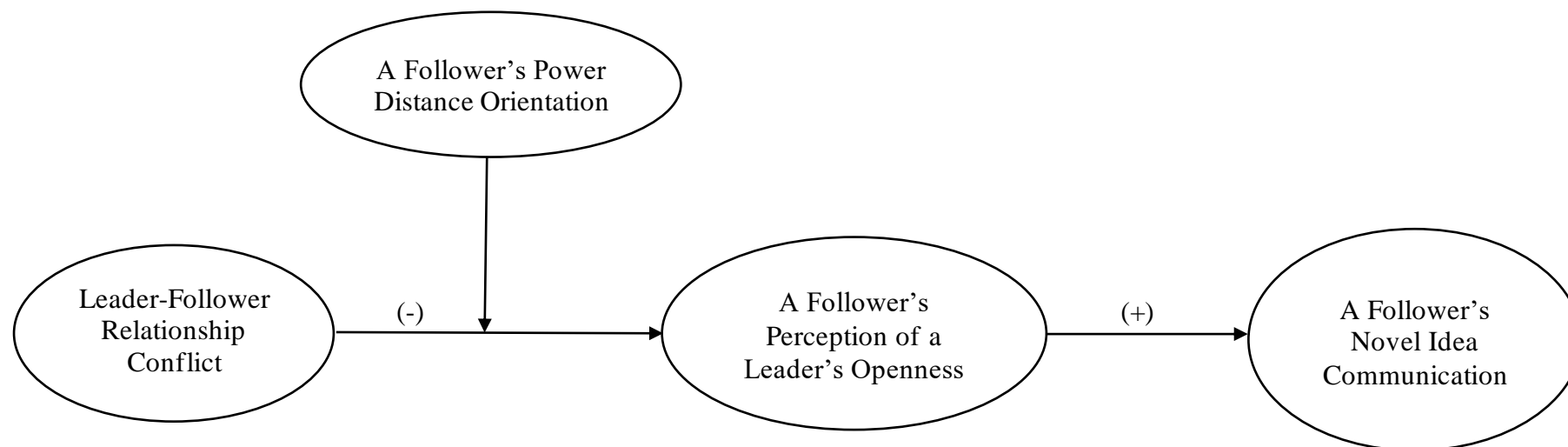
Notes. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed). In Studies 2 and 3, relationship conflict indicates a condition of relationship conflict (Coding = 1) versus control (Coding = 0).

Table 2

*Regression Analyses of Predicted Associations in Studies 1-3*

Predictors	Study 1			Study 2			Study 3		
	Model 1: Openness	Model 2: Openness	Model 3: Novel Idea Communication	Model 1: Openness	Model 2: Openness	Model 3: Novel Idea Communication	Model 1: Openness	Model 2: Openness	Model 3: Novel Idea Communication
Task Conflict	-0.19*	-0.15	0.30***						
Relationship Conflict	-0.27**	-0.34***	-0.12	-0.42***	-0.42***	0.00	-0.35***	-0.35***	-0.09
Power Distance Orientation	-0.16*	-0.18**	-0.06	-0.03	0.01	0.05	-0.13	0.14*	-0.06
Task Conflict × Power Distance Orientation		-0.05	-0.15						
Relationship Conflict × Power Distance Orientation		0.23**	0.15		0.14*	-0.11		0.13*	0.01
Openness			0.49***			0.24**			0.23**
$R^2$	.21	.26	.26	.18	.20	.06	.13	.15	.08
$F$	18.21***	14.15***	12.14***	21.01***	15.75***	3.14*	14.75***	11.31***	4.22**

*Notes.* \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed). Standardized regression coefficients are presented. In Studies 2 and 3, relationship conflict indicates a condition of relationship conflict (Coding = 1) versus control (Coding = 0).



*Figure 1. Predicted Associations Between Variables*

*Notes:* The positive or negative sign denotes a positive or negative association between variables. The moderating effect of follower power distance orientation decreases the negative association between leader-follower relationship conflict and perceived leader openness.

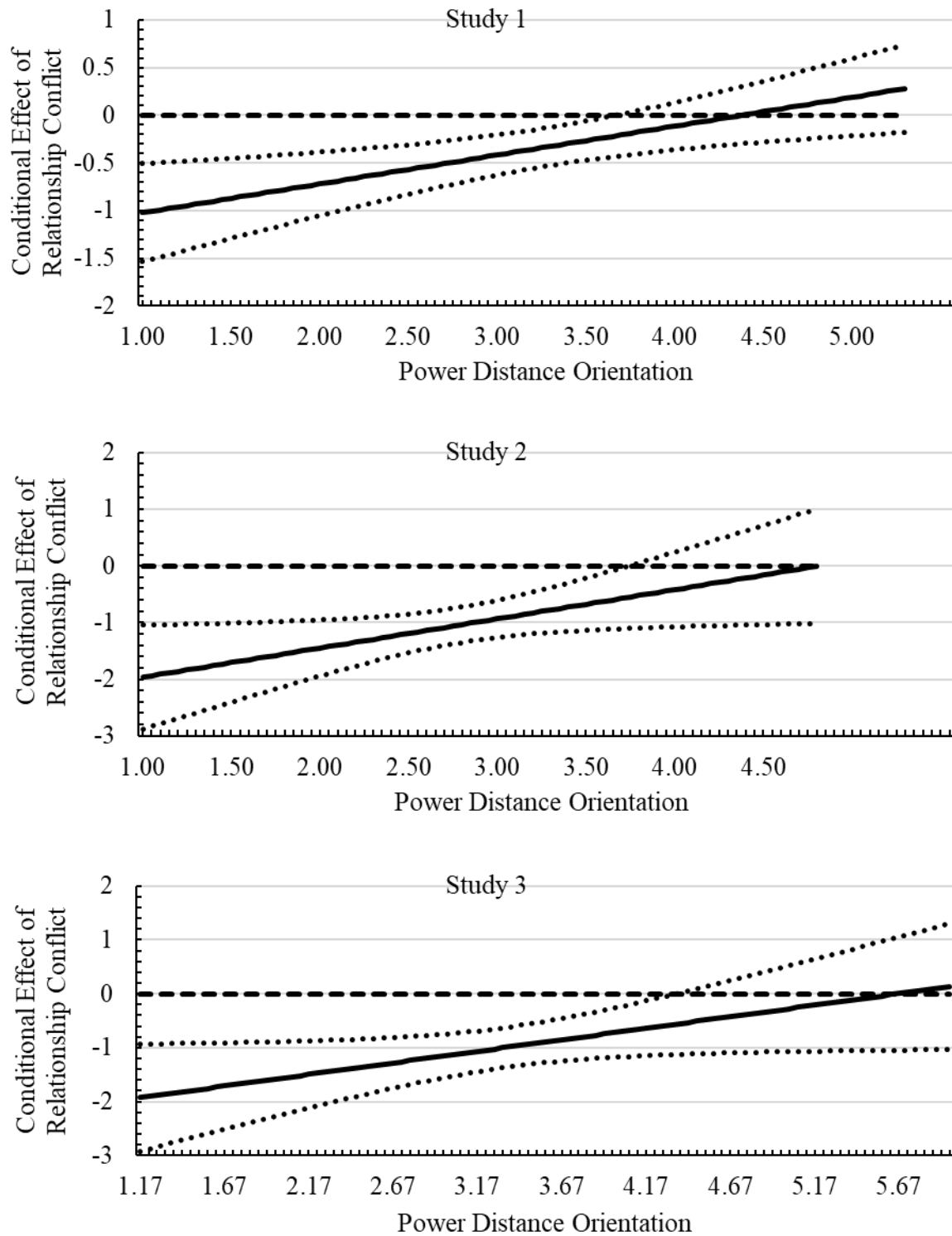
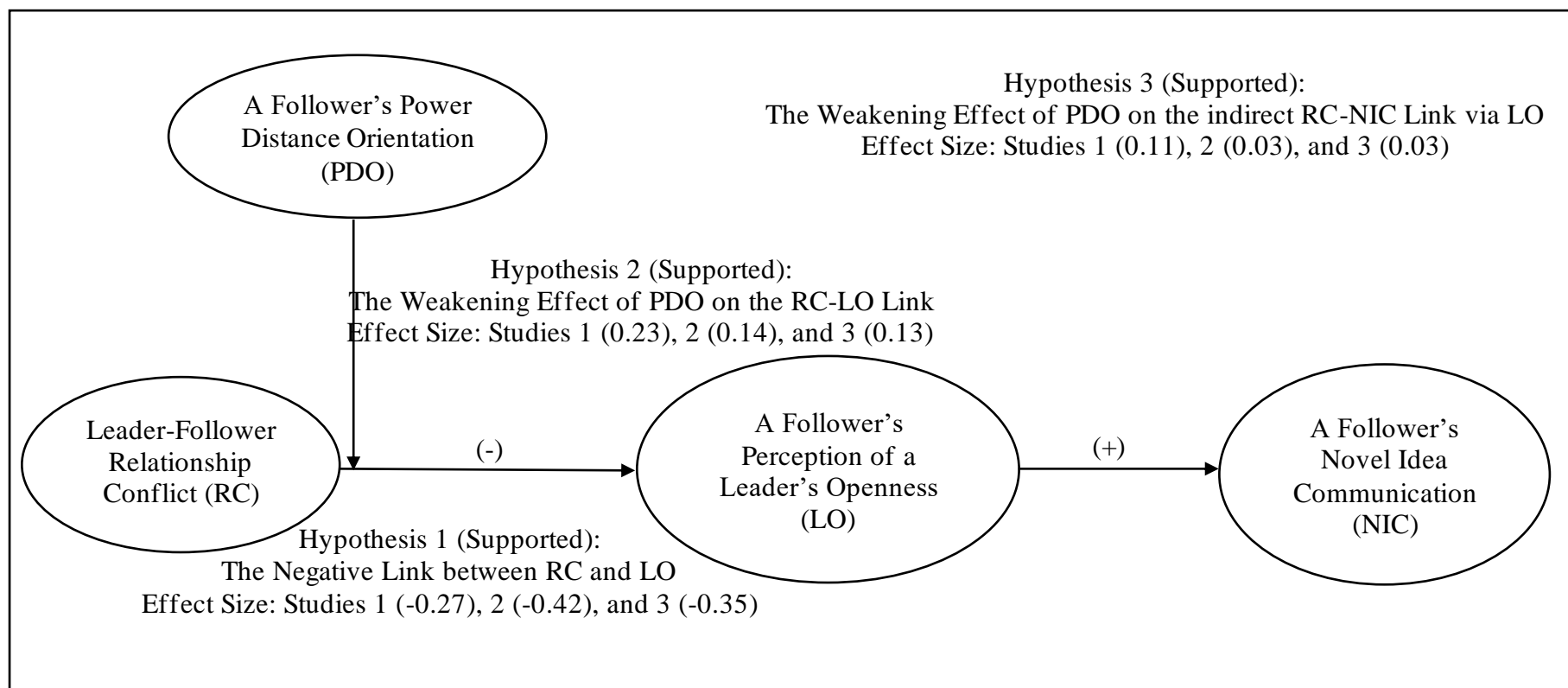


Figure 2. Johnson-Neyman Plot for Power Distance Orientation and Relationship Conflict  
(Perceived Leader Openness as a Dependent Variable) in Studies 1-3





*Figure 3. A Review of Hypotheses and Results*

*Notes:* Standardized regression coefficients are used to indicate effect sizes. The positive or negative sign denotes a positive or negative association between variables.