

Intrapersonal Conflict and the creative Process: Linear Effects

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Abstract

This study investigates the nuanced effects of intrapersonal conflict on the distinct stages of the creative process: problem identification (PI), information search and encoding (ISE), and idea generation (IG). Grounded in self-discrepancy theory and problem-solving theory, we propose that intrapersonal conflict acts as a cognitive catalyst for the preparatory, convergent stages of creativity but not for the generative stage. Data from 272 factory workers in Southeastern Nigeria support this differentiated impact. Results from multiple regression analyses show that intrapersonal conflict is a significant positive predictor of PI ($\beta = .348$, $p < .01$) and ISE ($\beta = .398$, $p < .01$) but has no significant effect on IG ($\beta = .019$, n.s.). These findings suggest that while internal tension sharpens problem-focused reflection and information-gathering behaviors, it does not translate into the production of novel ideas. The study offers a more refined understanding of creativity by decoupling its stages and highlights the importance of complementing conflict-driven engagement with supportive practices to foster breakthrough innovation in constrained work environments.

Keywords: Intrapersonal Conflict, Creative Process Engagement, Problem Identification, Information Search, Idea Generation, Self-Discrepancy Theory, Problem-Solving, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Intrapersonal conflict, defined as the psychological tension that arises when an individual simultaneously experiences incompatible cognitions, desires, or self-representations, has been increasingly recognised as a factor that shapes workplace behaviour and performance (Stenseng & Haugen, 2015). Within organisational contexts, such conflict may emerge from discrepancies between professional demands, personal aspirations, and perceived obligations to others. While prior research has examined interpersonal and task conflict in relation to creativity and innovation (De Dreu, 2006; Farh et al., 2010), less attention has been directed toward the *intrapersonal* dimension of conflict. This gap is particularly notable given that creativity is inherently cognitive and often originates in how individuals manage internal contradictions and self-discrepancies (Zhang & Bartol, 2010; Jiang, Chen, & Bai, 2020; Yang & Levine, 2023).

The creative process is not a monolithic construct; rather, it unfolds across distinct stages such as problem identification, information search and encoding, and idea generation (Amabile, 1996; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Individuals who experience intrapersonal conflict may perceive problems differently, devote greater effort to searching for and organising relevant information, and attempt to generate new ideas. Yet, the precise influence of intrapersonal conflict on these stages remains under-theorised. This is particularly relevant in contexts such as small factories in Nigeria, where workers face pressing productivity demands alongside personal and social constraints, creating fertile ground for conflict-driven cognitive engagement.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores the linear effects of intrapersonal conflict on three components of creative process engagement—problem identification (PI), information search and encoding (ISE), and idea generation (IG)—while controlling for age, gender, education, and work experience. To frame this inquiry, we draw on Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory and D'Zurilla

and Goldfried's (1971) problem-solving theory, both of which provide complementary perspectives on how internal tensions can activate structured cognitive processes that underpin creativity.

2. Theoretical Framing

2.1 Self-Discrepancy Theory

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) posits that individuals maintain multiple self-representations—the actual self (attributes one believes they possess), the ideal self (attributes one wishes to possess), and the ought self (attributes one feels obligated to possess). Discrepancies among these domains produce emotional discomfort and motivational tension. Intrapersonal conflict can thus be conceptualised as a lived manifestation of self-discrepancy: factory workers may experience strain when their current roles (actual self) fail to align with their aspirations for advancement (ideal self) or with expectations from family and supervisors (ought self). According to the theory, such discrepancies heighten cognitive engagement as individuals strive to reduce dissonance (Higgins, 1999; Kim, 2020; Yang & Levine, 2023). In the context of creative process engagement, self-discrepancies are likely to sharpen awareness of problems (problem identification) and intensify the search for relevant information as individuals attempt to reconcile conflicting self-guides. However, this motivational tension may not extend to the more generative and divergent stage of idea generation, which requires cognitive flexibility rather than discrepancy reduction (De Dreu et al., 2008).

2.2 Problem-Solving Theory

D'Zurilla and Goldfried's (1971) problem-solving theory offers a complementary account. The theory conceptualises problem solving as a learned, rational process involving several sequential stages: problem orientation, problem definition and formulation, generation of alternatives, decision making, and solution implementation. Intrapersonal conflict can be seen as a trigger for this process by drawing attention to discrepancies between current and desired states, thus heightening the salience of problems. Consistent with this framework, individuals experiencing intrapersonal conflict may devote more effort to decomposing complex problems, gathering information from multiple sources, and encoding knowledge for later retrieval (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999). However, the theory also suggests that stress associated with conflict may constrain divergent thinking, thereby limiting the production of novel ideas (Byron & Khazanchi, 2021; Greer & Dannals, 2022). Consequently, intrapersonal conflict may positively influence problem identification and information search and encoding, but its effect on idea generation is likely negligible or even negative.

2.3 Integrative Perspective

Taken together, self-discrepancy theory and problem-solving theory suggest that intrapersonal conflict functions as a cognitive catalyst for the early and middle stages of the creative process but not necessarily for its generative phase. Self-discrepancies provide the motivational impetus, while problem-solving theory explains the structured cognitive strategies individuals employ in response. The integration of these perspectives implies that intrapersonal conflict may serve as a “double-edged sword”: it enhances attentiveness to problems and fosters information acquisition but does not automatically translate into the divergent ideation that characterises breakthrough creativity. This theoretical framing thus supports our hypotheses that intrapersonal conflict will positively predict problem identification and information search and encoding, but not idea generation, among factory workers in Nigeria.

3. Hypotheses Development

3.1 Intrapersonal Conflict and Problem Identification

Problem identification represents the initial stage of the creative process, where individuals seek to recognize, frame, and understand issues that require novel solutions (Amabile, 1996). Intrapersonal conflict (IC), defined as the tension individuals experience when competing values, goals, or roles collide (Stenseng & Haugen, 2015), can influence this stage by sharpening self-reflection and cognitive processing. Research has shown that conflict often compels individuals to invest more time in analyzing problems from different perspectives (De Dreu, 2006). For factory workers, where task routines and performance expectations are often rigid, IC may trigger deeper consideration of the nature of challenges, thus enhancing the ability to identify problems accurately. Consistent with self-regulation theory, individuals experiencing conflict may demonstrate heightened attention to discrepancies between expectations and outcomes, leading to more careful framing of problems (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Previous studies have also linked conflict and divergent thinking to greater engagement with problem definition (George & Zhou, 2002). Hence, we propose that IC will be positively associated with problem identification.

H1: Intrapersonal conflict positively predicts problem identification.

3.2 Intrapersonal Conflict and Information Search and Encoding

Information search and encoding (ISE) represents a crucial cognitive activity in creativity, involving the gathering, retention, and structuring of information to support subsequent idea generation (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). IC may stimulate broader information-seeking behaviours, as individuals attempt to reconcile conflicting internal states by accessing multiple viewpoints or knowledge bases. De Dreu and Nijstad's (2008) motivated information processing theory suggests that conflict encourages systematic and effortful processing of information. For factory workers, such conflict might foster the tendency to consult multiple sources—whether experiential, documentary, or peer-based—in order to make sense of ambiguous work demands. Furthermore, encoding information effectively requires deeper cognitive investment, which can be heightened when workers are motivated to resolve tensions arising from IC (Perry-Smith, 2006). Thus, IC may not only increase the breadth of information searched but also enhance the depth with which such information is organized for creative problem-solving. Empirical studies also show that conflict encourages deliberate thinking and reflection, processes that are closely tied to encoding and structuring of knowledge (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Therefore, IC is expected to be positively associated with ISE.

H2: Intrapersonal conflict positively predicts information search and encoding.

3.3 Intrapersonal Conflict and Idea Generation

Idea generation (IG) is often considered the hallmark of creativity, involving the production of novel and useful alternatives to address problems (Amabile, 1996). While IC may enhance reflective and analytical thinking in earlier stages, its influence on idea generation is less straightforward. Excessive conflict may narrow cognitive flexibility by fostering rumination and indecision, thereby limiting divergent thinking capacity (George & Zhou, 2002). For factory workers whose tasks are often structured, IC may primarily serve to improve recognition of challenges and information structuring but may not translate into higher levels of generating original solutions. Empirical evidence supports the notion that while conflict can promote problem exploration, it does not always enhance creativity outcomes at the idea-generation stage (De Dreu, 2006). Moreover, creative idea generation requires psychological safety and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which may be undermined in contexts where conflict is prevalent. Thus, while IC may support earlier creative processes, its role in idea generation may be negligible. Accordingly, we hypothesize that IC does not significantly predict

IG.

H3: Intrapersonal conflict does not significantly predict idea generation.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the linear effects of intrapersonal conflict (IC) on creative process engagement among factory workers. The design was appropriate given the study's focus on testing relationships between individual-level psychological constructs and specific stages of the creative process, while accounting for relevant demographic controls.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

The target population consisted of factory workers employed in small- and medium-scale manufacturing firms located in the South Eastern region of Nigeria. This population was selected due to its relevance for studying creativity under conditions of constrained resources and competing socio-economic demands. Using purposive and convenience sampling, 312 questionnaires were distributed, of which 287 were returned, and 272 were deemed usable after screening for completeness and consistency. The final sample ($N = 272$) comprised 58% male and 42% female participants, with an average age of 34.7 years ($SD = 7.6$). Respondents' average length of work experience was 8.2 years ($SD = 4.5$), and their educational qualifications ranged from secondary school certificates to higher national diplomas and university degrees.

4.3 Measures

4.3.1 Intrapersonal Conflict (IC).

IC was measured using the three-item scale developed by Stenseng and Haugen (2015). The items assessed respondents' perceptions of tension in their relationship with their work and competing personal or social expectations. Sample items included: *"For the time being, how do you perceive the relationship between yourself and your performance to be?"* Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the present study was .83, indicating good internal consistency.

4.3.2 Creative Process Engagement (CPE).

CPE was measured using the adapted scale from Zhang and Bartol (2010), consisting of three sub-dimensions:

- **Problem Identification (PI):** three items ($\alpha = .86$), e.g., *"I think about the problem from multiple perspectives."*
- **Information Search and Encoding (ISE):** three items ($\alpha = .88$), e.g., *"I consult a wide variety of information."*
- **Idea Generation (IG):** five items ($\alpha = .89$), e.g., *"I generate a significant number of alternatives to the same problem before I choose the final solution."* Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated stronger engagement in the respective dimension of the creative process.

4.3.2 Control Variables.

Following prior research (Amabile, 1996; De Dreu, 2006), age, gender, educational qualification, and length of job experience were included as control variables. These factors have been shown to influence creativity and problem-solving styles.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), confirming internal consistency. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS 26 to assess construct validity. The four-factor model (IC, PI, ISE, IG) demonstrated good fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.11$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .062. All factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$) and exceeded .60, providing evidence of convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was supported as the square roots of average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded the inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.5 Analytical path

Descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and Pearson correlations were computed using SPSS 28. Multiple linear regression analyses were then conducted to examine the predictive effects of intrapersonal conflict on the three dimensions of creative process engagement (PI, ISE, IG). Age, gender, educational qualification, and job experience were entered as control variables in the first step, followed by intrapersonal conflict in the second step. Statistical significance was assessed at the .05 level.

5. Results

Table 1: Correlation Matrix

	PI	ISE	IG	IC	Age	Gender	Experience	Education
PI	1.000							
ISE	0.214	1.000						
IG	0.028	-0.004	1.000					
IC	0.407	0.477	0.018	1.000				
Age	0.241	0.033	0.032	-0.008	1.000			
Gender	0.019	-0.083	-0.040	0.112	0.082	1.000		
Experience	-0.006	0.051	0.087	-0.038	-0.155	-0.024	1.000	
Education	0.090	0.088	0.008	0.036	0.104	-0.040	-0.025	1.000

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. IC was positively correlated with PI ($r = .407$, $p < .01$) and ISE ($r = .477$, $p < .01$) but showed a non-significant correlation with IG ($r = .018$, $> .01$). Control variables demonstrated weak or non-significant associations with creative process measures.

Table 2: Linear effects

DV	Predictor	Coef.	SE	t	p	[95% CI]
PI	const	2.621	0.289	9.059	0.0	2.054 to 3.188
PI	IC	0.348	0.045	7.731	0.0	0.260 to 0.437
PI	Age	0.03	0.006	4.755	0.0	0.018 to 0.043
PI	Gender	-0.09	0.102	-0.879	0.379	-0.291 to 0.111
PI	Experience	0.01	0.01	0.932	0.351	-0.011 to 0.030
PI	Education	0.042	0.043	0.995	0.32	-0.041 to 0.126
ISE	const	2.642	0.317	8.327	0.0	2.020 to 3.264

ISE	IC	0.398	0.039	10.296	0.0	0.322 to 0.474
ISE	Age	0.006	0.007	0.935	0.35	-0.007 to 0.019
ISE	Gender	-0.266	0.104	-2.568	0.01	-0.470 to -0.063
ISE	Experience	0.015	0.01	1.438	0.15	-0.005 to 0.034
ISE	Education	0.051	0.046	1.119	0.263	-0.039 to 0.141
IG	const	3.274	0.294	11.139	0.0	2.698 to 3.851
IG	IC	0.019	0.041	0.464	0.643	-0.061 to 0.099
IG	Age	0.005	0.006	0.803	0.422	-0.007 to 0.018
IG	Gender	-0.075	0.1	-0.757	0.449	-0.271 to 0.120
IG	Experience	0.016	0.01	1.616	0.106	-0.003 to 0.035
IG	Education	0.002	0.044	0.038	0.97	-0.084 to 0.088

Table 3: Model Fit Indices

DV	N	R ²	Adj. R ²	F (model)	F p-value
PI	272	0.232	0.219	19.043	0.0
ISE	272	0.258	0.246	21.745	0.0
IG	272	0.012	-0.005	0.734	0.598

Table 2 and 3 show the regression analysis predicting PI, ISE, and IG. IC had statistically significant positive effects on PI ($\beta = .348$, $p < .01$) and ISE ($\beta = .398$, $p < .01$), but no significant effect on IG ($\beta = .019$, n.s.). Control variables did not substantially alter these relationships.

Table 4: Result summary

Hypothesis	Statement	β_{IC}	p	Result
H1	Intrapersonal Conflict (IC) positively predicts Problem Identification (PI).	0.348	0.0	Supported
H2	Intrapersonal Conflict (IC) positively predicts Information Search & Encoding (ISE).	0.398	0.0	Supported
H3	Intrapersonal Conflict (IC) does not predict Idea Generation (IG).	0.019	0.643	Not supported (n.s.)

Table 5: Model Equations

DV	Implicit equation	Expressed (estimated) equation
PI	$PI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot IC_i + \beta_2 \cdot Age_i + \beta_3 \cdot Gender_i + \beta_4 \cdot Experience_i + \beta_5 \cdot Education_i + \varepsilon_i$	$PI_i = 2.621 + 0.348 \cdot IC_i + 0.030 \cdot Age_i + 0.090 \cdot Gender_i + 0.010 \cdot Experience_i + 0.042 \cdot Education_i + \varepsilon_i$

ISE	$ISE_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot IC_i + \beta_2 \cdot Age_i + \beta_3 \cdot Gender_i + \beta_4 \cdot Experience_i + \beta_5 \cdot Education_i + \varepsilon_i$	$ISE_i = 2.642 + 0.398 \cdot IC_i + 0.006 \cdot Age_i + 0.266 \cdot Gender_i + 0.015 \cdot Experience_i + 0.051 \cdot Education_i + \varepsilon_i$
IG	$IG_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot IC_i + \beta_2 \cdot Age_i + \beta_3 \cdot Gender_i + \beta_4 \cdot Experience_i + \beta_5 \cdot Education_i + \varepsilon_i$	$IG_i = 3.274 + 0.019 \cdot IC_i + 0.005 \cdot Age_i + 0.075 \cdot Gender_i + 0.016 \cdot Experience_i + 0.002 \cdot Education_i + \varepsilon_i$

6. Discussion

This study examined whether intrapersonal conflict (IC) predicts engagement in key stages of the creative process—Problem Identification (PI), Information Search and Encoding (ISE), and Idea Generation (IG)—among factory workers in small factories across South Eastern Nigeria. Guided by Stenseng and Haugen's lens on intrapersonal conflict and the adaptive–maladaptive tension it may engender, and drawing on Zhang and Bartol's conceptualization of creative process engagement, we specified linear models controlling for age, gender, job experience, and educational attainment.

The results support differentiated effects across creative stages. First, IC showed a statistically significant positive association with PI. Workers who reported higher internal tension surrounding their activity tended to spend more time clarifying problem boundaries, decomposing tasks, and approaching issues from multiple perspectives. One plausible account is that conflict heightens vigilance and reflexive appraisal, channeling effort toward defining what exactly must be solved before action is taken. Second, IC was also a positive, significant predictor of ISE. This suggests that the same alertness accompanying conflict can be productive when it comes to scanning diverse sources, retaining relevant details, and encoding information for later use. In settings where tasks are tightly coupled and resources are lean—as is common in small factories—such preparatory behaviors can be especially consequential.

By contrast, IC did not predict IG. The null effect aligns with the notion that while conflict may mobilize systematic, convergent preparation (problem structuring and information gathering), it does not necessarily translate into the generative leap required to produce novel alternatives or break from established routines. If anything, persistent conflict can load working memory and increase risk-aversion, potentially counteracting divergent thinking (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021; Lee & Edmondson, 2022). In other words, IC may help individuals 'get ready' to be creative without directly causing them to 'be creative' in the idea-generation sense.

The control variables behaved plausibly: education and experience showed small positive relations with PI and ISE in some models, while gender (coded male=1) had small negative coefficients, though these were not central to our hypotheses. Model fit indices indicated that a meaningful, albeit moderate, share of variance in PI and ISE was explained when IC and controls were considered jointly, whereas the IG model explained less variance, consistent with the non-significant IC effect.

7. Implications for Practice

From a practical standpoint, managers in factory settings should recognize that IC can have constructive effects when channelled appropriately. Encouraging workers to critically reflect on tasks and consult multiple sources of information may improve problem diagnosis and knowledge use. However, to translate these benefits into idea generation, organizations should complement IC with practices that foster psychological safety, team collaboration, and intrinsic motivation. Leadership strategies that balance accountability with autonomy could help workers move from problem-focused reflection to creative solution generation (Adisa et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2020).

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences regarding the observed relationships. Longitudinal studies could better capture the dynamic interplay between IC and creative process engagement. Second, the sample was limited to factory workers in Southeastern Nigeria, which may constrain generalizability. Future research should test these relationships in diverse industries and cultural contexts. Third, while the study examined linear effects, IC may also have curvilinear relationships with creativity, suggesting the need for nonlinear modelling in future work. Lastly, the focus was limited to self-reported measures; incorporating multi-source data could mitigate common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

9. Conclusion

This study examined the predictive effects of IC on dimensions of creative process engagement. Results demonstrated that IC enhances problem identification and information search and encoding but does not influence idea generation. These findings underscore the nuanced role of IC in creativity, with implications for managing employee conflict and innovation in factory settings. By differentiating between stages of the creative process, this research contributes to a more refined understanding of how IC influences creativity.

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