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Building Strength or Lending an Ear in Legal Conflicts: Dependence and Conflict Asymmetry as Distinct Predictors of Needs for Support

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Abstract

Being aware of psychological aspects of legal conflicts can benefit the efficiency of legal aid. We propose that needs for support may be particularly dependent upon the experience of asymmetry between conflict parties. We distinguish between two types of asymmetry and examine how they relate to different needs for support. We hypothesized that *dependence* asymmetry (being more dependent on the other party than vice versa) would predict a need for problem-focused help. *Conflict* asymmetry (experiencing more conflict than the other side) was expected to increase the need for emotion-focused help, particularly when people have a weak social network. We tested these hypotheses with a survey among 700 legal aid clients. Results showed that dependence asymmetry was indeed a strong and positive predictor of problem-focused empowerment needs, whereas conflict asymmetry positively and significantly predicted the need for emotion-focused help, particularly in the absence of wider social support.

Being in a legal conflict[1] can bring about a need for support (Giebels & Yang, 2009), especially if someone feels like the underdog. Such an individual faces a plethora of options to choose from to gain information and help in dealing with his or her conflict. Alternative dispute resolution, legal aid, and online legal information sources are well established and offer alternatives to the more traditional option of gaining advice from a legal professional such as a lawyer. However, with such a wide and diverse range of parties, reflecting different types of help, the question is to what extent these different types of help meet the specific needs a conflict party can have. Those needs may be particularly dependent upon the experience of asymmetry in the relationship between the conflict parties.

Cumulating evidence, primarily within work contexts, suggests that asymmetry in conflict situations may have substantial consequences, for example, in terms of productivity and team functioning (Jehn,

[1]In line with Van de Vliert (1996), we define a legal conflict as a person's experience of discord due to a socially induced subject matter involving legal aspects. Prototypical examples are divorce cases, labor conflict concerning termination of contract, conflicts with government institutions, etcetera.

Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010). Until now, research has only rarely related asymmetry to the involvement of support parties. We propose that the experience of asymmetry might not only be an important reason why conflict parties ask for help in the first place. It may also influence the specific type of help one prefers.

Despite the growing interest in conflict asymmetry in the conflict literature (De Dreu, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2008; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Ufkes, Giebels, Otten, & van der Zee, 2012), many different conceptualizations of asymmetry have been used (Giebels, Ufkes, & van Erp, 2014). For example, some studies have looked at the effects of asymmetry of roles and power between conflict parties such as the asymmetry between spouses with unequal divisions of household tasks (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 2000). Others look into the asymmetry of conflict experiences such as the differing experience of a conflict between two neighbors where one experiences a severe conflict without the other neighbor being aware or sharing this experience (Ufkes et al., 2012). Departing from the notion that not all types of asymmetry may work out alike, we distinguish between two types of asymmetry which we consider important in relation to needs for support: dependence asymmetry and conflict asymmetry. Asymmetry of dependence refers to an imbalance in power, where one party perceives itself to be more (or less) dependent on the other side than vice versa. Conflict asymmetry reflects the extent to which a party perceives an imbalance in the amount of conflict experienced by both sides (cf. Pruitt, 1995). We predict and demonstrate that the two types of asymmetry have distinct effects on the type of support that parties involved in a legal conflict prefer. We expect that needs for help will arise out of a specific experienced relative disadvantage in asymmetrical conflicts. We also show that these distinct effects on needs for support hold across a wide range of legal conflicts. We hope this approach advances the conflict research field as it further builds upon the existing research on asymmetry in dyadic conflicts. We also hope to make a contribution to practice by making professional support parties more sensitive to different needs and possible relevant dimensions that could help them offer more tailored advice to help seekers.

Needs for Support

Third-party intervention is generally considered to be a powerful strategy to manage conflicts and to offer resolutions for intractable disputes (Conlon & Meyer, 2004). Typically, a third party offers assistance to both parties in the process of conflict management. However, in the context of legal conflicts, a whole range of support parties are available. Professionals such as paralegals from the legal aid field are often a first port of call in case of legal conflicts. A conflict party can ask such an outside party for advice, referrals to further help, initial practical or procedural support, or call on them as understanding listeners. The support party often meets with only one of the parties involved, has no power to decide over the case, and stays on the side line, while supporting the conflict party in tackling the problem. These outside parties, or legal aid and support providers, can refer parties on to a lawyer or to third parties such as mediators when necessary.

Our focus on these support parties without decision power is rooted in the growing importance of paralegals and legal aid professionals in the legal field (Beck & Sales, 2000; Moorhead, Sherr, & Paterson, 2003). Access to justice is not just access to courts, but includes access to legal aid, mediation, assistance from paralegals, and even access to legal information. As courts are generally overburdened (and budgets stretched), these types of support are becoming increasingly important. Research has pointed to the importance (in terms of numbers and effects) of these advice and support parties (Buck, Pleasence, & Balmer, 2008; Pleasance, Genn, Balmer, Buck, & O'Grady, 2003), but to our knowledge, research on psychological aspects of the involvement of these parties in conflicts is lacking (cf. Hillyard, 2007). In order to predict which type of intervention will be most effective for parties who experience asymmetry, insight into their specific needs for help is essential. Studies outside the legal context have shown that the involvement of parties without decision power can successfully

reduce conflict stress and promote conflict resolution (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Ufkes et al., 2012). Similarly, such research has highlighted the importance of distinguishing between different types of help.

In the current study, we build on coping literature (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003), as well as on the work of Giebels and Yang (2009), who specifically focused on types of third-party help in conflicts. Recent categorizations of coping have included the coping style "support seeking". This coping style includes looking for support from professionals (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Skinner et al., 2003). These authors define two types of support: instrumental or problem-focused support and emotional or emotion-focused support seeking (Chen, Kim, Mojaverian, & Morling, 2012; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Skinner et al., 2003), which echoes the classic distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). We first look at types of problem-focused help in the sense of being provided with practical tools, guidance, support, and information to be able to handle the conflict and stand up for oneself. Secondly, we turn to emotion-focused help in the form of an opportunity to relate one's story to an understanding listener.

Problem-focused coping and help are primarily oriented at addressing a stressor with the aim of resolving the issue satisfactorily. In their research, Giebels and Yang (2009) showed that in conflicts, such a type of help is procedural help. Procedural help focuses on structuring the process of conflict management and guiding the processing of information. This may include providing information concerning procedures to follow in conflict management and help with clearly defining conflict issues and goals (Giebels & Yang, 2009). This type of help can be provided in a mediation, where both parties are present, but it can also be provided unilaterally, by assisting one side in the conflict management process. Within the context of legal conflicts, the informational element of procedural help becomes increasingly important, as parties need knowledge of formal (legal) rules and procedures to be able to effectively deal with their conflict. Additionally, written texts are often more important in legal conflicts than in nonlegal conflicts and can add to the informational load (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Informational help includes the provision of such formal information concerning the legal context, rights, and obligations and practical tools such as examples of legal letters and contracts. Additionally, and particularly in a legal context, conflict parties may have a need for support that may help them to claim their rights from the other party, stand up for themselves, and defend their point of view. Such help may be used to improve one's position relative to the other side (Callan, Kay, Olson, Brar, & Whitefield, 2010).

Emotion-focused coping and helping are not aimed at the stressor but address the emotions arising from the stressor (Carver et al., 1989; Chen et al., 2012). This aligns with Giebels and Yang's (2009) concept of emotion-focused help. A support party can give emotion-focused help by showing understanding and a willingness to listen to the help seeker. Such help may be important because conflicts usually threaten conflict parties' self-image and can make them less sure or confident about themselves (Ufkes et al., 2012). Even in the mediation context, this help may be provided to each of the parties separately, in the intake phase or during caucus (Ufkes et al., 2012). Emotional support may therefore be beneficial merely because it makes parties feel understood and listened to and, as such, reduces conflict stress. Research has shown that the stress inherently associated with conflict is likely to be responsible for many negative consequences of conflict in the long term, for example in terms of individual well-being and daily functioning (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Furthermore, heightened levels of conflict stress make conflict parties less receptive to more content- or solution-focused types of help (Carnevale & Probst, 1998; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), because it impairs information processing (cf. Giebels & Janssen, 2005).

Taken together, the two main categories of support (problem-focused help and emotion-focused help) may reflect different orientations toward the conflict at hand (i.e., "I want to prevail over the other side"

versus "I want to be understood and listened to"). The current study explores the need for these different types of support in the context of asymmetrical conflicts.

Asymmetry in Conflicts

In previous studies, conflict asymmetry has referred to an asymmetry in the structure or division of power in conflict, but also to an asymmetry or perceived asymmetry in conflict experience (for a more extensive review, see Giebels et al., 2014). We propose that although dependence (power) asymmetry and conflict (experience) asymmetry can be related, they are also conceptually distinct. While dependence asymmetry is usually the result of unequal access to valuable resources, conflict asymmetry refers to differential experiences in terms of how much the situation matters to parties. We focus on the party who is disadvantaged in terms of dependence or conflict experience. We expect this disadvantage to lead to a need for support arising out of the specific imbalance between both parties. Within the context of this study, we also expect that those who make use of legal aid are often relatively more dependent and experience relatively more conflict, as they often face powerful others, such as governments or businesses, or an ex-spouse with a larger income.

Dependence Asymmetry

Dependence asymmetry is related to power and control and a lack of resources to maintain control (Emerson, 1962; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Studies on structural asymmetries relating to role often focus on roles that are different in terms of power as well. For example, in a study on the roles of expatriates and expatriate spouses, the spouses who follow their partners are the more dependent party in the relationship, due to the contextual factors of foreign placement (Van Erp, Giebels, van der Zee, & van Duijn, 2011). Also, in their work on factors related to the willingness to reconcile of both victims and perpetrators, Shnabel and Nadler (2008) showed that being a victim is associated with a threat to one's status and power. In this study, we therefore use the more general concept of dependence asymmetry, with dependence referring to (the experience of) a lack of power (Emerson, 1962).

Research has shown that the experience of dependence asymmetry has a substantial impact on emotions and cognitions (e.g., a loss frame), conflict behavior, expected success, and satisfaction with mediation (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Bollen, Euwema, & Müller, 2010; De Dreu et al., 2008; Fitness, 2000; Greer & Bendersky, 2013; Jehn et al., 2010; Kluwer et al., 2000; Nauta, de Vries, & Wijngaard, 2001; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000; Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006). For example, Van Kleef et al. (2006) demonstrated that individuals randomly allocated to low-power negotiator roles were more likely to concede after a display of emotions by their opponent than those allocated to high-power negotiator roles. Similarly, Nauta et al. (2001) showed that after interdepartmental company negotiations, low-power departments had more negative perceptions of the conflict behavior of the high-power departments than vice versa. Additionally, Bollen et al. (2010) found that in work mediation cases, the experience of uncertainty about the mediation decreased satisfaction with the mediator for subordinates, but not for supervisors. Presumably, the lack of control that subordinates experience reinforces the negative impact of uncertainty.

Conflict Asymmetry

Conflict asymmetry refers to differential experiences in terms of how much the situation matters to the conflict parties. Research, primarily in work team settings, has shown that such differential experiences of the conflict at hand have a profound impact on a wide variety of work-related outcomes. Jehn and Chatman (2000) showed that in work groups where members had different views of the amount of process and relationship conflict occurring in the group, work satisfaction, commitment, and team performance were lower. In addition, when group members had such asymmetrical conflict perceptions, performance and creativity also decreased (Jehn et al., 2010). In another study on interpersonal conflicts

at work, Jehn, Rupert, and Nauta (2006) showed that perceived asymmetries predicted lower work motivation and higher absenteeism.

Often, conflict asymmetry has been studied by comparing self-reports of each of the parties or team members and by calculating the difference between the parties or the standard deviation within a team. An important question is then whether parties are aware of imbalances between them. The more a party consciously experiences an imbalance, the more it may influence individual reactions, for example, when to involve outside support parties (Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014). Following Swann (1999), we expect that in such situations of asymmetry awareness, a lack of self-verification, or validation of one's understanding of own experiences, will lead to self-doubt and insecurity (Jehn & Chatman, 2000).

Taken together, although relatively little is known about how asymmetry gives rise to distinct needs for support, a number of studies have looked into the consequences of dependence asymmetry and conflict asymmetry. In line with these studies, we have argued that dependence asymmetry and conflict asymmetry are distinct experiences, and we therefore expect them to be related to distinct needs for support. These types of help may be directed at two types of insecurity: insecurity stemming from a (relative) lack of control and resources (dependence asymmetry) and insecurity about one's perception and understanding of the conflict (conflict asymmetry).

Asymmetry and Needs for Support

In conflicts where the focal party experiences a high level of dependence asymmetry, where they feel more dependent on the other party than vice versa, the imbalance is an asymmetry of power. Disadvantaged conflict parties in this situation will experience a loss of control over the situation and "a threat to their identity as powerful social actors" (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013). Control or autonomy has been identified as a basic psychological need (Staub, 1999), which means that an experienced relative lack of control will lead to an increased motivation to restore control (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). In conflicts specifically, we know that process control is important to conflict parties (Tyler, 1988). Shestowsky (2004) showed that conflict parties who experience low control prefer dispute resolution procedures that grant them greater control over the conflict resolution process. In line with this, Shnabel and Nadler (2008) showed that in victim–perpetrator interactions, victims, as opposed to perpetrators, experience a damaged sense of power, which leads to a stronger need for power and control over the conflict situation and in the interaction with the other party.

Thus, based on previous findings, we can expect that parties who experience a relative lack of control will want to restore their sense of control over the conflict situation. Such a restoring of power and control may be particularly accomplished by empowering actions of a support party. We therefore expect dependence asymmetry to be positively related to the need for problem-focused empowering types of help (procedural, informational, and self-interest help); the greater their experienced disadvantage in terms of power, the stronger their need (H1).

In a situation of conflict asymmetry, where own conflict experience is perceived to be higher than that of the other side, a conflict party will likely feel distressed. That is, the other party does not recognize and acknowledge the urgency or intensity of the conflict to the same extent. Several authors have related this to the need to self-verify (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2006; Ufkes et al., 2012). If conflict asymmetry indeed entails a lack of self-verification, we would expect to find a relation between conflict asymmetry and the need for emotion-focused help. This type of help corresponds closely to tactics of self-verification, specifically the tactic of creating opportunity structures of self-verification (Swann, 1983). The goal of seeking out a legal aid professional might be to find someone who will listen, and will confirm and validate one's experience of a conflict. In offering emotion-focused support, a professional support party gives a conflict party opportunity to vent their ego-focused emotions, offers to listen, and shows understanding. We know from the work of Ufkes et al. (2012) that particularly under conditions of conflict asymmetry, parties seem to benefit from emotion-focused, rather than content-oriented,

interventions. In a community mediation program, they showed the benefits of an initial intake without the other party present, in conflicts with asymmetrical conflict perceptions. In these intake sessions, the mediator would offer emotion-focused support, by listening to each party separately. This finding is in line with research showing that social support may be particularly helpful to reduce conflict-associated stress (Abbey, Abramis, & Caplan, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Lepore, 1992). We infer that these ex-post observed benefits will correspond to ex-ante needs and therefore expect conflict asymmetry to lead to a higher need for emotion-focused help.

However, emotion-focused support from a professional in a legal conflict is distinct from problem-focused help, in that it can be more easily provided by nonprofessional support parties. Whereas providing information related to court proceedings or specific rights, or help in choosing the most advantageous conflict strategy, requires specialist legal knowledge, listening to a party's story and showing understanding can also be provided by meaningful others, such as family and friends. When parties do not receive social support and understanding from their own network, they are more likely to need a professional support party to provide emotion-focused help. Therefore, we expect wider social support to moderate the relationship between conflict asymmetry and the need for emotion-focused help. Specifically, we expect the relation between own conflict experience and the need for emotion-focused help to be stronger when the other party's conflict experience is perceived to be low, but only when wider social support is relatively low instead of high (H2).

Method

Overview and Participants

We conducted a survey study with the help of the Dutch Legal Aid Desk: a government-funded public service institution, where paralegals offer one stop legal advice to citizens in legal conflicts, ranging from divorce, termination of job contracts, to consumer conflicts and more. The Desks also refer clients to legal professionals, such as lawyers or mediators, social workers, or any other professional most suited to offer help in the client's specific situation. Any inhabitant of the Netherlands can contact the Desks, free of charge, by phone, email, chat, or at any of the 30 offices nationwide.

Before our main online study, we first pretested our survey among 99 individuals in the target population. Clients at two offices of the Dutch Legal Aid Desk were approached before they spoke to the legal aid advisors. This pilot study contributed to fine-tuning the survey questions and improving on accessible language for use of the survey as an online questionnaire. For our main study, we ran an online survey during a 7-day period. The link to the survey was sent out to clients who had had contact with the Desks in the 2 years prior to data collection (i.e., between January 2011 and January 2009). Participants were informed that the questionnaire concerned legal aid in the Netherlands took about 20–30 min to complete and that their answers would be treated confidentially. The first 500 participants received a small reward (10 euro). Later, participants were informed that they could still participate but would no longer receive a reward. A total of 726 Legal Aid Desk clients participated in the study during the week it was online. We excluded respondents who indicated that they only had a legal question (e.g., concerning the rules on adoption for same sex couples) and not a conflict ($n = 12$), respondents who represented someone else and did not have a problem themselves ($n = 4$), and respondents who reported or showed serious mental health problems ($n = 10$). This resulted in a final sample of 700 respondents.

The average age of the respondents was 42 years ($SD = 12.9$) ranging from 19 to 79 years, and 46.1% were male. In terms of education, individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher made up 37% of the sample. Less than 2% had no or only primary education, 17.1% had completed prevocational secondary education, 13.7% nonvocational secondary education, and 30.4% vocational education.

A high percentage (38.3%) of respondents were involved in a labor conflict concerning termination of an employment contract, 14.9% of respondents reported a consumer conflict, 9.7% had come to the

Legal Aid Desk for a divorce case, and 9.3% had a conflict with a government institution. The remaining respondents (20.7%) had other types of conflicts (e.g., conflicts between family members, neighbors or ex-partners, or conflicts with a debt collection agency or land lord). A total of 6.6% of the respondents did not report what their conflict was about. Those who had asked the Legal Aid Desk for help in more than one conflict were asked to keep their most important problem in mind.

Independent Variables: Dependence Asymmetry, Conflict Asymmetry, and Social Support

Dependence asymmetry was assessed with two questions*:* "To what extent were you dependent on the other party?" and "To what extent was the other party dependent on you?" Answers were measured on 7-point scales, ranging from 0 (labeled "not at all") to 6 ("completely"). On average, respondents felt fairly dependent on the other party ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.84$) and faced a less dependent other ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 2.00$). This difference was significant in a pairwise t test, $t(700) = 27.83$, $p < .001$.

Asymmetry of conflict experience was measured with the questions: "To what extent did you consider there was a problem?" and "To what extent did the other party think there was a problem?" We chose to use the word "problem" rather than "conflict" as the nuances of these words differ slightly in Dutch. "Having a problem with someone" implies being in conflict with that person, whereas the word "conflict" would suggest a highly escalated conflict. Answers were measured on a 7-point scale, where 0 reflected "not at all" and 6 "completely". Respondents mostly perceived a high amount of conflict ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.29$). On average, they also believed the conflict to be asymmetrical as they estimated the conflict experience of the other party to be substantially lower ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 2.30$). This difference was significant in a pairwise t test, $t(700) = 23.36$, $p < .001$.

Both types of asymmetry were measured by direct questions as we were interested in the experience of respondents. Following Jehn et al. (2006), questions related to own experience and perceived experience of the other party were asked one after the other, to ensure that respondents took into account relative differences.

As expected, most respondents experienced a disadvantage in terms of asymmetry, but there were also respondents who experienced symmetry or an advantaged position in asymmetry. A total of 21.6% ($n = 151$) experienced dependence symmetry, and 23.3% ($n = 163$) experienced conflict symmetry. A total of 7% ($n = 49$) experienced an advantage in dependence asymmetry, and 10% ($n = 70$) experienced an advantage in conflict asymmetry. We chose not to exclude these respondents, but to use this opportunity to explore the advantaged side of the spectrum in terms of effects of both dependence and conflict asymmetry.

As an indication of social support, we asked respondents to indicate how many people were on their side in the conflict. On average, people reported receiving support from 7 or 8 individuals ($M = 7.77$; $SD = 26.16$); answers ranged from 0 to 500. We performed a log transformation on the skewed distribution of scores (skewness = 12.34), to prevent very high answers from having a too strong effect. The transformed scores ranged from 0 to 6.22 ($M = 1.42$; $SD = 1.02$).

Dependent Variables: Needs for Support

Respondents indicated which types of needs for support they experienced when they contacted the Legal Aid Desks for assistance. In line with Giebels and Yang (2009), emotion-focused help was measured with two items ("I wanted a sympathetic ear" and "I wanted understanding for my situation"). Similarly, the need for procedural help was measured with two items based on Giebels and Yang's (2009) scale (e.g., "I wanted to know which steps to take to solve my problem"). Interviews with a panel of legal aid professionals confirmed the importance of adding items reflecting the informational element of procedural help in a legal context. Based on the interviews, we included eight additional items (e.g., "I wanted to be informed about my rights and duties in my situation"). Finally, we also included two items measuring

Table 1

Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis of Needs for Support

Need to or for:	M	SD	Factor	
			Problem-focused help	Emotion-focused help
Know which steps to take to solve my problem	5.47	1.06	.85 **.78**	
Advice about the route to take to solve my problem	5.34	1.14	.82 **.76**	
Be informed about my rights and duties in my situation	5.46	1.08	.84 **.75**	
Know if I have the law on my side	5.29	1.23	.80 **.76**	
Someone who helps me to think of possible solutions for my problem	5.27	1.23	.76 **.78**	
Someone with concrete advice that could solve my problem	5.03	1.35	.69 **.72**	
Know if I was on the right track in solving my problem	4.88	1.4	.61 **.61**	
Know if the information that I had found myself was correct	4.93	1.39	.58 **.57**	
Stand up for my own interests	5.21	1.25	.57 **.60**	
Find the most advantageous solution for myself	5.07	1.35	.55 **.57**	
Know what the most commonly used solution to my problem is	*4.78*	*1.51*	*.52*	
Know how other people have solved a problem like mine	*4.01*	*1.79*	*.35*	
Understanding for my situation	4.00	1.73		.94 **.94**
A sympathetic ear	3.78	1.77		.83 **.90**

Notes. n = 700; Values in the first row of each item correspond to the factor loadings from the exploratory factor analysis. Factor loadings below .3 were removed. Values in boldface, in the second row of each item, correspond to loadings of the confirmatory factor analysis. Item order corresponds to the 2-item clusters that were allowed to correlate. The items in italic were removed after running the exploratory factor analysis.

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted using "principal axis factoring" extraction with direct Oblimin rotation. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using the LAVAAN package in R (Rosseel, 2012). Answers ranged from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*).

self-interest focused help (e.g., "I wanted to stand up for my own interests"). Answers ranged from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*; see Table 1 for an overview of all items included).

A principal axis factor analysis with Oblimin rotation resulted in two factors. The first factor consisted of the three types of problem-focused help (procedural, informational, and self-interest focused; Table 1). One item related to social comparison did not load strongly on either dimension, and a second item related to social comparison only loaded weakly on problem-focused help. Because social comparison is distinct from the other types of help in that it corresponds less to the professional help the Legal Aid Desks offer, both items were excluded. The resulting 10-item factor, reflecting problem-focused help, explained 49.09% of the variance and had good internal consistency (α = .91). The second factor reflected emotion-focused help and included two items, which correlated highly, $r(700)$ = .84, p < .001, Spearman–Brown coefficient (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013): .91. This factor explained 13.13% of the variance.

To further substantiate our proposed 2-factor model, we ran confirmatory factor analyses on the remaining twelve items and compared a 2-factor model with a single factor model. Confirmatory factor analyses were computed using the LAVAAN package in R (Rosseel, 2012). The 2-factor model had better model fit indices than the 1-factor model (CFI = .84; AIC = 26497.36; RMSEA = .14; SRMR = .07 and CFI = .76; AIC = 27232.21; RMSEA = .19; SRMR = .10, respectively; Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003). However, modification indices suggested that the 2-factor model could be improved significantly by accounting for correlation between five sets of items (Table 1). The resulting 2-factor model fit the data well (CFI = .97; AIC = 23550.67; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .05). Factor loadings of the final 2-factor model are presented in Table 1.

The need for problem-focused help was generally higher and showed less variance ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.92$) than the need for emotion-focused help ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.68$).

Analyses

To test our hypotheses, we used hierarchical linear regression analyses with the need for either problem-focused or emotion-focused help as the dependent variable. To test the effects of asymmetry on needs for support over and beyond the effects of age, education, and gender (Giebels & Yang, 2009), we added these as control variables in the first step. In the second step, we added the main effects: own dependence, other's dependence, own conflict experience, and other's conflict experience. In the third and final step, we added the two-way interaction term of own and other's dependence and the two-way interaction term of own and other's conflict experience.

We used the interaction between own and other's dependence to test the effect of dependence asymmetry (and the interaction between own and other's conflict experience to test for the effect of conflict asymmetry). This way, we aim to address concerns associated with the use of difference scores (Johns, 1981). For example, a difference score on dependence of 3 might mean that the help seeker reported a level of own dependence of 6 and other's dependence of 3, but the values might also be 3 and 0, respectively. An interaction (moderation) analysis allows us to rule out whether such differences in absolute levels that would comprise the difference score have different effects.

We included both types of asymmetry in each analysis predicting a specific type of need, to be able to control for the other type of asymmetry and to show that the two types of asymmetry have unique and distinct effects on the two types of needs. In other words, we expected dependence asymmetry to be related to need for problem-focused support, but not, or less so, to need for emotion-focused support. Similarly, we expected conflict asymmetry to be related to need for emotion-focused support, but not, or less so, to need for problem-focused support. We used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests, and all variables used in interactions were centered in advance.

Results

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables included in the study. It shows that own and other's dependence and own and other's conflict experience were weakly, but significantly correlated, respectively, $r(700) = .14$, $p < .001$, and $r(700) = .09$, $p = .02$. Importantly, own dependence and own conflict experience, as well as other's dependence and other's conflict experience, showed no more than modest correlations, $r(700) = .26$, $p < .001$, and $r(700) = .23$, $p < .001$, indicating that these are indeed distinct constructs. Both dependence measures and own conflict experience were positively related to the need for problem-focused help, while the need for emotion-focused help was particularly related to own and other's conflict experience, all $r(700)s > .08$, p's < .05. Finally, the two types of needs for support were significantly and positively related, $r(700) = .40$, $p < .001$.

Table 2
Pearson's Correlations of All Variables Included in the Study

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Own dependence	4.66	1.84	–								
2. Other's dependence	1.62	1.99	−.14**	–							
3. Own conflict experience	5.01	1.29	.26**	−.02	–						
4. Other's conflict experience	2.78	2.30	−.10**	.23**	.09*	–					
5. Social support	1.42	1.02	.02	.10**	.03	.01	–				
6. Need for problem-focused help	5.20	0.92	.20**	−.13**	.22**	−.04	.02	–			
7. Need for emotion-focused help	3.89	1.68	.05	−.03	.08*	.08*	.03	.40**	–		
8. Gender (1 = *male*)	0.46	0.50	−.10**	.14**	.03	.04	.00	−.14**	−.11**	–	
9. Age	41.93	12.88	.01	−.07	.14**	.04	−.09*	.13**	.16**	.17**	–
10. Education	3.75	1.30	.02	−.04	−.01	−.04	−.04	.01	−.22**	.05	.01

Notes. n = 700, There were no missing values.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

Dependence Asymmetry

Following Hypothesis 1, we would expect a significant interaction effect of own dependence and other's dependence on the need for problem-focused help. Table 3 shows the results of the regression analysis with need for problem-focused help as a criterion. After the final step, the model explained a significant proportion of variance in the need for problem-focused help, R^2 = .12, $F(9, 690)$ = 10.54, $p < .001$.

First, older people and women reported a higher need for problem-focused help than younger people or men, respectively: b = .01, SE = .00, p = .001 and b = −.26, SE = .07, $p < .001$. Education had no significant influence, b = .01, SE = .03, p = .85. When own conflict experience was higher, so was the need for problem-focused help, b = .12, SE = .03, $p < .001$. Other's conflict experience and the interaction effect of own and other's conflict experience were not significant, b = −.01, SE = .02, p = .64 and b = −.00, SE = .01, p = .82.

Both own and other's dependence significantly influenced the need for problem-focused help. The more help seekers felt dependent on the other side, the more they reported needing help, b = .06, SE = .02, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the more the help seeker felt that the other party was dependent on them, the less help was needed, b = −.04, SE = .02, p = .03. In line with our expectations, the interaction effect between own and other's dependence proved to be significant, b = −.02, SE = .01, p = .003.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, and as can be seen in Figure 1, this interaction effect indicated that own dependence is a positive and significant predictor of the need for problem-focused empowerment when other's dependence is perceived to be low (0), b = .10, SE = .02, $p < .001$. Please remember that when other's dependence is low, a higher level of own dependence corresponds to a higher level of asymmetry or increasing difference between the parties. In contrast, when such a disadvantage is impossible (i.e., the other's dependence is perceived to be high: 6), own dependence does not significantly predict the need for empowerment, b = .04, SE = .04, p = .28. Note that when other's dependence is high, asymmetry between the parties decreases as own dependence goes up. Thus, only higher levels of asymmetry (and not higher levels of own dependence without higher asymmetry) predicted an increase in the expected need for help in preparing for conflict. We showed this interaction effect in Figure 1 using the scale values of dependence, rather than the conventional standard deviation above and below the mean, as we wanted to

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting the Need for Problem-Focused Help

| | | | | 95% Confidence interval | |
Predictor	ΔR^2	B	Lower bound	Upper bound
Step 1	.04**			
Intercept		5.34**	5.24	5.43
Age		.01**	.01	.02
Education		.01	−.04	.06
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.30**	−.44	−.17
Step 2	.07**			
Intercept		5.32**	5.23	5.40
Age		.01*	.00	.01
Education		.01	−.04	.06
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.26**	−.39	−.12
Own conflict experience		.13**	.08	.18
Other's conflict experience		−.01	−.04	.02
Own dependence		.06*	.02	.10
Other's dependence		−.04*	−.07	.00
Step 3	.01*			
Intercept		5.30**	5.21	5.39
Age		.01**	.00	.01
Education		.01	−.04	.05
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.26**	−.39	−.13
Own conflict experience		.12**	.07	.18
Other's conflict experience		−.01	−.04	.02
Own dependence		.06**	.03	.10
Other's dependence		−.04*	−.07	.00
Interaction own × other's conflict experience		−.00	−.02	.02
Interaction own × other's dependence		−.02*	−.04	−.01
Total R^2	.12**			
n	700			

Notes. There were no missing values. Table made with centered predictors.
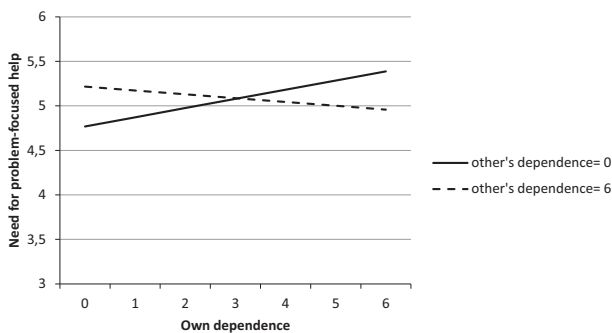*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Figure 1. Interaction pattern of own and other's dependence (dependence asymmetry), predicting the need for problem-focused help. Based on standardized values of control variables.

be able to detect asymmetry and symmetry in the graph, and standard deviations and mean scores for own and other dependence differed. Surprisingly, although the slope was not significant, the level of need for problem-focused help when other's dependence was high seemed to be relatively high as well.

Conflict Asymmetry

We expected conflict asymmetry to predict the need for emotion-focused help, particularly when respondents reported low instead of high levels of social support. Therefore, a fourth step was added to the regression analysis, in which the three-way interaction between own and other's conflict experience and social support was added. The main effect of social support and underlying two-way interaction effects were added to steps two and three.

Table 4 shows the results of the regression analysis with the need for emotion-focused help as criterion. After the final step, the model explained a significant proportion of variance $R^2 = 12\%$, $F(13, 686) = 7.18$, $p < .001$. Firstly, the reported need for emotion-focused help again increased with age, $b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$, but decreased with educational level, $b = -.27$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$. Men were less likely to need emotion-focused help than women, $b = -.42$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$. There were no main effects of own or other's dependence, $b = .02$, $SE = .04$, $p = .56$ and $b = -.02$, $SE = .03$, $p = .48$, but the two-way interaction effect showed that asymmetry of dependence did influence the need for emotion-focused help in a way similar to its influence on the need for problem-focused help, $b = -.03$, $SE = .02$, $p = .05$. Thus, only increasing levels of disadvantage in dependence asymmetry, and not simply a higher own dependence, predicted an increased need for emotion-focused help.

Of the main effects and two-way interaction effects of own conflict experience, other's conflict experience, and social support, only the main effect of other's conflict experience was significant in the centered model, $b = -.06$, $SE = .03$, $p = .04$, indicating less need for emotion-focused help when other's conflict experience increased (all other b's $< .07$ and all other p's $> .15$). Most importantly, the expected three-way interaction effect between own and other's conflict experience and social support exerted a significant impact, $b = .05$, $SE = .02$, $p = .02$. Further analyses confirmed, in line with Hypothesis 2, that the simple two-way interaction effect of own and other's conflict experience was significant at low levels of social support (-1 SD), $b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p = .01$, but not when respondents indicated high levels of social support from others ($+1$ SD), $b = .02$, $SE = .03$, $p = .50$.

Examining the significant simple two-way interaction effect at low levels of social support in more detail (Figure 2), own conflict experience was a positive and significant predictor of the need for emotion-focused help, when conflict parties perceived the other's conflict experience to be low (0), $b = .33$, $SE = .11$, $p = .002$. Thus, consistent with our expectations, respondents reported a higher need for emotion-focused help with increasing levels of conflict asymmetry (i.e., experiencing more conflict than the other party). In contrast, when the other's conflict experience was perceived to be high (6), own conflict experience did not significantly predict the need for emotion-focused help, $b = -.14$, $SE = .12$, $p = .24$. Thus, only higher levels of asymmetry and not higher levels of own conflict experience without higher asymmetry predicted an increase in the expected need for emotion-focused help. Again, we see that although the slope is not significant, the level of need for emotion-focused help is remarkably high when other's conflict experience is high (at a maximum of 6). We will discuss these effects further in the discussion.

As our sample was quite varied in terms of conflict type, we ran some additional analyses to test for the robustness of the results reported above. We tested for the effect of type of conflict and included dummy variables in the above analyses for the major conflict types (consumer conflicts, divorce, employment termination, and conflicts with governmental institutions) as control variables. The aforementioned effects remained virtually identical. None of the dummies representing the different conflict types were significant predictors of the two needs for help, all b's $< .26$, p's $> .24$.

Discussion

Recent research has highlighted the importance of perceptions of asymmetry in conflict-related matters (Jehn et al., 2010; Pruitt, 1995; Ufkes et al., 2012). Recent developments have also increased the importance

Table 4

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting the Need for Emotion-Focused Help

			95% Confidence interval	
Predictor	ΔR^2	B	Lower bound	Upper bound
Step 1	.09**			
Intercept		4.09**	3.93	4.26
Age		.02**	.01	.03
Education		−.28**	−.37	−.19
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.44**	−.68	−.20
Step 2	.01			
Intercept		4.09**	3.93	4.25
Age		.02**	.01	.03
Education		−.27**	−.36	−.18
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.44**	−.68	−.19
Own dependence		.02	−.04	.09
Other's dependence		−.02	−.08	.04
Own conflict experience		.05	−.04	.15
Other's conflict experience		.05	.00	.11
Social support		.06	−.06	.18
Step 3	.01			
Intercept		4.08**	3.92	4.25
Age		.02**	.01	.03
Education		−.27**	−.36	−.18
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.43**	−.67	−.18
Own dependence		.03	−.04	.09
Other's dependence		−.02	−.09	.04
Own conflict experience		.05	−.05	.14
Other's conflict experience		.06*	.00	.11
Social support		.08	−.04	.20
Interaction own × other's dependence		−.03*	−.06	.00
Interaction own × other's conflict experience		−.03	−.07	.01
Interaction own conflict experience × social support		−.08	−.17	.01
Interaction other's conflict experience × social support		.01	−.04	.06
Step 4	.01*			
Intercept		4.08**	3.92	4.24
Age		.02**	.01	.03
Education		−.27**	−.37	−.18
Gender (0 = *female*)		−.42**	−.67	−.18
Own dependence		.02	−.05	.09
Other's dependence		−.02	−.09	.04
Own conflict experience		.07	−.03	.16
Other's conflict experience		.06*	.00	.11
Social support		.06	−.06	.18
Interaction own × other's dependence		−.03*	−.06	.00
Interaction own × other's conflict experience		−.03	−.07	.01
Interaction own conflict experience × social support		−.05	−.15	.04
Interaction other's conflict experience × social support		.00	−.05	.05
Three-way interaction own × other's conflict experience × social support		.05*	.01	.09
Total R^2	.12**			
n	700			

Notes. There were no missing values. Table made with centered predictors.
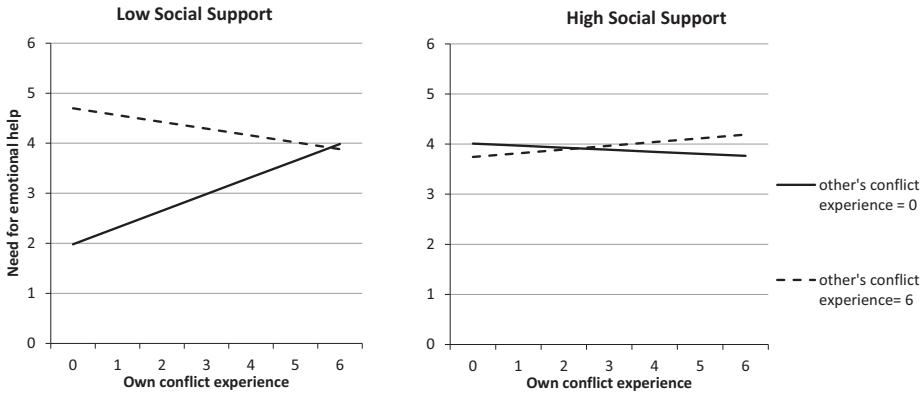*p < .05. **p < .001.

Figure 2. Interaction pattern of own and other's conflict experience (conflict asymmetry), predicting the need for emotion-focused help when social support is low and high. Based on standardized values of control variables.

of supporting those conflict parties who self-represent in court or solve their conflict outside of the courts in the shadow of the law (Moorhead et al., 2003). This support is often provided by professionals from the government or not-for-profit legal aid field. In this study, we strove to address the dearth of research related to these professional support parties. We have examined the relationship between asymmetry and needs for different types of support in the context of legal conflicts and legal aid. We focused on two commonly provided types of help in such settings: problem-focused help, such as information on procedures and steps to take toward a solution, and emotion-focused help, such as a support party showing understanding. We examined the effects of two types of asymmetry: dependence asymmetry—a perceived asymmetry of power between two parties—and conflict asymmetry—a perceived asymmetry of conflict experience.

In line with both basic needs theory and previous conflict research, we found dependence asymmetry to predict a conflict party's need for problem-focused help. Specifically, help seekers who felt that they were more dependent on the other side than vice versa preferred a support party who reinforced them with practical support, information, and advice, and focused on their self-interest. Such empowering help is likely to restore the power balance and improve their position toward the other party. Although the importance of restoring power has been shown in previous conflict research (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), we expect it to be particularly important in legal settings. Callan et al. (2010) have suggested that self-interested and competitive attitudes will be stronger in legal conflicts than in conflicts that are not framed as legal. Others have shown the importance of voice and process control in legal proceedings (Houlden, LaTour, Walker, & Thibaut, 1978; LaTour, Houlden, Walker, & Thibaut, 1976; Tyler, Rasinski, & Spodick, 1985). Our data suggest that the need for empowerment, or being armed with information and advice, with the goal of standing up for oneself, is particularly prevalent among conflict parties who perceive themselves to be more dependent on the other party than vice versa. This pattern held when we controlled for the specific type of legal conflict clients were engaged in.

Asymmetry of conflict experience proved to be a distinct predictor of the need for emotion-focused help from a professional support party. In line with our hypothesis, this relation was only found when social support was low. In other words, when people perceived their own conflict experience to be higher than that of the other party, and when they did not experience strong support from their own social network, they were particularly in need of a sympathetic ear. Previous studies have suggested that the experience of conflict asymmetry is linked to a lack of self-verification (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Ufkes et al., 2012). In this study, we show that experiencing more conflict than the other party is related to a higher need for emotion-focused help. This suggests that the underlying mechanism may indeed be the need to

self-verify. In other words, these conflict parties may feel a strong desire for a support party to confirm their understanding of the situation (Swann, 1983). Those who cannot find such a support party in their own personal network are more likely to turn to a legal aid professional. Again, this pattern held when controlling for the type of legal conflict parties were engaged in.

Thus, our research supports the idea that although related, dependence asymmetry and conflict (experience) asymmetry are two distinct forms of asymmetry. This is not only evident from their differential effects, but is also reflected by the weak correlations between the constructs related to asymmetry in this study. This underlines the importance for future research to clearly define what type of asymmetry is expected be important in the conflict context and for the specific outcomes of interest. We found no association between conflict asymmetry and need for problem-focused help. The expected effects of dependence asymmetry on need for problem-focused help and of conflict asymmetry on need for emotional help were strongest, but we did find a weak (but significant) association between dependence asymmetry and the need for emotion-focused help. This association could be a result of a general need to enlist a support party as a resource, to increase a sense of control, or of a need for a specific type of emotion-focused support containing empowering messages as those in the work of Shnabel and Nadler (2008). Alternatively, it could be an effect of higher sensitivity among relatively less powerful parties, resulting in a higher need for emotion-focused help (Van Kleef et al., 2006). We also explored the data for effects of advantages in asymmetry. A somewhat counterintuitive finding was that there were some indications for elevated needs for problem-focused empowering help when other's dependence was perceived to be relatively high. A similar pattern was observed for emotion-focused help when other's conflict experience was perceived to be high. We can think of several explanations for these unanticipated findings. First, it might be that powerful parties, those facing a dependent other, also have a particularly strong desire to maintain control (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Second, it might be worrying to face another party with a much higher dependence and conflict experience than oneself, for example, because one may fear escalation or retaliation. This may increase both the need to prepare for conflict (problem-focused help) and seek reassurance (emotion-focused help). Third, parties who experience no conflict and are confronted with another who experiences a high amount of conflict might experience an equal need to self-verify as parties in the opposite situation ("Do I have a proper understanding of this conflict? Am I missing something?"). Even more so, and following the line of Shnabel and Nadler's (2008), experiencing no conflict when the other party does might feel like a transgression, damaging one's moral self-image. Future research might elaborate on and test such explanations. In any case, these intriguing elevated need levels among those facing a more dependent or conflictual other underline the importance of our analytical approach to test the interaction effects between own and other's dependence or conflict experience. If we had used the difference asymmetry scores as predictors, then we would not have been able to detect these elevated levels among relatively less dependent and less conflictual parties.

There are also some important limitations to note. Firstly, future studies might distinguish between dependence within and beyond the conflict context. Dependence within the conflict context might describe who controls which procedures are chosen to solve the conflict and who has more control over the outcome. Dependence beyond the immediate conflict might, for example, be related to whether one party depends on the other for income such as alimony between divorcing partners, or welfare benefits in a conflict with government. We know that expected future dependence can impact the choices made in conflict management (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). The same may be true for expected future asymmetry of dependence. Secondly, emotion-focused help was measured with two items describing general emotion-focused support. Future studies might measure specific types of emotion-focused help such as messages of belonging (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2013), creating opportunities for the sharing of experiences and venting (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001; Nils & Rimé, 2012), showing understanding and validation (Swann, 1983; Ufkes et al., 2012), esteem support (Chen et al., 2012; Cobb, 1976), or a combination of these. This might also contribute to fine-tuning emotion-focused help to specific needs of low- and high-conflict perceivers. In addition to emotional help, social

support from the help seeker's own network could then also be measured more specifically and elaborately, in a way that takes into account these dimensions. Third, due to the context of sampling and the retrospective nature of the study, the need for problem-focused empowering help could be overestimated in this study. Problem-focused help mirrors most closely what the Legal Aid Desk provides and is expected to provide. Another limitation with regard to our sample is that it is limited to help seekers only. Future studies might include parties to legal conflicts who have not actively searched for help (yet). Such studies might also include perceptions of both parties in the same conflict to examine to what extent conflict parties' perceptions of each other's experiences correspond, and whether that impacts on needs for help as well. Finally, although this study is high in external validity because of the sample of help seekers with real legal conflicts, it would be valuable to replicate these results in an experimental setting. This might also allow comparison between the needs of those who do and those who do not seek advice when they encounter legal conflicts (Buck et al., 2008).

In terms of its implications for practice, our study underlines the importance of understanding the conflict-related perceptions of help seekers (cf: Shestowsky, 2004). For legal aid providers, it might be important to know that clients in asymmetrical conflicts are likely to have higher needs for help than clients in symmetrical conflicts. Furthermore, what type of help is needed is largely dependent on the type of asymmetry one experiences. In case of asymmetry of power, it seems more effective and useful to empower the client to face both the conflict and the other party by providing tools like information and guidance. In case of asymmetry of conflict experience, professional support parties should be aware of needs of vulnerable clients who lack a strong support network. These clients are more likely to call on their legal aid professionals for social and emotional support, replacing the support they lack elsewhere. The primary help strategy in those cases should be to take the time to listen to the client, to let them tell their story, and to acknowledge their experiences. In addition, for legal aid professionals who are the first port of call in legal conflicts, such as legal aid consultants of the Dutch Legal Aid Desks, it is not only important to know what help to provide, but also where to refer a client. Those experiencing dependence asymmetry might benefit most from referral to a lawyer. Those experiencing conflict asymmetry might also benefit from referral to social work.

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