

Threat Regulation and Trust: An Empirical Investigation of Cross-Boundary Leadership



Michele Williams
Cornell University

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Fuqua Center on Leadership and Ethics
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Where followers fear to tread...

- Phenomenon: Threats to team leadership across boundaries

How do people influence the fears that others associate with collaboration?

- Fear of identity damage
 - Fear of material loss
 - Fear of neglect of their interests
- Framework: Threat regulation
- Data:
 - A top 10 international consulting firm

The Gap

- Although we know that negative emotions and relational conflict often disrupt collaboration and teamwork (Behfar et al., 2004; Huy, 2002; Jehn, 1997; Simmons and Peterson, 2000; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003)
 - We understand little about how emotions influence trust development (c.f. Dunn and Schweitzer, 2004; Lawler, 2001).
 - And less about how people actively manage the negative emotional responses of others to develop trust (c.f., Huy, 2002; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992).

Leading Teams Across Boundaries Intensifies the Potential for Disruptive Negative Emotions

- People frequently perceive individuals from other groups as adversaries with aspirations, beliefs, or styles of interacting that threaten their goals (Fiske & Ruscher, 1993; Kramer, 1991; Sitkin & Roth, 1993; Williams, 2001; 2007).

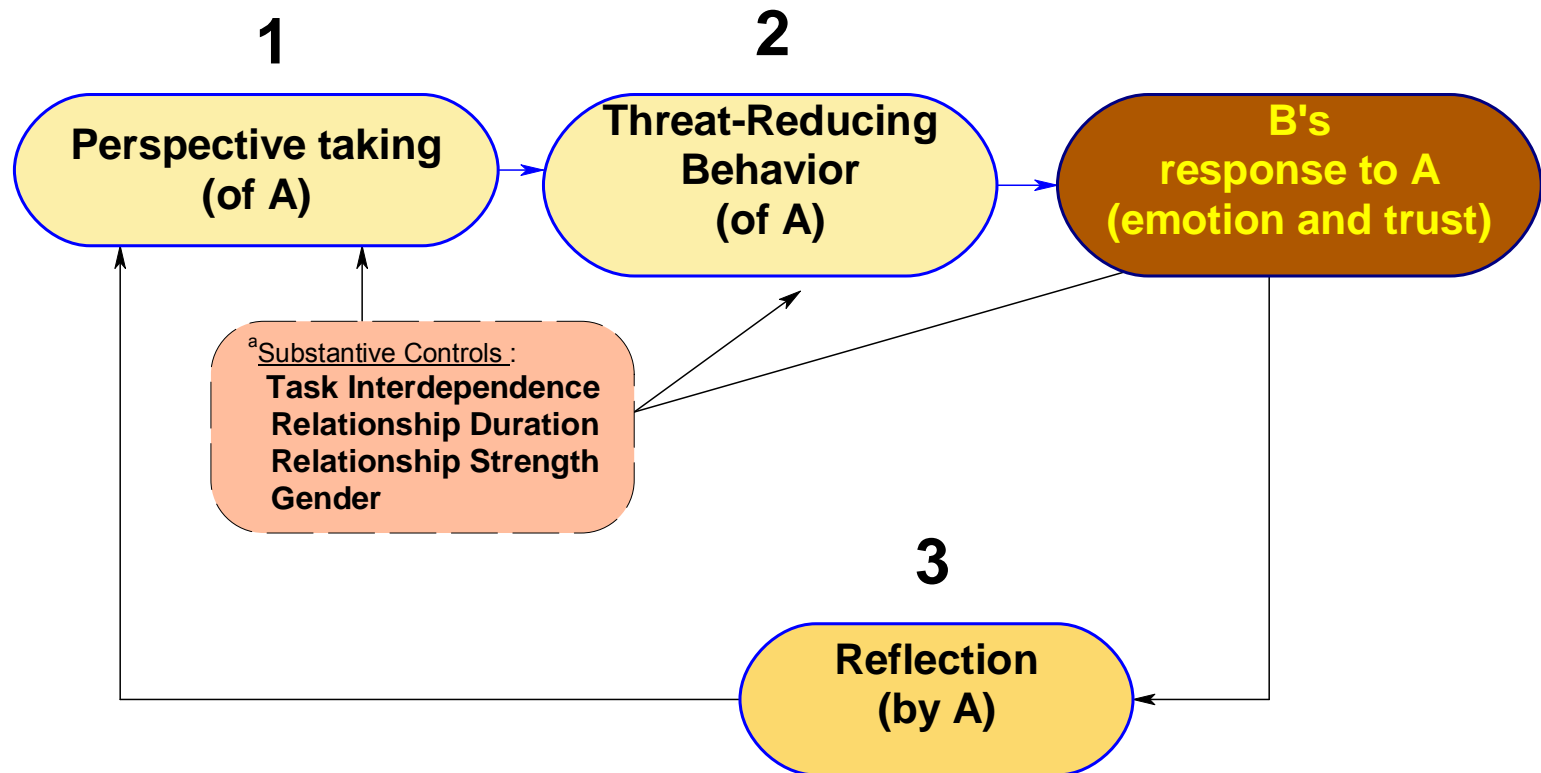
Example

- An example from my interviews with senior-level consultants from a top 10 consulting firm
 - Failed emotion work: The story of Gil (Williams, 2007, p. 599)

Framework: Threat Regulation

Threat regulation refers to a set of conscious processes through which individuals attempt to understand and influence the thoughts and emotions that colleagues experience when those colleagues anticipate that events will have a negative impact on their goals, concerns, and well-being (Williams, 2007).

Model of Threat Regulation



Example

- An example from my interviews with senior-level consultants from a top 10 consulting firm
 - Successful threat regulation: The story of Ted (Williams, 2007, p. 601)

Active Processes of Threat Regulation

1. Perspective Taking

- Imagining from another's point of view the impact of a situation on their goals, concerns and well-being (cognitive appraisal) (Mead, 1934, Davis, 1996; Williams, 2003).

2. Threat-reducing Behavior

- Strategic interpersonal actions that are intended to minimize or eliminate counterparts' feelings and perceptions that one's actions are likely to have a negative impact on their goals, concerns, or well-being (Williams, 2003).
 - E.g., modulating emotional responses or altering situations, attention, or cognitions

3. Reflection

- Enables self-evaluation and self-correction: monitoring one's actions and the environment, comparing outcomes to a standard and making adjustments (Bandura, 1986, 2001).

The Impact of Threat Regulation

□ Threat regulation

- manages negative affect

↓ stress, anxiety, fear

- generates positive affect

↑ calm, relief, emotional bonds

- signals trustworthiness (benevolence)

Data

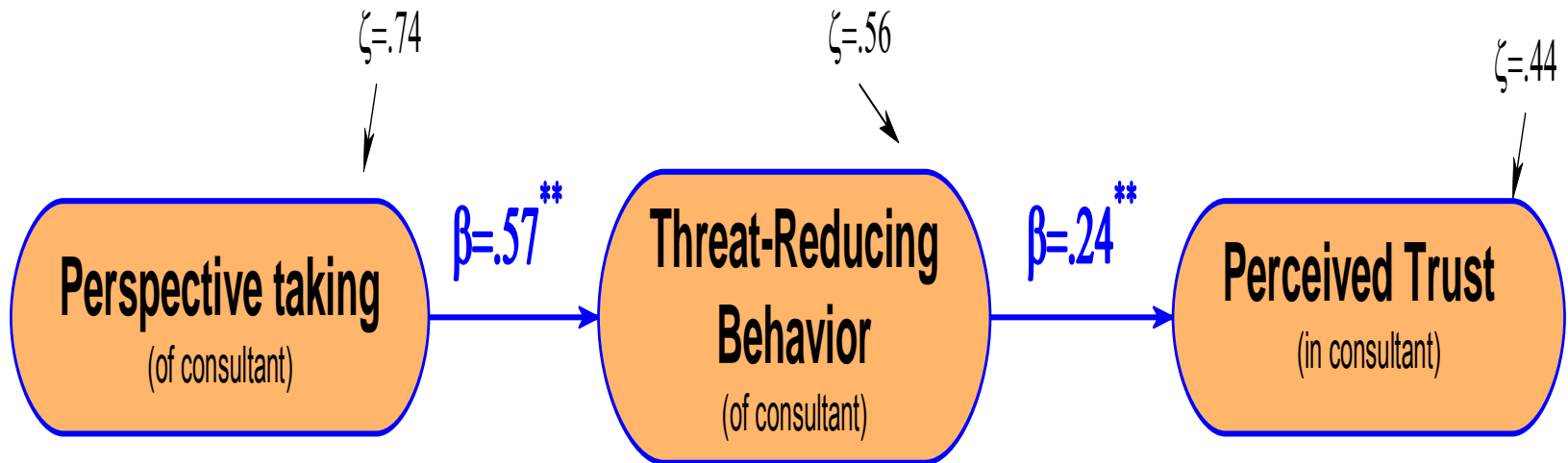
- Study 1: Mental models of threat regulation
 - 207 senior level consultants (self-report survey)

- Study 2: The impact of threat regulation across organizational boundaries
 - 94 senior level consultants
 - 306 of their clients (multi-rater survey)
 - 252 of their bosses

- Study 3: Contextual motivators of threat regulation
 - 183 senior-level consultants (egocentric network survey)

Study 1

Study 1: People engage in threat regulation across boundaries.



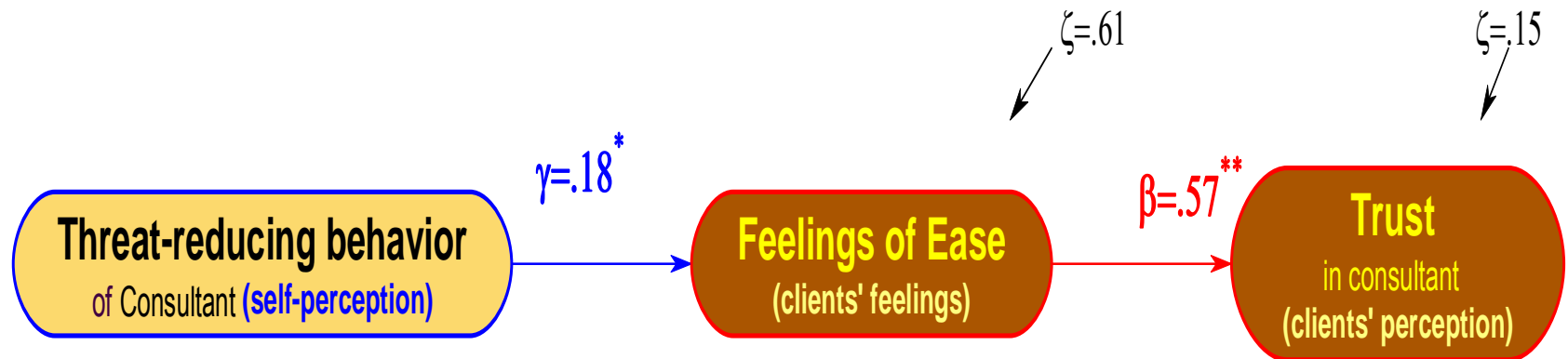
$\chi^2(37) = 39.00, p = .38$

NNFI = .99

(controls: relationship strength and duration, task interdependence, consultant's age and gender)

Study 2

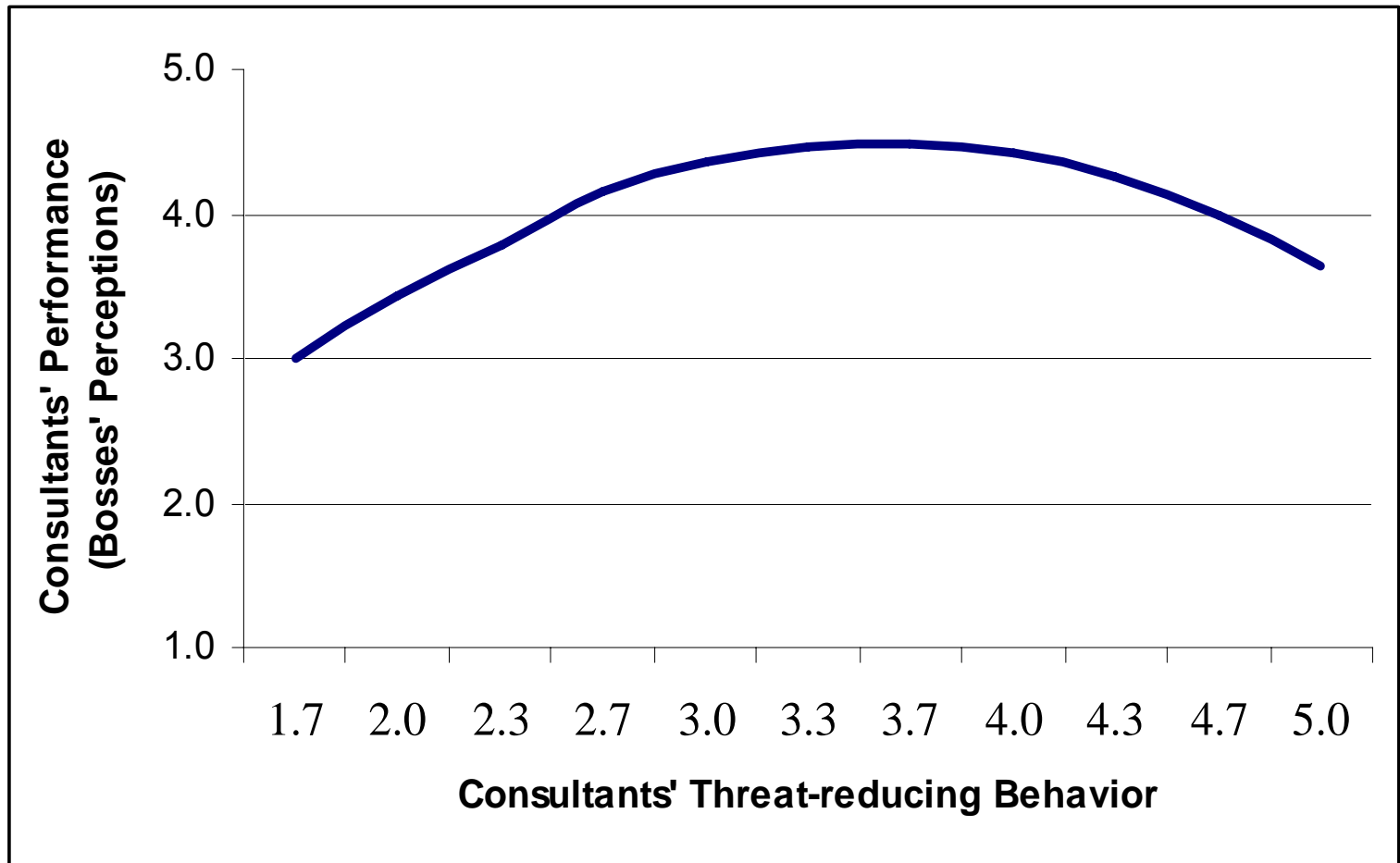
- Study 2: Threat regulation is emotion work (a) that positively influences others' experiences and (b) that targets are aware of receiving.



$\chi^2(28) = 36.07, p = .14$

CFI = .97 (controls: relationship strength and duration)

The Downside of Threat-reducing behavior



Study 3

- Study 4: Instrumental and non-instrumental factors (e.g., power, emotional bond and gender) motivate threat-regulation.

	Boundary Spanner's Threat-Reducing Behavior		
1. Boundary spanner's gender (0=male, 1=female)	0.07	0.05	
2. Counterpart's gender (0=male, 1=female)	<u>0.37</u>	0.08	*
3. Team Gender Composition (% female counterparts)	--	<u>0.81</u>	*
4. Emotional Closeness to Primary Counterpart	0.21	0.21	**
5. Power of Primary Counterpart	0.14	0.14	*
R ²	0.25	0.27	N=183

(Multiple controls)

Summary of findings

- People engage in threat regulation within and across boundaries
 - Mental models support threat regulation
 - Perspective taking → threat-reducing behavior
 - Threat-reducing behavior → trust
- Threat regulation is emotion work that
 - positively influences followers' feelings and trust.
 - Followers are aware of receiving this emotional influence.
 - has a downside (i.e., curvilinear relationship to performance)
- Threat regulation links emotion management to trust in leaders.
- Instrumental and non-instrumental factors motivate threat regulation.

Contributions to theory

1. Explores interpersonal emotion work in knowledge context (expands emotional labor literature).
2. Examines process of interpersonal threat regulation and unpacks the construct of threat-reducing behavior (as interpersonal emotion work).
3. Addresses material and interpersonal threats to trust (opportunism and identity damage).
4. Examines active trust building through the emotion-based mechanism of avoiding and managing threats.

Conclusion

As the knowledge intensity of the economy escalates...

As collaborative work proliferates across organizational and departmental boundaries...

Individuals who lead across boundaries may increasingly need to engage in emotion work to reduce negative emotions that can inhibit collaborative efforts.

Thank you!

Michele Williams

Cornell University

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Contact: mwilliams@cornell.edu
(607-255-6692)