Unpacking the impact of attachment to project teams on boundary-spanning behaviors☆

Sujin Lee [a,*], Sukanlaya Sawang [b]

[a] KAIST, Daejeon 305-701, South Korea
[b] QUT Business School, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

As business environments become even more competitive, project teams are required to make an effort to operate external linkages from within an organization or across organizational boundaries. Nevertheless, some members boundary-span less extensively, isolating themselves and their project teams from external environments. Our study examines why some members boundary-span more or less through the framework of group attachment theory. Data from 521 project team members in construction and engineering industries revealed that the more individuals worry about their project team's acceptance (group attachment anxiety), the more likely they are to perceive intergroup competition, and thus put more efforts into operating external linkages and resources to help their own teams outperform competitors. In contrast, a tendency to distrust their project teams (group attachment avoidance) generates members' negative construal of their team's external image, and thus fewer efforts are made at operating external linkages. Thus, project leaders and members with high group attachment anxiety may be best qualified for external tasks.
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1. Introduction

Effective teamwork is a critical success factor for project performance in the engineering and construction industry (Yang et al., 2011) and has a strong connection to financial and non-financial benefits (Chou and Yang, 2012). To achieve project efficiency, project teams increasingly rely on communications and collaborations across team boundaries (Bond-Barnard et al., 2013). Boundary spanning, or boundary management, refers to project team members' efforts to operate external linkages from within an organization (e.g., across marketing and manufacturing teams) or across organizational boundaries (e.g., to external customers, suppliers) (Ancona, 1990; Marrone, 2010). As the business environment becomes even more competitive, individual team members need to venture beyond team boundaries to seize innovation opportunities (Crawford and Lepine, 2013). Nevertheless, some team members boundary-span less extensively, isolating themselves and their project teams from external environments. Our study aims to unpack project team members' behavior especially to propose a model that predicts who will be better (or worse) boundary spanners on their teams' behalf, based on attachment to project teams.

The purpose of our research is to elucidate project team members' relational orientations that facilitate (or hamper) their externally focused behavior, along with shedding light on underlying psychological mechanisms. The extant literature has mostly focused on performance *outcomes* of external activities, documenting that broader ranges of boundary spanning

enhance the team's performance (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Somech and Khalaili, 2014). In contrast, prior research has paid less attention to *antecedents* of externally focused behavior (Choi, 2002; Brion et al., 2012). Especially, boundary spanners need to deal with interpersonal relationships and project environments inside and outside their teams (Friedman and Podolny, 1992; Qu and Cheung, 2013). Understanding project team members' relational orientation—that is, how they perceive project environments and interact with others—is critical in this context but remains largely unaddressed in project teams and boundary-spanning behavior research. Our study thus contributes to a current knowledge by applying group attachment theory (Smith et al., 1999) to understand how project team members' relational orientations influence their boundary-spanning behavior. Group attachment is an individual-level construct based on an individual's perception of his or her relationship to the specific group as a whole (Lee, 2005; Lee and Ling, 2007) and provides a psychological foundation of team boundary management. Our proposed model (Fig. 1) may help explain why some project team members excel while others derail tasks and teams in external activities. Practically, management may use our results to predict the most (least) active boundary-spanners and form externally focused project teams, or choose ideal team representatives.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we review group attachment theory and its relevance to project team members' boundary-spanning behaviors. We then propose two psychological mechanisms (perceived intergroup competition and construed external image of the project team) as mediators between group attachment and team member boundary-spanning behaviors. The key hypotheses are then developed and follow with methodology, results, and analysis explanation. Finally, the discussion and implications are presented.

2. Group attachment theory: Anxiety and avoidance dimensions

Attachment to groups refers to individuals' psychological ties to their groups as a whole, rather than to another person (Lee, 2005; Lee and Ling, 2007; Smith et al., 1999). Although individuals' attachment to groups is affected by their group experience, it is neither a dyad- nor group-level construct. Attachment to groups is a conceptually and empirically individual-level construct (Marmarosh and Tasca, 2013; Rom and Mikulincer, 2003). Empirical research demonstrates that group members have different levels of attachment to the group, as suggested by low intraclass correlations of the construct within a group (Rom and Mikulincer, 2003).

Attachment to groups has been found to influence individuals' cognition, emotion, and behavior in task-related (Lee and Ling, 2007; Rom and Mikulincer, 2003) and social groups (Smith et al., 1999).

Attachment to groups has two distinct dimensions: group attachment anxiety and group attachment avoidance (Smith et al., 1999). *Group attachment anxiety* results from inconsistent and unpredictable reactions from team members to individuals' fear-motivated support-seeking behaviors. It refers to the degree to which a person worries that his or her project team will not be available or adequately responsive in times of need. Team members with *high* group attachment anxiety tend to have low self-confidence and associate their team with inconsistent support and respect. Their attachment goal is to gain acceptance. In contrast, team members with *low* group attachment anxiety are self-confident and believe the team offers consistent support and acceptance (Lee and Ling, 2007).

The other dimension, *group attachment avoidance*, reflects the extent to which he or she distrusts group members' goodwill and strives to maintain autonomy and emotional distance from them (Smith et al., 1999). Team members with *high* group attachment avoidance distrust their teams and thus seek to remain self-reliant and emotionally distant. In contrast, those with *low* group attachment avoidance trust and count on the team for support. Team members with low levels of both group attachment anxiety and avoidance dimensions have high *group attachment security*—they feel accepted by their teams and count on them for support (Lee, 2005; Lee & Ling, 2007; Smith et al., 1999). Attachment research focuses on the two continuous higher-order dimensions of anxiety and avoidance, rather than categorizing people by discrete attachment types (Brennan et al., 1998). Our research shares this focus on the two continuous dimensions.

2.1. Group attachment anxiety and perceived intergroup competition

We predict that group attachment anxiety is positively associated with perception of intergroup competition. Team members more anxiously attached to their project teams perceive the team's support and responsiveness as inconsistent (Korsgaard et al., 2003; Lyubovnikova and West, 2015). Their attachment goal is to gain acceptance (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). For team members with high group attachment anxiety, such beliefs are likely to promote deep concern about the project team's acceptance of them as valuable members and to make them strive to gain acceptance. Therefore, members more
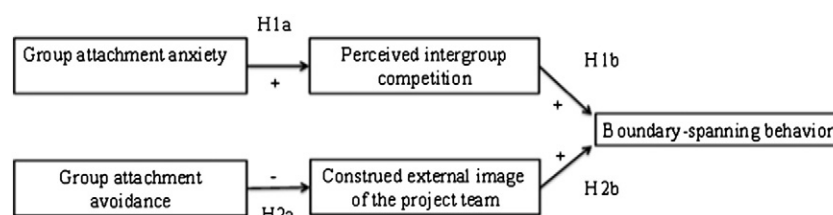

Fig. 1. A proposed model to explain project team members' boundary-spanning behaviors.