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Review

When faultlines are created: Exploring the conflict triggering process in sport

Shannon Kerwin^{a,*}, Matthew B. Walker^b, Trevor Bopp^c

^a Department of Sport Management, Brock University 1812, Sir Isaac Brock Way, St. Catharines, Ontario L2S 3A1 Canada

^b Department of Health and Kinesiology, Texas A&M University, 4243 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843, United States

^c Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Management, University of Florida, 310 Florida Gym, P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 32611, United States

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to advance theoretical understanding of the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict (i.e., triggering process) by discussing the role of social identity as a mediating factor. Specifically, the authors' proposed theoretical model emphasizes the consequences of intense, long-lasting task conflict by mapping the connection to workgroup identity formation and relationship conflict. The authors apply social identity theory to provide a new lens through which to view the impact of intense, long-lasting task conflict that goes unmanaged in sport organizations. Further, the authors provide several testable propositions regarding identity and subgroup formation that point to major factors influencing the development of relationship conflict within groups. The authors' propositions bolster current sport management theory by emphasizing how intergroup and intragroup processes are interwoven.

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1. Introduction

Within sport organization governing boards, a continuum of conflict is ever-present, as task-related conflict has the potential to develop into relationship conflict (Kerwin, Doherty, & Harman, 2011). Kerwin et al. (2011) concluded that sport board members may come to their board with diverse priorities that may impact board member engagement in task-related disagreement. For example, board members may become passionate when discussing the location of the next national championship, particularly when the members have varying priorities. In this case, the task conflict may become intense and manifest as relationship conflict (Kerwin et al., 2011). Given that nonprofit sport organizations are prone to operating with a fairly loose set of common organizational values and priorities (Kerwin, MacLean, & Bell-Laroche, 2014), the likelihood of intense task conflict developing into relationship conflict becomes a process that needs to be understood and managed.

According to attribution theory, group members interpret others' intentions during group interactions and pass personal judgments on individual motives or agendas (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1974). When groups regularly interact, this subjective calculus leads to conflict, interpersonal tension, social exclusion, and task withdrawal (Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; Ren & Gray, 2009). The negative outcomes of regular interaction may be particularly problematic for sport managers who

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: skerwin@brocku.ca (S. Kerwin), walkerma@tamu.edu (M.B. Walker), tbopp@ufl.edu (T. Bopp).

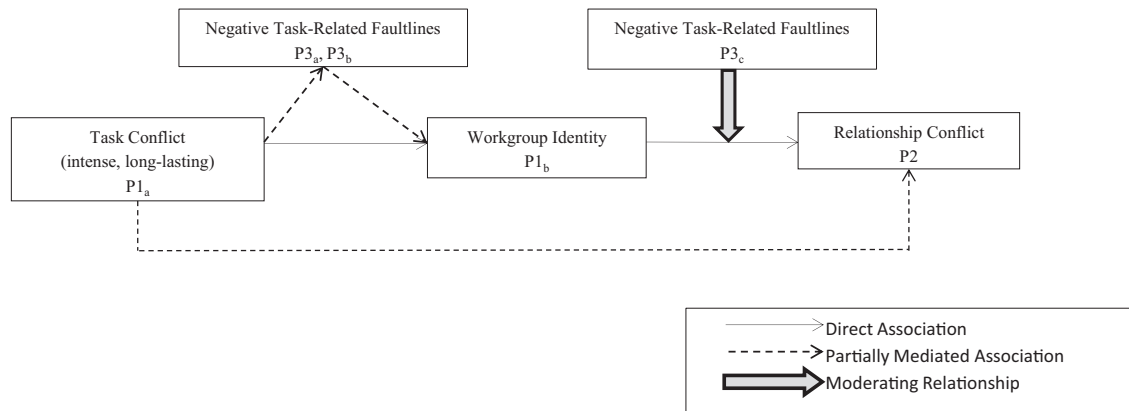


Fig. 1. The proposed model demonstrates the link between intense, long-lasting task conflict, workgroup identity and relationship-based conflicts. The mediating and moderating effects of task-related faultlines are also highlighted.

operate in situations where employees and volunteers are engaging in periods of close, intense interaction (e.g., planning and delivering national or international sport events). Further, volunteer boards of directors in sport have experienced the negative impact of conflict on decision quality and commitment (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010). Accordingly, the need to understand how conflict manifests within sport organizations (and groups) is increasingly important for organizational managers and leaders.

Researchers have noted that relationship conflict (in particular) yields negative individual and group outcomes within organizations (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008; Kerwin et al., 2011). Korsgaard, Ployhart, and Ulrich (2014) contend that despite a history of support for the dysfunction of relationship conflict, an exploration of the contextual conditions (e.g., predisposition to unmanaged conflict) associated with relationship conflict is needed. Relatedly, within sport continued examination of how task-related conflicts trigger or influence relationship conflict is warranted (Kerwin & Doherty, 2012). These relationships may be particularly germane to professional sport, where the presence of both organizational and team identification (Swanson & Kent, 2015; Todd & Kent, 2009) may contribute to the passion that manifests itself in the formation of intense task conflict.

Dovidio, Saguy, and Shnabel (2009) noted that both intra- (e.g., conflict) and inter- (e.g., identity) group processes are highly connected. The tenets of social identity theory support this idea by suggesting that individuals align with groups (e.g., organization, workgroup, teams) based on similar personal attributes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such group alignment results in the formation of subgroups, which can lead to faultlines (i.e., tensions) between the larger group and subgroup members (Bezrukova, Thatcher, Jehn, & Spell, 2012; Lawrence & Zyphur, 2011). Consequently, as the subgroup becomes socially relevant to its members, faultlines within the larger group will manifest (Bezrukova, Thatcher, & Jehn, 2007; Lau & Murnighan, 2005; Li & Hambrick, 2005). However, relevant to the contribution of the current article, scant theoretical attention has been placed on identifying the role that social identity plays in the conflict paradigm in general and in sport specifically. Connecting social identity to faultline formation could suggest that in-group and out-group membership stem from individual preferences toward group identification (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; van Knippenberg, Dawson, West, & Homan, 2011; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Faultline formation is especially relevant to sport organizations, as sport employees and volunteers develop high levels of organizational identity, primarily stemming from their love of sport and/or specific team fandom (Swanson & Kent, 2015; Todd & Kent, 2009). Although this form of identification is positive, it can also result in negative feelings toward outgroup members, which may be dysfunctional to organizational effectiveness when subgroup faultlines are present. Therefore, understanding how group identification occurs is fundamental to illuminate how the conflict triggering process manifests in sport organizations.

The purpose of this article is to advance the theoretical understanding of the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict (i.e., triggering process) by discussing the role of social identity as a mediating factor. As shown in Fig. 1, we suggest that identity targets and potential subgroup (i.e., task-related) faultlines are formative factors that influence the conflict-to-conflict association. In particular, the antecedent conditions to conflict have traditionally included task-based (e.g., formalization) or contextually-based factors (e.g., interdependence; Mooney et al., 2007). However, certain individual and group factors may be more influential in conflict processes. For example, Kerwin et al. (2011) recognized that individuals on sport boards have unique perceptions of their own role in conflict episodes when compared to others, which underpins the importance of social identity in conflict theory. Further, Kerwin (2013) highlighted the role of in-group and out-group membership on the development of relationship conflict in the sport setting; however, the theoretical mechanisms underlying this association are still unknown. As such, we focus on social identity theory as a viable theoretical lens to explain how intense long-lasting task conflict can manifest in subgroup division, activate task-related faultlines, and intensify relationship conflict in sport organizations.

Specifically, we show that social identification targets (i.e., workgroup identity) will result from intense task conflict at the group level that is persistent over time. These workgroup identity targets will then lead to individual level relationship

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