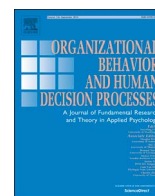




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Does gender diversity help teams constructively manage status conflict? An evolutionary perspective of status conflict, team psychological safety, and team creativity

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Status conflict
Team creativity
Psychological safety
Gender diversity

ABSTRACT

Despite the recent development of the literature on status conflict, the reasons and the contingency of the effects of status conflict on team creativity remain unclear. In this study, we draw on an evolutionary perspective to theorize team psychological safety as an underlying mechanism and gender diversity as a critical boundary condition for understanding why and when status conflict is likely to hinder team creativity. We tested these theoretical hypotheses using a multimethod (field and scenario studies) and cross-cultural (Korean and North American samples) set of studies. The findings offer novel practical and theoretical insights into the joint influence of status conflict and gender diversity on team psychological safety and team creativity.

1. Introduction

The emergence of team-based work systems and the demands of increasingly knowledge-driven economies lead firms to emphasize team creativity as a primary means of organizational survival and competitive advantage (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003). In search of the determinants of team creativity, the growing body of extant literature focuses on intragroup conflict, including task and relationship conflict, and their implications on team creativity (De Dreu, 2006, 2008; Farh, Lee, & Farh, 2010). However, how status conflict, which refers to disputes over the relative status positions of people in the social hierarchy of their group, influences team creativity remains unclear (Bendersky & Hays, 2012). Understanding the relation between status conflict and team creativity is important because status conflict can pose a serious challenge in fostering team creativity by making the social environment of a group unsafe for members to share their creative ideas (Gould, 2003; Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson, 2008). For example, our interviews with full-time employees reveal that individuals in teams with status conflict tend to be worried that “people in the group will try to be overly aggressive in asserting their own thoughts,” “members who think they are of higher status will believe that their ideas deserve more attention,” and “team members might disrupt the meeting or try to undermine one another’s participation.” They also tend to believe that status conflict “will likely lead to disagreements and possibly heated disputes and people’s feelings will get hurt” and “could

prompt more personal encounters or more negatively charged interactions among members.” Status conflict among members may pose a practical barrier to the creativity of organizational teams.

The purpose of the present study is to advance our knowledge on when and why status conflict affects team creativity. To achieve this objective, we draw on an evolutionary perspective because status conflict and team creativity share a common evolutionary underpinning. The struggle for status has long been considered “a fitness-relevant feature of human social life” (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010, pp. 334), and it has become acknowledged as a fundamental human motive with a strong evolutionary basis (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Cheng et al., 2010). Human displays of creativity have also been valued for their evolutionary function with regard to the increased likelihood of survival and prosperity (Byrne, 1995; Griskevicius, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006). In linking status conflict with team creativity, an evolutionary perspective highlights psychological safety as key mechanism underlying such a relationship because humans have evolved to detect potential threats and risks in the environment (e.g., high status conflict) and this social motivational climate plays a role in promoting team creativity.

Notably, an evolutionary perspective helps identify a critical boundary condition for understanding when status conflict is less likely to hinder team creativity via team psychological safety. We focus on gender diversity as a critical contingency because what is admired and respected in the group and the interpersonal tactics used during status

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2017.09.005>

Received 18 April 2016; Received in revised form 13 August 2017; Accepted 13 September 2017
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competition could differ remarkably depending on whether the group is gender diverse. When team members compete for high status, they need to be generous and friendly in gender-diverse groups because the human characteristics of altruism, kindness, and helpfulness are considered highly desirable in these groups (Apestequia, Azmat, & Iriberry, 2012; Barclay, 2010; Farrelly, 2011; Ortmann & Tichy, 1999; Williams & Polman, 2015). By contrast, interpersonal tensions associated with status challenges may persist and even escalate in gender-dominant groups because the use of aggressive tactics becomes a common and acceptable method to win conflicts (for male-dominant groups, see Anderson et al., 2001; Correll, 2004, and Porath et al., 2008; for female-dominant groups, see Archer, 2004; Oesterman et al., 1998, and Griskevicius et al., 2009). The use of unique interpersonal tactics in a group influences team psychological safety, which refers to a shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999; Gelfand, Leslie, Keller, & De Dreu, 2012). Accordingly, we expect that gender diversity (versus gender dominance) mitigates the potential detriments of status conflict on team creativity via team psychological safety.

The present study substantially contributes to the literature by utilizing an evolutionary perspective in investigating the status conflict–team creativity relationship. First, our study complements the emerging literature on status conflict, which lacks empirical works, as well as the theory on how and why status conflict is related to team creativity (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2011; Pettit, Doyle, Lount, & To, 2016; Spataro, Pettit, Sauer, & Lount, 2014). Although the situation in which a social hierarchy is unstable can be functionally beneficial for team creativity given that team members may present creative ideas to prove their superiority and value to the collective (Nijstad & De Dreu, 2012; Sligte, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011), an evolutionary perspective predominantly suggests that status conflict is likely to undermine team creativity due to the nature of status as a limited but valuable resource in the group. Individuals in a status conflict situation tend to become competitive and aggressive to attain the evolutionary values of status toward survival as well as prosperity, thereby resulting in a psychologically unsafe social climate and constrained idea exchanges (Gould, 2003). We extend the literature by adopting the psychological safety perspective to provide a compelling explanation on why status conflict can undermine team creativity (Chen, Farh, Campbell-Bush, Wu, & Wu, 2013; Eisenbeiss, van Knippenberg, & Boerner, 2008; Gong, Cheung, Wang, & Huang, 2012). The present expansion of the criterion domain to include team creativity (moving beyond team task performance) is meaningful given the increasing appreciation for team creativity for teams to perform non-routine and complex tasks.

More important, we propose gender diversity as a critical group contingency that may suppress the negative effects of status conflict on team psychological safety and subsequent team creativity. Our utilization of an evolutionary perspective suggests that the gender composition of a group may engender noticeably disparate interpersonal behaviors that reshape the way status conflict is managed and resolved in a group (Apestequia et al., 2012; Myaskovsky, Unikel, & Dew, 2005). The literature on intragroup conflict adopts the contingency perspective to understand the conditions under which workgroup conflicts lead to important group outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). However, on account of the incentive nature of the literature on status conflict, the contingency of its effects remains unknown (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Chun & Choi, 2014). Given the importance of the successful management of intragroup conflict, identifying the boundary conditions of the effects of status conflict on team creativity offers valuable insights.

1.1. Status conflict and team psychological safety

Striving for status involves evolutionary conditions that stimulate intense competition among members because high status is a scarce but

valuable resource for survival and prosperity (Griskevicius et al., 2006; Huberman, Loch, & Öncüler, 2004; Owens, Sutton, & Turner, 2001). Members who strive for status may benefit group functioning with increased motivation, constructive deviation from the status quo, and competition for novel and useful ideas that facilitate the achievement of a superior group position (e.g., Nijstad & De Dreu, 2012; Sligte et al., 2011). However, evolutionary perspective predominately endorses detrimental consequences of status conflict because disputes over social hierarchy among members tend to become tense and often destructive (Gould, 2003). The limited access to a high status and the considerable impact of status compel individuals in a status conflict situation to become competitive and aggressive, thereby degenerating the social climate of a group including psychological safety (Griskevicius et al., 2009).

Bendersky and Hays (2012) outlined three distinctive properties of status conflict that make this type of conflict particularly damaging for team psychological safety.¹ First, status is a fixed social resource, which means that status conflict “represents zero-sum exchanges in which individuals gain at the expense of others” (Carton & Tewfik, 2016, p. 1138). The disagreements and competition over status may urge team members to claim their status position and become sensitive to potential challenges from others (Groysberg et al., 2011). If such a hostile environment is created by status conflict, team members make sense of this disturbing social environment and develop social evaluative concerns, thereby becoming suspicious about being talked about and mistrusting the intentions of others (Kramer & Messick, 1998). In sum, members perceive the social environment of the group as unsafe.

Second, status conflict implicates other group members. To legitimize changes in social hierarchy, actors need to expand their alliances and invite bystanders in a group. Consequently, political divisions into subgroups may emerge during the process of status contest (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Chun & Choi, 2014). Thus, a challenge to social hierarchy is likely to influence the entire network of social relationships, possibly resulting in an all-out battle over the status involving an expanded set of members (Kalkhoff, 2005; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). The emergence of subgroups and the spread of friction across members escalate interpersonal tension that compromises the psychological safety climate of a team.

Third, given the disproportionate influence of high-status individuals, disputes over social hierarchy among members tend to become intense because they are concerned about the aftermath (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Gould, 2003). Although intrateam competition is not necessarily destructive, serious competition could disrupt collaboration and cooperation among members (Christie & Barling, 2010; Groysberg et al., 2011). Engaging in intensive status contests, team members may view one another not as coworkers but as competitors attempting to win at the expense of others (Greer, Caruso, & Jehn, 2011). As a result, members perceive low levels of interpersonal trust and mutual respect, which are foundations of a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999).

In sum, status conflict can intensify competition and interpersonal tension among team members, urging them to stay alert to potential status threats and act assertively to defend their status (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Assertive and aggressive behaviors used to claim status produce various negative emotions, such as frustration, resentment, and anger (Porath et al., 2008; Roseman, 1996). These negative emotions could impair the willingness to act with generosity and interpersonal sensitivity, thereby further damaging interpersonal trust and support (Chun & Choi, 2014; Gould, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Such damaged interpersonal climate and hostile atmosphere in a group creates an unsafe environment for members (Edmondson, 1999; van Ginkel & van Knippenberg, 2008). Thus, we present the following hypothesis:

¹ For additional information on the recent development and discriminative validity of the construct of status conflict, see Appendix A.

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