The impact of within-group conflict on perceptions of the organizations: Evidence for emergent group-level effects

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Abstract

Within-group conflict, an aspect of the immediate work climate in a small unit such as a platoon, may have an important impact on service members' perceptions of the organization as a whole. In this paper, we examine the importance of within-group conflict within a multilevel modeling framework to determine individual and group-level effects on perceptions of organizational support. Surveys were administered to a brigade of combat arms soldiers (n = 864, platoons = 46) deploying to Kosovo. The results showed that individuals who rated within-group conflict as high had a negative perception of organizational support. In addition, the analyses also demonstrated that shared perceptions of conflict among platoon members drive ratings of organizational support over-and-above individual perceptions of conflict. This evidence of emergent contextual effects has implications for targeting interventions to small-group leaders to reduce within-group conflict.

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The immediate work climate in a small unit such as a platoon or company may have an important impact on employees' perceptions of the organization as a whole. That is, individuals' attitudes towards an entire organization may be heavily influenced by the climate in the immediate work setting. When it comes to assessing the climate in the immediate work group, the level of conflict between co-workers serves as an excellent indicator. Within-group conflict is very common within organizations, and the industrial/organizational psychology literature shows that within-group conflict has a negative effect on a host of organizational outcomes such as increased financial costs (Dana, 1999; Slaikev & Hasson, 1998) as well as employee health and job attitudes (Spector & Jex, 1998; Frone, 2000; Thomas, Bliese & Jex, in review). We build on this literature by focusing specifically on how soldiers' views of the US Army are influenced by the conflict within their unit.

The notion that immediate work climate affects attitudes about or perceptions of the organization is congruent with the tenets of social influence theory(Festinger, 1954). Social influence theory stipulates that social interactions among group members affect individuals' perceptions of social reality. While social influence theory has been in existence for over fifty years, it has been difficult to test some of its basic principles empirically (see Bliese & Britt, 2001, for an exception). One of the reasons why it has been difficult is that the theory is fundamentally a multilevel theory proposing that shared social interactions (group-level variables) impact individual perceptions of social reality.

For many years, the mathematical challenges associated with analyzing multilevel data limited researchers' ability to test multilevel theories such as social influence theory. Recently,

however, advances in multilevel modeling have shown great potential to test a range of multilevel theories in occupational and organizational settings (Bliese & Jex, 2002). Multilevel methods allow for the examination of shared group constructs, and as such, add considerable predictive (or explanatory) power in determining the drivers of attitudes and behaviors of individuals.

One of the benefits of multilevel modeling is that it can determine empirically the degree to which group-level effects contribute uniquely to a given model. In addition, when group-level effects contribute to a predictive model above-and-beyond the more traditional individual-level variables, then these group-level effects are termed "emergent" (Bliese, 2000; Bliese & Jex, 2002; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). For example, research shows that the relationship between average work hours in a unit and average well-being in a unit is significantly stronger than the relationship between individual reports of work hours and individual reports of well-being (Bliese & Halverson, 1996). Thus, the variable of work hours has emergent group-level properties as a predictor of well-being. In short, the identification of emergent relationships provides empirical support for the importance of shared social factors (Bliese, 2000).

One ideal setting for examining the impact of group-level climate factors on attitudes toward the organization is the military. In the military, existing work groups, or platoons, epitomize the strong social environment described by Festinger (1954). In the present study, US soldiers rated the degree of within-group conflict in their platoons. Soldiers also rated their perceptions of organizational support, reflecting their attitudes towards the organization as a whole, the US Army.

There are two goals of this study. First, we examine the importance of immediate work group climate as a factor affecting perceptions of the organization with soldiers. Second, we

examine the utility of applying multilevel modeling techniques to military data to determine individual and group-level effects on perceptions. That is, if shared social environments play a role in determining perceptions of organizational support, then we should see an emergent relationship between average platoon ratings of conflict and perceptions of organizational support.

Method

Data were collected as part of a large pre-deployment psychological screening survey from a brigade of combat arms soldiers (n = 864) deploying to Kosovo. For the multi-level analysis of the data, soldiers' data were only retained in the sample if complete data existed for all study measures including clear identification to a specific platoon (work unit). In total, 46 platoons with an average group size of 15.21 soldiers were used in the analyses.

Measures

In addition to the typical clinical domains assessed by screening instruments (e.g., depression), the climate variables of within-group conflict and perceived organizational support were also assessed.

Within-group conflict. We measured within-group conflict using a modified version of Spector and Jex's (1998) interpersonal conflict scale. The scale consists of four items that assessed overt forms of conflict behavior within the workgroup. For example, two items from the scale were, "how often do people in your unit get into arguments with each other at work?" and, "how often do people in your unit do bad things to each other at work?" All responses were made on a 5-point response scale (1 = never and 5 = very often) with higher scores indicating higher interpersonal conflict within the unit. The reliability as estimated by Cronbach's Alpha was .88.

Perceived Organizational Support. We measured soldier perceptions of organizational support using an adapted version of the perceived organizational support scale by Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch (1997). The scale consists of 8 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). Two sample items from the scale are, "My unit is willing to help when I need a special favor", and, "My organization really cares about my well-being.". The reliability as estimated by Cronbach's Alpha was .90.

Estimating Agreement about Conflict

To assess the role of social influence on soldiers' perceptions of organizational support, ratings of conflict were aggregated to the platoon level by calculating platoon means and used as predictors for organizational support. By examining the links among self-ratings of conflict, platoon ratings of conflict and organizational support within a multilevel framework, the emergent group-level effects of within-group conflict maybe detectable.

When aggregating a variable such as conflict, the first step in the analysis is to examine the group-level properties of the variable. Specifically, we were interested in determining whether platoon members agreed about the levels of conflict within the platoon. Agreement was assessed using a Random Group Resampling (RGR) procedure (Bliese, Halverson & Rothberg, 1994). In this procedure, pseudo groups are created thousands of times and the variance of the rating of interest is calculated. If the variance of the actual groups is statistically smaller than the variance of the pseudo groups, it suggests that group members agree. In contrast, if the variance from the actual groups is no different from the pseudo group variances, it indicates no agreement among group members. The RGR agreement procedure was run on 9,982 pseudo groups (for details see Bliese, 2004), and revealed that the variance among platoon members was significantly smaller than the pseudo group variance ($Z=-1.67$, $p<.05$, one-tailed). As additional

tests, the ICC(1) and ICC(2) were also calculated. The ICC(1) was .08 and revealed that 8% of the variance in an individual soldiers' rating of conflict could be explained by the platoon to which the soldier belonged. This ICC(2) value was .53. This value is lower than the recommended values of around .60 and .70 (see Bliese, 2000) and suggests that group means are only marginally reliable. Nonetheless, the overall evidence from these tests suggests it is meaningful to consider platoon average ratings of within-group conflict as agreed upon characteristics of the work climate.

Results

Multilevel modeling was used to determine whether or not the relationship between conflict and organizational support showed emergent properties. The first step in multilevel modeling is typically to estimate a null model and determine how much of the variance in the outcome is within-group variance and how much is between group variance (Bliese, 2002; Hofmann, 1997). The expectation is that values of the outcome variable significantly cluster by groups. The null model revealed that levels of organizational support significantly clustered by platoons. The ICC(1) value was .07, indicating that 7% of the variance in soldier's rating of organizational support was related to platoon membership.

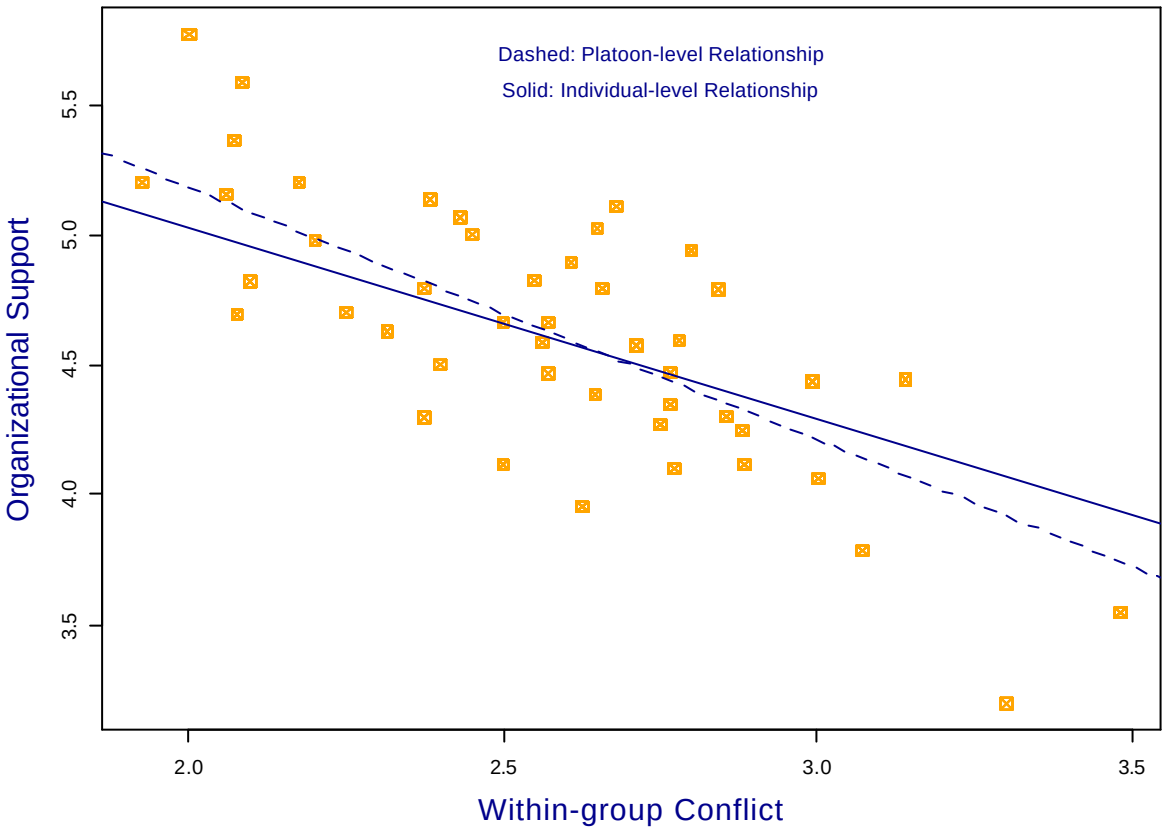
The test for emergent properties was a multilevel model regressing individual perceptions of organizational support on individual ratings of group conflict and platoon average ratings of group conflict. The results are presented in Table 1. Notice that individual ratings of within-group conflict are negatively related to individual perceptions of organizational support – soldiers who personally reported high levels of within-group conflict also tended to report low levels of broader organizational support. More importantly, however, the model also provides evidence of emergent effects. Specifically, the relationship between average levels of conflict

within a platoon and average levels of organizational support in a platoon were significantly more negative than were the individual relationships (using a liberal p-value of less than .10). This emergent effect is captured in the last row of table 1.

Table 1: Multilevel Model predicting organizational support.

	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	DF	t value	p value
(Intercept)	7.21	0.39	653	18.30	0.00
Within-group conflict	-0.70	0.05	653	-14.83	0.00
Platoon average conflict	-0.31	0.16	44	-1.97	0.06

A plot of the individual-level and platoon-level relationships is provided in figure 1. In the figure, the plotted points represent platoon averages on conflict and support. Notice how the relationship between platoon averages has a stronger negative slope than does the relationship between individual variables (the latter represented by the solid orange line). These results show the emergent properties of the platoon level data.



Discussion

We examined the degree to which the work climate in a platoon was related to broad perceptions of the organization using data from the US Army. The results showed that individuals who rated inter-group conflict as high had a negative perception of organizational support. More importantly, however, the analyses also provided evidence of emergent contextual effects. Specifically, the relationship based on platoon means was stronger than the relationship based on individual variables in predicting perceptions of organizational support.

Emergent effects are theoretically and practically important. In theoretical terms, the emergent relationship suggests that shared perceptions of conflict among platoon members drive ratings of organizational support over-and-above individual perceptions of conflict. This

demonstrates the importance of the immediate social environment in terms of how it helps shape individuals' perceptions of social reality. In short, the relationship between within-group conflict and perceptions of organizational support cannot be entirely captured by looking at individual soldier data – one must also consider the group-level properties of the data (i.e., shared interactions between group members) when attempting to understand the relationship.

In practical terms, the findings also have important implications. The findings demonstrate that events unfolding between members of immediate work groups are linked to how unit members perceive the larger organization. Not only may within-group conflict lead to immediate problems in how a unit may function (e.g., increased costs, poor health, negative job attitudes) but it is also associated with negative perceptions of the organization.

The findings also have implications for interventions. A strength of multilevel analyses is that the separation of effects into individual and group components helps clarify the anticipated impact of various interventions (Bliese & Jex, 2002). These findings, for instance, suggest that platoon-level interventions aimed at reducing levels of conflict in platoons with high conflict would be an effective way of improving soldiers' average levels of perceived organizational support. In fact, the findings suggest that intervening at the platoon level is likely to be relatively cost-effective compared to working with each individual soldier. One efficient method for reducing within-group conflict may be through training leaders at the small-group level. Leaders, especially at the small group level, have the potential to manage their platoon's social environment, and perhaps even reduce the within-group conflict. By targeting organizational resources to these small group leaders, soldiers' perceptions of the organization, and even their health and well-being, may be enhanced.

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plot(IAMPS$QICS.PLT,IAMPS$QPOS.PLT,col="orange",cex=1.25,pch=7,
xlab=list("Within-group Conflict",col="dark blue",cex=1.5),
ylab=list("Organizational Support",col="dark blue",cex=1.5))
abline(lm(QPOS.PLT~QICS.PLT,data=IAMPS),lty=2,col="dark blue",lwd=2.5)
abline(lm(QPOS~QICS,data=IAMPS),lty=1,col="dark blue",lwd=2.5)
text(x=2.75,y=5.7,"Dashed: Platoon-level Relationship", col="dark blue")
text(x=2.75,y=5.55,"Solid: Individual-level Relationship", col="dark blue")
```