Understanding and Addressing Faultlines

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Conceptualizations of faultlines

We know that the mix of people in a science team matters. In fact, group composition research has investigated the characteristics of people that work together on a project to understand how they influence team decisions, conflict management, and ultimately performance. Issues related to group composition research have attracted a lot of attention across different disciplines: sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, and even computer science. While using different methods and approaches, all have been adding to our understanding of group composition's critical role in productive work. This paper focuses on how group divisions serve as a way to understand group composition effects in science teams and push this research area forward.

People are different. They can differ, for example, based on age, gender, race, occupation, or even attributes such as pace of work or conscientiousness. Imagine if all these attributes perfectly align together to form fairly homogeneous subgroups based on these similarities. Then, you get a faultline! Faultlines are defined as hypothetical dividing lines that split a group into relatively homogeneous subgroups based on the group members' demographic alignment along multiple attributes (adapted from Lau & Murnighan, 1998). For instance, a faultline exists in a science team when all the engineers in a team are fresh college graduates and all the scientists are just about to retire. These divisions may provide the impetus for members of diverse groups to differentiate themselves across a divide and fracture into subgroups (Lau & Murnighan, 1998).

The faultline perspective suggests that not only must the various attributes of a group be considered, but also the alignment of those attributes (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Empirical

evidence supports this argument; a number of field and experimental studies have shown that such demographic alignments provide more explanatory power than do dispersion indices in predicting both perceived (Lau & Murnighan, 2005; Li & Hambrick, 2005) and objective group outcomes (Bezrukova, Thatcher, & Jehn, 2007). Yet, to matter at all, faultlines need to be noticed. The distinction between *potential (dormant)* and *active faultlines* is becoming increasingly central to faultline literature (Jehn & Bezrukova, 2010; Thatcher & Patel, 2012). Potential faultlines are defined as faultlines based on objective demographic characteristics, whereas active faultlines exist when members actually perceive subgroups based on the demographic characteristics (Jehn & Bezrukova, 2010). Faultlines can be activated through triggers such as differential treatment, different values, assimilation, insult, and simple contact (Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman, Weber, & Ernst, 2009).

Faultlines is a multilevel concept that can affect individual, subgroup, and group behavior. To that effect, research suggests that differences across faultline subgroups may trigger behavioral disintegration, lack of trust, and poor team performance (e.g., Bezrukova et al., 2007; Li & Hambrick, 2005; Polzer, Crisp, Jarvenpaa, & Kim, 2006; Sawyer, Houlette, & Yealey, 2006). However, similarities across members within faultline subgroups may reinforce social support, liking, job satisfaction (Lau & Murnighan, 2005; Phillips, 2003) and increased individual-level health (Bezrukova, Spell, & Perry, 2010). Thus, faultline effects may not operate in the same direction across levels. Staying with health outcomes, emerging research has envisioned faultlines on the organizational and larger levels as a way to explain health disparities between population subgroups (Spell, Baveja, & Bezrukova, 2013). Such research shows promise in identifying and addressing subgroups of people that are aligned in terms of multiple strikes against them for poor health (e.g., smoking, poor access to health care).

How faultlines are related to group conflict

Faultlines escalate group conflict (c.f., Thatcher & Patel, 2012). For example, Polzer and colleagues' (2006) study of geographically dispersed teams found that faultlines reduce team functioning and increase conflict within groups. However, there is at least one qualifier to this relationship - the type of conflict at play. For example, in an R&D team, conflict can be about disagreements over a new drug under development (task conflict) or more about personalities that clash (relationship conflict). Different faultline types are related to these forms of conflict differently: that is, faultlines based on social categories (age, gender) are related to relationship conflict but not to task conflict (Choi & Sy, 2010).

Other qualifiers may include creative conflicts. We know that conflict can be an opportunity for growth, learning, and development when it stimulates better group decision-making and leads to improvement in the way people work together. Groups with faultlines tend to be more polarized, and ultimately clash and face conflicts. These conflicts may redirect people's energy toward creating new ideas; thus, breathing new life into an organization. For instance, Kanter (1988) noted that the very nature of innovation involves controversy and the conditions that promote creativity should allow for coalition formation and multiple structural linkages. This can be exemplified by the phenomenon known in high tech companies as 'skunk works' (Rich & Janos, 1996) which describes high-performing groups doing controversial work that are culturally distinct from larger organizational units – inherent in the faultline idea.

Strategies to mitigate conflict and promote positive team dynamics

There are many strategies that can alleviate the harmful effects of faultlines. Ultimately, they can be classified into three classes. First is known as the 'we are all in this together!' approach. Here, the strategy is to focus on building superordinate team identification and

superordinate goals (Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009; Jehn & Bezrukova, 2010; Rico, Sanchez-Manzanares, Antino, & Lau, 2012). Team identification reflects a perception of oneness with or belonging to a team (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For example, whether and how young male members in a science team may act in terms of their gender- and age-defined categories will partly depend on how strongly they identify with their workgroup. While recent research suggests that correlated demographic characteristics increase the likelihood of subgroups (Carton & Cummings, 2012), the strength of members' attachment to the group (team identification) may bind members together into a powerful psychological entity (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). Empirical research supports this argument by showing a better performance of faultline groups when team identification is high (Bezrukova et al., 2009).

Other ways to reinforce superordinate team identification is through common goals, norms, or cultural values. These can operate at different levels and may not be the same. For example, a faculty group may have a culture that emphasizes scholarly publications but gets little support from their department that does not value scholarly achievements. We know that this cultural misalignment between the group values and that of the larger business unit has implications for performance (Bezrukova, Thatcher, Jehn, & Spell, 2012). When cultural values are misaligned across levels, superordinate goals may not be realized leaving faultlines salient and harmful.

The second strategy is to create a cross cutting category such as a reward system or task role assignment that cuts across the group (Homan et al., 2008; Rico et al., 2012). Cross-cutting categories within groups are those where 'others' can be simultaneously classified as ingroup or outgroup members based on multiple dimensions. For example, in a science team, engineers and scientists maybe grouped together to work on different aspects of a prototype. This cross-cutting

identification (same task assignment) decreases bias and contributes to productive intersubgroup contact by reducing psychological distance between distant subgroups emerging from a faultline. The former intersubgroup boundaries become less salient, and instead new, inclusive team-based boundaries become important in the minds of members.

The third strategy is to 'find a common enemy' (Spell & Bezrukova, 2013). For example, research has shown how external conflict, or rage and aggression directed outside the team, could act as a regulatory strategy adopted by individuals to diffuse fear and anticipation of failure in highly competitive achievement situations (Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2007). Certain contextual conditions of a team can fuel self-regulated forms of motivation not only by giving rise to enhanced perceived competence, but also by generating elevated levels of perceived autonomy, relatedness (Ommundsen, Lemyre, & Abrahamsen, 2010), and group solidarity (Collins, 2011). While this may be seen as paradoxical, external conflict can make demographic subgroupings formed by faultlines less salient by uniting the team to 'fight' against common 'enemies' outside the team (Brewer, 1999; Tajfel, 1982). The presence of a common enemy can serve to distract attention from other issues and redirect focus towards a universal threat, as has been shown to be an effective tool of politicians (Merskin, 2005).

While the topic of faultlines has not received as much attention as other areas in groups and teams research (e.g., emotions, leadership, conflict), it is remarkable how much we have learned from this area. Even though group splits can lead to all sorts of dysfunction, they can also turn into 'healthy divides.' It is our task and a challenge to learn how we can best live with faultlines since they are obviously here to stay. ☺

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