

THIN SLICES OF GROUP CONFLICT

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Researchers typically study group conflict from the vantage point of the group members who experience and contribute to the conflict. Accordingly, conflict is usually measured by obtaining self-reports from the group members themselves or through the coded observations of trained researchers (Weingart, 1997). As appropriate as this focus may be, we propose that other perspectives are also important to organizational outcomes. Consider that organizational groups are often surrounded by external constituents who sometimes observe interactions, including conflict, among members of groups to which they do not belong. In an increasingly interdependent and collaborative world, all sorts of external parties might attend a group meeting or otherwise get a glimpse of group interaction, ranging from a superior who intermittently sits in on group decisions, to clients or vendors who receive the output of the group, to Human Resource professionals who are documenting group decisions, to members of other groups who attend meetings to share relevant information. Aided by the widespread use of video and teleconference communication technologies, including the increasingly easy and unobtrusive means to record videoconferences for others to observe, group interactions are frequently subject to the scrutiny of outsiders. These external observations of group conflict can have material consequences, for example by providing input into resource allocation decisions, performance appraisals, or future group assignments involving the members of the group.

The purpose of this study is to explore how external observers form perceptions of conflict within the groups they observe. Though researchers have accumulated an abundance of evidence about how people form appraisals of other individuals (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2007) and of broad social categories (Fiske, 1998), relatively little research has focused on how people form appraisals of small intact workgroups. Drawing on studies of so-called “thin slices” of

individual behavior (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993), we are especially interested in how people form appraisals based on relatively short observations of the group in action (e.g., thin slices of group interaction). One purpose of our study is to ascertain whether external observers can distinguish high-conflict from low-conflict groups (and related dimensions of group processes and effectiveness) based on very brief glimpses of group interaction, paralleling the surprisingly accurate inferences people make after seeing thin slices of individual behavior.

Our empirical approach to studying these issues consists of videotaping small decision-making groups as they deliberate their options in a unique-information task (Stasser & Stewart, 1992) and then using these videotapes as stimulus materials. Subsequently, we ask other people to view these videotapes in order to evaluate each group on a variety of dimensions, including perceptions of conflict among the members of the group. We will compare external observers' perceptions of conflict to various criterion measures of conflict, including conventional self-reports obtained from the group members themselves (Jehn, 1995) and the group members' behaviors as coded by the researchers. By coding group members' behaviors in each "thin slice" video clip, we will be able to pinpoint which behaviors influence external observers' perceptions of group conflict.

We will also employ a novel method for measuring group members' vocal dynamics. Each group member will wear a "sociometer" during the videotaped group discussion. A sociometer is a small device that records the unique voice of the person wearing it, allowing each person's voice to be measured in terms of speech speed, volume and pitch (Pentland, 2008). By measuring these dimensions every millisecond, it is possible to assess their mean level and variation within any brief period of group interaction, across group members. This method of

measuring group members' communication patterns will allow us to test whether these vocal dynamics are related to external observers' perceptions of group conflict and related dimensions.

We will also ask external observers to evaluate individual group members on dimensions such as warmth and competence (Collange, Fiske & Sanitioso, 2009), personality (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003) and status (Bendersky & Hays, 2009). Using these appraisals, we will be able to explore how perceptions of conflict in the group as a whole are related to evaluations of the individual members who engage in the conflict.

Finally, we will have external observers provide their subjective evaluation of each group's overall effectiveness. We will know the objective effectiveness of each group based on whether they pooled their information appropriately to choose the best option in the unique-information task they performed. With this objective criterion, we will assess whether observers were able to accurately discern effective groups based on thin slices of observation, and whether their assessment of group conflict contributed to the accuracy of their group appraisals.

The goal of this study is to understand how people assess group conflict when they are not directly engaged in the conflict, but instead are external observers of the groups in question. We are particularly interested in the cues that observers use to gauge conflict during very brief observations of group interaction and how assessments of conflict are associated with assessments of individual and group effectiveness. These issues are of practical relevance given the prevalence with which organizational members observe short episodes of group interaction. It is also of theoretical interest given how little we know about how people form appraisals of conflict or related processes in small workgroups. By exploring these issues, this study, and this symposium, will advance our knowledge of group conflict.

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