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The motivating potential of teams: Test and extension of Chen and Kanfer's (2006) cross-level model of motivation in teams

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ABSTRACT

Although individual- and team-level studies of motivational processes abound, very few have sought to link such phenomena across levels. Filling this gap, we build upon Chen and Kanfer's (2006) multilevel theoretical model of motivation in teams, to advance and test a cross-level model of relationships between individual and team motivation and performance. Data from two samples of undergraduates performing simulated team tasks supported the direct and mediated cross-level relationships between *team-level* prior performance, efficacy, and action processes with *individual-level* self-efficacy, goal striving, and performance. The findings provide support for a multilevel, system-based formulation of motivation and performance in teams. Findings also contribute to the on-going debate on whether motivational processes account for performance once controlling for prior performance.

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Stimulated by the growing use of interdependent teams in work organizations, interest in work motivation as it operates at and within team contexts has burgeoned over the past two decades (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008). Extending theories of work motivation and teams, Chen and Kanfer (2006) developed an integrated theoretical model which postulates team motivation as multilevel, system-like phenomena involving parallel and inter-related individual-level, team-level, and cross-level processes. However, only limited *empirical* research has explicitly considered individual or team motivation from a multilevel perspective (Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008). The limited research on motivation in teams to date has focused on establishing functionally parallel, or homologous (Chen, Bliese, & Mathieu, 2005; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), individual-level and team-level motivation constructs and processes. Initial evidence from this research suggests that motivational constructs at the individual and team levels are functionally similar, in that they relate to each other and to performance similarly at the individual and team levels (Chen & Bliese, 2002; Chen, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Chen, Webber, et al., 2002; DeShon, Kozlowski, Schmidt, Milner, & Weichmann, 2004; Gibson, 2001). In contrast, much less is known regarding *cross-level* relationships *between* individual and team motivation (exceptions

include Chen and Bliese (2002) and Watson, Chemers, and Preiser (2001)).

Accordingly, the primary purpose of this study was to empirically test cross-level hypotheses within an integrative, multilevel model of individual and team motivation and performance. Building on Chen and Kanfer's (2006) theorizing and prior research on motivational homology, we examine the model shown in Fig. 1, which specifies direct and mediated *cross-level* relationships between team-level and individual-level prior performance, efficacy beliefs, goal striving and action processes, and subsequent performance. Consistent with Chen and Kanfer, our emphasis in this research is on top-down (contextual) influences of team-level variables on individual-level outcomes, as opposed to bottom-up (emergent) influences of individual-level variables on team-level outcomes. Indeed, focusing on top-down influences is a logical next step in enhancing our understanding of multilevel motivation phenomena in teams beyond homology, as top-down effects are more prevalent, immediate, and powerful relative to bottom-up effects (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Mathieu & Taylor, 2007). Thus, a primary contribution of our research is the more complete empirical test of the cross-level relationships postulated by Chen and Kanfer, and the consideration of key mediating processes that link individual and team motivation across levels. Ultimately, we argue, this cross-level approach allows us to explain more variance in individual-level motivation and performance than would be explained by single-level or homologous formulations of these phenomena alone.

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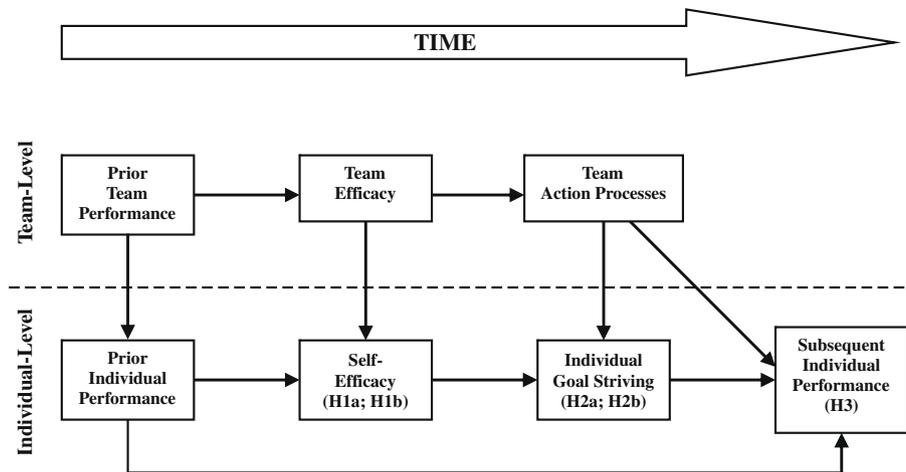


Fig. 1. Hypothesized multilevel model of motivation and performance in teams.

However, we also extend Chen and Kanfer's (2006) model by considering *dynamic* relationships in which, over time and across the individual and team levels, motivation contributes to performance, which in turn feeds back into subsequent motivation. Adopting this dynamic view of motivation in teams can help inform the recent debate regarding the efficacy–performance relationship (e.g., Bandura & Locke, 2003; Vancouver, Thompson, Tischner, & Putka, 2002; Vancouver, Thompson, & Williams, 2001). Specifically, work by Vancouver and his colleagues (2001, 2002) have suggested that self-efficacy relates to subsequent effort and performance more weakly and negatively when examined at the within-person level over repeated performance episodes. Extending these studies, we examine the dynamic within-person efficacy–performance relationship *within a team context*, where individual-level efficacy, effort and performance are likely influenced by team-level (i.e., contextual) phenomena. Likewise, our study also helps inform the broader question of whether self-efficacy predicts subsequent performance above and beyond past performance, which has yet to be studied in a team context (cf. Heggstad & Kanfer, 2005; Judge, Jackson, Shaw, Scott, & Rich, 2007). Finally, we also test our model in two samples consisting of 2-member and 3-member teams performing different tasks, and using different measures of individual goal striving, team action processes, and individual performance. Thus, the two samples allowed us to constructively replicate (Lykken, 1968) our findings across important operational boundaries of teams and motivation.

Theory and hypotheses

Chen and Kanfer (2006) multilevel model of motivation in teams build upon and integrated among social-cognitive theories of individual motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Locke & Latham, 1990) and theories of team processes and team effectiveness (e.g., Hackman, 1992; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). In this model, Chen and Kanfer postulated that, although individual motivation constructs are based on cognitive and behavioral processes and team-level constructs emerge from social and interpersonal processes, individual and team efficacy beliefs, goal processes, and performance share similar meanings and relate to each other similarly. Indeed, Bandura (1997) defined *self-efficacy* as the “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 408), and, similarly, *team efficacy* as “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p. 477).

Likewise, Chen and Kanfer (2006) proposed that goal striving – i.e., the self-regulation of effort when pursuing task objectives – captures functionally similar phenomena to what the team literature has coined as “team action processes” (Marks et al., 2001). According to Marks et al., team action processes include: (1) *monitoring progress toward goals* (i.e., assessing how the team does relative to its mission/task goals), (2) *system monitoring* (i.e., tracking material resources and environmental conditions as they relate to mission accomplishment), (3) *team monitoring and backup behaviors* (i.e., assisting team members in performing their task roles), and (4) *coordination* (i.e., orchestrating the sequence and timing of interdependent actions). A meta-analysis found that the four action process dimensions are positively related, and relate similarly (positively) to team performance (LePine, Piccolo, Jackson, Mathieu, & Saul, 2008), suggesting that these processes reflect a unified, yet multidimensional system of collective effort. Thus, in teams, *individual goal striving* captures members’ allocation of *personal* effort towards team goals, which may involve effort directed at performing their individual role within the team, as well as assisting the team in other ways, such as helping other members perform their roles. Similarly, *team action processes* capture members’ allocation of *collective* effort towards team goals, which includes engagement in the four dimensions of team action processes.

Recently, Chen et al.’s (2005) study of teams performing a low-fidelity attack helicopter task and DeShon et al.’s (2004) study of simulated radar teams have shown that, in line with Chen and Kanfer’s (2006) theorizing, the individual-level relationships among self-efficacy, individual effort regulation, and individual performance are highly similar (i.e., homologous) to the team-level relationships among team efficacy, team effort regulation, and team performance. Although these studies advanced our understanding of the homologous nature and function of motivation in and of teams, they did not examine another important component of Chen and Kanfer’s theory, namely the *cross-level* interplay between individual and team motivation.

Accordingly, following the model displayed in Fig. 1, we next consider cross-level relationship involving prior team and individual performance, team and self-efficacy beliefs, team action processes and individual goal striving, and subsequent individual performance. Consistent with the general, multilevel principle of *bond strength* (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), we expect that more proximal antecedents – i.e., those occurring closer in time and within the same level – will exert more powerful influences on an individual-level outcome than more distal antecedents. In line with Chen

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