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The Prevalence and Consequences of Intragroup Conflicts for Employee Well-Being in Women-Dominated Work

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ABSTRACT
This study examined the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflicts for well-being in three women-dominated occupations from a gender perspective. Using survey data from 1299 nurses, teachers, and social workers, we found that task conflict was the most common type of conflict but it was unrelated to well-being. Relationship conflict was negatively associated with vigor and positively associated with employee stress, burnout, and depression. Process conflicts were positively associated with depression. Our findings revealed that women and men in the same occupation experience intragroup conflicts in the same way. Organizations should therefore primarily reduce relationship conflicts to ensure employee well-being.

Practitioner Points:
● Not all types of conflicts at work are destructive. Some types of conflict may in fact be a good thing!
● Task conflict is the most common type of conflict in women-dominated workplaces, but it does not impair employee well-being. Instead, the contesting of ideas may lead to nuanced decisions.
● Managers in women-dominated workplaces should pay close attention to, and try to resolve, relationship conflicts as they may reduce employee well-being.

KEYWORDS
Intragroup conflict; employee well-being; women-dominated work

Introduction

Work-related ill health is increasing, and the prevalence of mental disorders in the working population is estimated to be 20% (Arends, Baer, Miranda, Prinz, & Singh, 2014). Besides health care costs, work-related ill health are responsible for losses in labor supply, high rates of unemployment and high incidence of sickness absence (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2012). Among employees on sick leave, women are in the majority, and in Sweden the highest incidences are found in women-dominated sectors such as health care, social services, and education (Försäkringskassan, 2016). Understanding factors that contribute to ill health in women-dominated workplaces is therefore of utmost importance, and previous research points toward factors within the work environment (see FORTE, 2016 for a review). One potential explanation, which has so far attracted little research attention, is the role that intragroup conflicts at work may play for employee health and well-being (De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012).

Studies of conflicts at work have traditionally focused on conflict management and not the consequences, and those studying consequences have mainly focused on the role played by intragroup conflicts for individual or group performance. These studies suggest that different types of conflict affect team performance in different ways; however, the prevalence and consequences of intragroup

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conflict on employee well-being in general, and in women-dominated workplaces in particular, have been less studied. The lack of integration of research on intragroup conflicts on the one hand and employee well-being on the other is remarkable, given that not only is the relationship between conflicts and well-being intuitively appealing, but also more than seven percent of employees on sick leave attribute their poor mental health to conflicts at work (Engers, 1995).

The purpose of the present study is therefore to examine the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflict on employee well-being in three women-dominated occupations (teachers, social workers, and nurses) from a gender perspective. We contribute to the literature on intragroup conflict, employee well-being, and gender in three important ways. Firstly, we examine the prevalence of intragroup conflicts in women-dominated professions. Although the prevalence of intragroup conflicts has been studied in general, less is known of their prevalence in women-dominated professions specifically. In addition, we compare the prevalence of conflicts in three women-dominated occupations: teachers, nurses, and social workers, in order to explore whether the different settings/organizations in which they work (schools, hospitals, and social services) are prone to developing different types of conflict. Secondly, we examine the consequences of intragroup conflicts on employee well-being, including outcomes that, to our knowledge, have not been studied before, such as depression. Given the high prevalence of sick leave in women-dominated occupations, in combination with high workloads and restructuring, which are known predictors of intragroup conflict (Oxenstierna, Elofsson, Gjerde, Magnusson, & Theorell, 2012), it is important to examine the prevalence and consequences of such conflicts for employee well-being in this particular context. Understanding how intragroup conflict may contribute to ill health in women-dominated workplaces is also important to help organizations build and design interventions based on empirical evidence that may improve the health of employees in this sector. Finally, we compare the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflicts between men and women using a gender perspective. Previous studies on gender and work conflicts have focused either on the conflict management styles and gender of managers (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002; Chusmir & Mills, 1989; Holt & De Vore, 2005; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Watson & Hoffman, 1996) or on examinations of gender differences in conflict resolution in studies involving students (Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, & Chin, 2005; Sadri & Rahmatian, 2003; Watson, Cooper, Torres, & Boyd, 2008). To our knowledge, few studies have attempted to incorporate a gender perspective on conflicts within work organizations, but this may be helpful in shedding light on a traditional dichotomous division whereby attributes considered typical of women are often negatively-coded characteristics and behavior compared to the attributes considered typical of men (Hirdman, 2001; Wikander, 1994). Women are characterized as rigid, conflictual, mean, and sensitive as well as talking behind other people’s backs and taking on problems (Keisu, 2009). On the other hand, men and masculinity are associated with setting boundaries with ease, leaving work at the office and resolving problems and conflicts explicitly. Furthermore, they are portrayed as being able to make decisions, rational, and direct, whereas women are considered vague, unable to make decisions, and emotional. Hence, this illustrates how understandings about men and women are ordered dichotomic and hierarchical, creating a gendered pattern (Acker, 2012).

**Intragroup conflict in women-dominated workplaces**

Teamwork and working in occupational teams is commonly encouraged and strived toward in women-dominated sectors, such as schools, health care, and the social services. Working in occupational teams has many established advantages; it increases knowledge, creativity, and the acceptance of new ideas and also improves commitment and motivation (Levine & Moreland, 1990; McGrath, 1984). But teamwork might also hinder effective group functioning, creating frustration and conflict (De Wit et al., 2012). Intragroup conflict is here defined as the process that emerges when group members experience differences or incompatibilities (De Wit et al., 2012). In previous research, three types of intragroup conflict have been identified: relationship, task, and process conflict (Amason,
Conflicts around personality differences and differences in norms and values are labeled relationship conflicts, and often involve feelings of tension, friction, and dislike. When a group disagrees about the content or outcomes of the tasks being performed, it is labeled task conflict. These disagreements can be characterized by animated discussions or personal excitement but not by the negative personal feelings that are associated with relationship conflicts. The third type is process conflict, which is disagreements about the logistics of task accomplishment, such as who is responsible for what and how much responsibility everyone has (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Meta-analyses and cross-sectional studies have indicated that relationship conflicts are more likely to cause anxiety and distract members from the task, leading to reduced efficiency (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Moderate task conflict, on the other hand, might increase the group’s performance and efficiency, stimulate critical thinking and improve the quality of decisions (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Process conflicts are also suggested to have negative effects on group outcomes because they may become highly personal, as they concern task delegation or role assignment, which implies capabilities or respect within the group (De Wit et al., 2012).

The role of the different types of intragroup conflicts in women-dominated workplaces remains more or less unexplored. However, previous research has demonstrated that both high and conflicting demands and organizational change are predictors of conflicts at work (Oxenstierna et al., 2012; Stoetzer, 2011). At least in Sweden, which is the context of the current study, there have been repeated reports of just such problems in women-dominated sectors such as schools, health care and social services (FORTE, 2016). These findings and reports suggest that this context may be particularly prone to developing intragroup conflicts, which makes it important to examine the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflicts in this sector.

Intragroup conflict and employee well-being

While the majority of previous research on intragroup conflict has focused on rather short-term consequences for individual and work-team performance, less attention has been devoted to “soft” outcomes, such as employee well-being (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005). In line with Dana and Griffin (1999), we view well-being as comprising both work-related and non-work-related aspects of general health and, in the present study, we use vigor, stress, burnout, and depression as indicators of well-being. Based on the idea that intragroup conflict may elicit negative emotions, trigger stress, and in the long run cause deteriorations in mental health (Frone, 2000; Warr, 1990), studies have examined intragroup conflicts in general, and found associations with negative affect (Ilies, 2011), stress (Dijkstra, van Dierendonck, Evers, & De Dreu, 2005), poor mental health (Dijkstra, van Dierendonck, & Evers, 2005), and depression (Inoue, Kawakami, Stress, & Health Cohort Study Group, 2010) in employees. However, based on the findings that relationship, task, and process conflicts vary in their association with employee outcomes such as productivity and performance (De Wit et al., 2012), it is warranted to assume that these different conflict types may also impact differently upon employee well-being.

Relationship conflict may influence employee well-being in a number of ways. Disagreements within a team on personal issues may increase anxiety, while also representing an ego threat because the issues leading to the conflict are often strongly intertwined with self-concept (De Wit et al., 2012). Ego threats may increase hostility between team members, which over time may translate into distrust or feelings of stress, burnout and/or depression. Based on conservation of resources theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989), relationship conflicts may also lead to loss of valuable resources, such as coworker support, which over time has a negative impact on well-being. Empirical studies confirm the negative influence of relationship conflicts on employees’ affective well-being (Guerra, Martinez, Munduate, & Medina, 2005; Medina, Munduate, Dorado, Martinez, & Guerra, 2005; Sonnentag, Unger, & Nagel, 2013), stress (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000), negative emotions (De Wit et al., 2012), and emotional exhaustion (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Studies on burnout are less conclusive, with some suggesting that relationship conflicts increase employee perceptions of burnout (Jimmieson, Tucker, & Campbell, 2017), while others found
no relationship (Leon-Perez, Antino, & Leon-Rubio, 2016). In sum, based on the overall findings of previous studies, we propose:

Hypothesis 1a. Relationship conflicts at work are negatively related to employee well-being.

Task conflicts have been less associated with negative outcomes than relationship conflicts, and a recent meta-analysis found no relationship between task conflict and affective reactions (De Wit et al., 2012). It has been suggested that, on the one hand, task conflicts improve a team’s critical evaluation of ideas and increase the members’ understanding of the task at hand. On the other hand, task conflicts are also suggested to increase team members’ cognitive load, generate dissatisfaction, cause people to ruminate, and generate stress (De Wit et al., 2012). The majority of empirical studies on the impact of task conflicts in relation to employee well-being suggest that task conflict is unrelated to emotional exhaustion (Giebels & Janssen, 2005), well-being (Medina et al., 2005), stress (Friedman et al., 2000), or burnout (Leon-Perez et al., 2016). One exception is a study of public-sector and private-sector employees, which found that task conflicts were related to reduced well-being, but only for employees in the private sector (Guerra et al., 2005). However, given that the majority of previous studies suggest that task conflicts are unrelated to employee well-being we propose:

Hypothesis 1b. Task conflicts at work are unrelated to employee well-being.

Process conflicts have been less thoroughly studied in relation to employee well-being. In fact, we found only two published studies on the subject. Leon-Perez et al. (2016) found in a study of safety inspection workers that process conflict was unrelated to burnout. However, in a diary study of Dutch employees, Rispens and Demerouti (2016) demonstrated that process conflict predicted daily negative emotions. Theoretically, process conflicts, just like relationship conflicts, are suggested to generate negative outcomes because the issues at the heart of process conflicts, such as task delegation or role assignment, may carry “personal connotations such as implied capabilities or respect within the group” (De Wit et al., 2012). For example, during a disagreement on task delegation, team members may feel that their assigned tasks are beneath them, and see the assignment as a personal insult. Therefore, process conflicts may become highly personal and thus generate stress and negative emotions that over time translate into feelings of burnout and depression. Based on these suggestions, we propose:

Hypothesis 1c. Process conflicts at work are negatively related to employee well-being.

A gender perspective on intragroup conflict and employee well-being

Several studies in a US context have examined gender differences in relation to conflicts at work (e.g. Boonsathorn, 2007; Davis, Capobianco, & Kraus, 2010; Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1984; Sorenson, Hawkins, & Sorenson, 1995; Wachter, 1999; Watson et al., 2008). The findings of these studies are contradictory (Thomas, Thomas, & Schaubhut, 2008). When gender differences are found, they involve more competitive behavior by men, whereas women’s styles of conflict lead to more varied findings. Against this backdrop, Holt and De Vore (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 36 empirical studies to provide a clearer picture. They included variables from individualistic and collectivist cultures, gender, and organizational roles such as superior, subordinate, and peer. The results revealed that, within collectivist cultures, withdrawing, compromising, and problem solving are more common than within individualistic cultures, where a forcing style was more often found. Still, women are more likely to endorse a compromising conflict style than men, regardless of culture. Men are also more likely than women to have a forcing style in an individualistic culture and overall with their superiors, regardless of culture. For example, in an intragroup conflict, a forcing style implies an individual who does not expose any weakness, and at the same time shows low
interest in listening to colleagues’ arguments or requests, and instead pushes his own will forward. Having a compromising conflict style could imply the opposite behavior. Despite extensive gender segregation, both vertical and horizontal in the labor market, previous studies on gender differences have tended to investigate gender and organizational level separately. However, one study found that men’s greater competitive behavior remained, even though six hierarchical organizational levels were included in the analysis (Thomas et al., 2008). This finding illustrates distinct gendered patterns in that men exhibit more competitive behaviors, a more forcing conflict style, and a less compromising style compared to women. As other research also supports a traditional dichotomous division between men and masculinity vs. women and femininity (Hirdman, 2001; Wikander, 1994), we propose:

Hypothesis 2. Men experience higher levels of intragroup conflict compared to their female colleagues.

As the occupations in this study are part of a collectivist culture, during their education, teachers, registered nurses, and social workers have academic training to focus on the needs of their students, healthcare recipients, and citizens respectively, but they also need to have professional autonomy and independence in their work. To understand gendering processes in organizations, we apply Acker’s (1990, 2012) analysis, where she argues that inequality are embedded in all organizations through four interrelated processes; organizational structure, organizational culture, interactions at work and individual identity. The first process, Gendering Practices and Structures, establish the gendered division of labor and requirements at work, producing ‘gender patterning of jobs, wages, and hierarchies, power, and subordination’ (Acker, 1992, p. 252). Gendering Cultures, the second process, involves the creation of symbols, images which explain, reinforce and seldom oppose gender divisions produced in the first process. The third process, Gendering Interactions, consider how individual or groups of individuals interact with each other, behavior that sometimes includes submission and dominance. Gendered Individual Identity, the fourth process, concerns how the individual presents oneself with behavior and appearance at work, as a gendered participant. If we include the results from conflict research on gender differences and knowledge about the social construction of femininity, in which girls from a young age are trained in caring for others (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and how gendered processes are an embedded part of everyday practice, creating inequality at work through four interrelated organizational processes (Acker, 1990, 2012), it is reasonable to assume that women to a greater extent than men are vulnerable when conflicts arise. The gendered division of labor (Gendering Practices and Structures) involves primary expectation of women to handle the relational work, to be compassionate, to listen and assess the needs of others. Hence, it becomes more of a failure in relation to gender identity (Gendered Individual Identity) for women to be in conflict with their colleagues. Presenting oneself as a respectable gendered member is for women more associated to relational expertise than it is for men. Therefore, we can assume that conflict affects women’s psychological well-being more negatively than it affects men’s. Another argument as to why the negative relationship between intragroup conflict and well-being is stronger for women than for men is that, when you include both paid work and unpaid household work, the gendered division of labor, women work more hours than men (SCB, 2018). Women are more tired and therefore have fewer resources than men with which to cope and deal with conflicts within their work groups. Hence we propose:

Hypothesis 3. The negative relationship between intragroup conflicts and well-being is stronger for women compared to their male colleagues.

Method

Procedure and participants

We used Statistics Sweden, a government agency that produces official statistics, to draw a (stratified random) representative sample of teachers, nurses, and social workers based on the Swedish
Occupational Register in Sweden. We invited 833 teachers, 833 nurses, and 833 social workers working in Sweden to participate in our study. A paper survey, taking around 10 minutes to fill in, was distributed by mail to the respondents’ home addresses. After two reminders, we received 1299 responses (consisting of 412 teachers, 481 nurses, and 406 social workers), yielding an overall response rate of 52%. The sample had an average age of 48 years, 85% were female, and the respondents had an average tenure in their occupation of 17 years.

**Measures**

**Intragroup conflict**

We used the nine-item scale developed by Jehn and Mannix (2001) to measure intragroup conflict. This scale consists of three subscales with three items each, including relationship, task, and process conflict. Example items are: “How often do people get angry while working in your group?” (relationship conflict), “How much conflict of ideas is there in your group?” (task conflict) and “How often are there disagreements about who should do what in your work group?” (process conflict). Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (rarely or never) to 5 (always). In the present study, coefficient alpha was 0.77 for the relationship conflict scale, 0.84 for the task conflict scale, and 0.84 for the process conflict scale.

**Employee well-being**

We measured employee well-being using four different scales, reflecting both positive and negative aspects. We measured **vigor**, referring to high levels of energy and mental resilience at work, using the three-item subscale from the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). An example item is: “In my work, I feel bursting with energy”, and responses are given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always/every day). Coefficient alpha for the three-item vigor subscale in the present study was 0.88.

We measured **depression**, which refers to a depressed mood, feelings of guilt, hopelessness, loss of appetite and sleep disturbance (González et al., 2017) using a four item subscale from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire II (COPSOQ II; Pejtersen, Kristensen, Borg, & Bjørner, 2010). An example item is: “How often do you feel sad?”, and responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (all the time). In the present study, coefficient alpha for the depression scale was 0.81.

**Burnout**, defined as a three-component construct including exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), was assessed using a four-item subscale from COPSOQ II (Pejtersen et al., 2010). An example item is: “How often do you feel emotionally exhausted?” and responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time). Coefficient alpha for the burnout scale in the present study was 0.88.

We measured **stress**, defined as an individual’s appraisal of the environment as taxing or exceeding his or her resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), using a four-item subscale from COPSOQ II (Pejtersen et al., 2010). An example item is “How often do you feel tense?” Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time), and the coefficient alpha for the stress scale in the present study was 0.84.

**Control variables**

Previous research suggests that well-being may not only be contingent upon intragroup conflicts, but also on the degree of control over one’s job and workload (De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003). Because these factors may also be associated with intragroup issues, we included them as control variables in our study. The inclusion of these variables will help to rule out alternative explanations when finding significant associations between intragroup conflict and employee well-being. We measured job control using a four-item scale developed by Pejtersen et al. (2010), assessing influence at work. An example item is: “Do you have a say in important decisions regarding your work?” Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never
or almost never) to 5 (often if not always). Coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.68. We assessed workload using a subscale from COPSPOQ II (Pejtersen et al., 2010) measuring quantitative work demands containing four items, with responses given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (often if not always). An example item is: “How often does it happen that you don’t have time to finish your tasks?” Coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.85. We also included single items of age, gender, and tenure as control variables in our study.

**Analysis**

We first assessed whether our core constructs, including relationship conflict, task conflict, process conflicts, vigor, burnout, stress, depression, job control, and workload represented nine distinct constructs by running a set of confirmatory factor analyses in Mplus. We then assessed the consequences of intragroup conflicts on employee well-being using structural equation modeling.

To compare the prevalence of intragroup conflicts between men and women, we used design weights calculated by Statistics Sweden to correct for non-response. These design weights correct potential bias in data due to non-response, and make the sample representative of its intended populations. Mean values were then compared and a 95% confidence interval for each value was calculated.

To be able to compare whether men and women are affected by conflicts in the same way, we used SPSS (version 25) to create a random sample of women equal to the number of men in the sample. This subsample thus consisted of 191 women drawn from the larger sample of female respondents (n = 1104). In our subsample analyses, stress and depression were highly correlated when included in the same regression (r > 1), and we therefore chose to exclude depression (given that it is less work related) from these subsample analyses to avoid multicollinearity.

We then tested whether our measures were invariant across gender, and in line with current recommendations (Little, 2013; Widaman, Ferrer, & Conger, 2010), configural, metric (factor loadings), and scalar (factor loadings and intercepts) invariance was tested across the group in a measurement model including intragroup conflict and well-being scales. We used change in the comparative fit index (ΔCFI) as the goodness-of-fit index when comparing the models. A decrease equal to or greater than −.01 in CFI is considered an indication of non-invariance (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Given the small subsample analysis, we then analyzed each conflict type separately, regressing it on the remaining well-being outcomes of vigor, stress, and burnout using multiple group structural equation modeling. To assess whether or not the differences in parameters between the men and women were significant, Wald’s test of parameter constraints was employed, comparing the estimates of vigor, burnout and stress in relation to the three different types of intragroup conflict. To evaluate the model fit in our structural equation models, we used conventional fit indices, which include the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardized root mean residual (SRMR), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Traditional cutoff criteria (CFI and TLI > .90, SRMR and RMSEA < .08) were used to indicate acceptable model fit (Kline, 2010; Marsh, 2007). All analyses were carried out using Mplus version 7.31 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998–2012) with maximum likelihood estimation.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics, scale reliability and correlations between all the variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, relationship conflict and process conflict were negatively correlated with employee well-being. Contrary to expectations, task conflict was not unrelated but also negatively correlated to employee well-being. In line with previous research, age and tenure were negatively correlated with employee well-being, while being female was positively correlated with both positive and negative aspects of employee well-being.
Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlations between all study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
<th>8.</th>
<th>9.</th>
<th>10.</th>
<th>11.</th>
<th>12.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>47.70</td>
<td>11.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>3. Tenure</td>
<td>17.12</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.78**</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Relationship conflict</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.77)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Task conflict</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>−.13**</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.10**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Process conflict</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>−.08**</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>−.06*</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Vigor</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>−.27**</td>
<td>−.25**</td>
<td>−.22**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Depression</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>−.13**</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>−.15**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>−.45**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Burnout</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>−.17**</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td>−.19**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>−.52**</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Stress</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>−.14**</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>−.15**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>−.41**</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.78**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Work-load</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−.08**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>−.19**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Job control</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>−.08**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.20**</td>
<td>−.15**</td>
<td>−.21**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
<td>−.26**</td>
<td>.08**</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The prevalence of intragroup conflict

The analyses of the prevalence of intragroup conflict in the total sample suggest that task conflicts are the most common type of conflict, and 93% of our respondents stated that they have experienced such conflicts. Also, 95% of the respondents have experienced relationship conflict, while 89% stated that they have experienced process conflicts. These findings suggest that intragroup conflicts are quite common in female-dominated workplaces. On the other hand, only 3–5% of our respondents reported that these conflicts occur frequently (i.e. often or all the time).

We then compared the prevalence of intragroup conflict among teachers, nurses, and social workers. A one-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences between the three occupational groups (see Table 2). Post-hoc tests suggest a statistically significant difference in relationship conflicts between nurses and teachers, with nurses experiencing more relationship conflict than teachers. In addition, social workers experience statistically significantly more task conflicts than both teachers and nurses. Finally, nurses experience statistically significantly more process conflicts than both teachers and social workers. These findings indicate important differences in experiences of intragroup conflict between the three occupational groups in our study.

Hypothesis testing

Next, structural equation modeling was employed. We first estimated a set of confirmatory factor analyses to examine whether our variables represented distinct constructs. A nine-factor model with all items loading on their respective factor fitted the data well: $\chi^2 (428) = 1573.38, p < .001$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.04, .05]. Importantly, it fitted better than a seven-factor model with all conflict items loading on a single factor: $\chi^2 (443) = 2452.40, p < .001$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.057, .062], or than a one-factor model: $\chi^2 (464) = 10065.20, p < .001$, CFI = .56, TLI = .54, SRMR = .12, RMSEA = .13, 90% CI [.12, .13]. We then analyzed the consequences of intragroup conflict on employee well-being, controlling for background variables such as age, gender, and tenure, as well as perceptions of job control and workload. The model fitted the data well: $\chi^2 (512) = 1789.88, p < .001$, CFI = .94, TLI = .93, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .04, 90% CI [.04, .05]. As presented in Figure 1, the analyses revealed that, among the different conflict types, relationship conflict is most damaging in relation to employee well-being. In line with Hypothesis 1a, relationship conflict was negatively related to vigor ($\beta = -.13, p = .027$), and positively related to depression ($\beta = .13, p = .029$), burnout ($\beta = .20, p = .000$), and stress ($\beta = .20, p = .000$). Task conflict was unrelated to all well-being outcomes; $\beta = -.06, p = .31$ (vigor), $\beta = .03, p = .59$ (depression), $\beta = -.02, p = .64$ (burnout), and $\beta = -.02, p = .71$ (stress), supporting Hypothesis 1b. Process conflict was positively related to depression ($\beta = .10, p = .04$), but unrelated to vigor ($\beta = .03, p = .53$), burnout ($\beta = .07, p = .12$), or stress ($\beta = .05, p = .28$), lending mixed support to Hypothesis 1c.

Finally, the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflict were compared between men and women. As presented in Table 3, the analyses revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the reported prevalence of intragroup conflict between men and women regarding relationship, task, or process conflict, lending no support to Hypothesis 2.

Table 2. Descriptives and F-values for the one way ANOVAs of intragroup conflict.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers (n = 404)</th>
<th>Nurses (n = 480)</th>
<th>Social workers (n = 396)</th>
<th>F-value for group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict</td>
<td>2.27 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.39 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.35 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task conflict</td>
<td>2.53 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.74 (0.68)</td>
<td>11.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process conflict</td>
<td>2.13 (0.75)</td>
<td>2.26 (0.74)</td>
<td>2.13 (0.75)</td>
<td>4.14*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .001
We then used structural equation modeling to compare whether men and women react to conflicts in the same way. Prior to estimating the models, measurement invariance across gender was examined to make sure that our measures were stable across groups (Little, 2013; Widaman et al., 2010). As presented in Table 4, increasingly restricted models were estimated, the first without any equality constraints (configural invariance), the second with equality constraints on

Table 3. Comparing the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflict on well-being between men and women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Vigor</th>
<th>Burnout</th>
<th>Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task conflict</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process conflict</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Multiple group measurement invariance (N = 379).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>90% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Configural</td>
<td>521.86</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>.948</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.051 - .069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric</td>
<td>543.64</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>.946</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.051 - .068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scalar</td>
<td>570.84</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.052 - .069</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Consequences of intragroup conflict on employee well-being controlled for demands, control, age, gender and tenure (variables omitted for clarity).
the factor loadings (metric invariance), and the third with equality constraints on factor loadings and intercepts (scalar invariance; Little, 2013). The analyses confirmed the presence of measurement invariance across groups.

The findings from comparing how men and women react to conflicts in terms of reduced well-being are summarized in Table 3, and overall we found no statistically significant differences between men’s and women’s reactions to intragroup conflicts, contradicting Hypothesis 3. However, women tended to make higher estimates, especially regarding process conflicts, and men made more insignificant estimates, suggesting a tendency for women to be slightly more affected by intragroup conflicts than men.

**Discussion**

The current study examined the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflict in women-dominated workplaces from a gender perspective. We found that task conflict (conflicts concerning the content or outcomes of the work tasks) was the most common type of intragroup conflict, but also that the prevalence of intragroup conflict depended on occupation. Furthermore, our analyses showed that, among the different types of intragroup conflicts, relationship conflict (conflicts centering on differences in norms, values or personality) reduced employee well-being the most, followed by process conflicts (conflicts about logistics and responsibilities). Finally, we found no gender differences in relation to the prevalence or consequences of intragroup conflicts.

Intragroup conflicts are common in the professions studied here. A majority of the respondents stated that they had experience of task, relationship and/or process conflicts, but at the same time these conflicts do not generally occur frequently. Comparing our findings to the meta-analysis by De Wit et al. (2012), our respondents experienced lower levels of intragroup conflict than work groups in general. In comparing the different occupational groups, we found interesting and important differences. Nurses stand out significantly; they have a greater occurrence of relationship conflicts than teachers and more process conflicts than both teachers and social workers. This finding could be due to the fact that nurses more commonly work in interdependent occupational teams together with other professions with slightly different norms, values and priorities (Keisu, Tafvelin, & Kvist, 2019). Even though occupational teams might increase creativity and knowledge, as well as improving commitment and motivation, they are also known to create frustration and conflict (De Wit et al., 2012; Levine & Moreland, 1990; McGrath, 1984). Teachers and social workers also work in occupational teams, of course, but more commonly with other professionals having a similar educational and professional background, and hence more similar norms, values and priorities. The greater occurrence of task conflicts experienced by social workers could be explained through their work content. Social workers often deal with complex social problems, often with disparate and contested interests at stake, problems that require a careful and reflexive approach. A high occurrence of task conflicts might in this case even indicate professional quality.

In support of Hypotheses 1a and 1b, our findings suggest that relationship conflicts were negatively related to employee well-being, while task conflicts were unrelated to employee well-being. This is in line with the small but increasing body of studies on the role of intragroup conflicts and employee well-being (De Wit et al., 2012; Friedman et al., 2000; Guerra et al., 2005; Medina et al., 2005; Sonnentag et al., 2013). Our study adds to this literature by showing that relationship conflicts also increase employees’ perception of depression, which demonstrates the severity of the consequences that intragroup conflicts at work may have.

Our study is among the first to examine the consequences of process conflicts for employee well-being, and our findings give mixed support to Hypothesis 1c, as only depression was related to process conflicts. Employee vigor, burnout, and stress, on the other hand, were unrelated to process conflicts. These findings suggest that, in relation to employee well-being, process conflicts are not as hurtful as relationship conflicts, but more so than task conflicts. Interestingly, our findings are in line with the mixed support found in previous studies, confirming that process conflicts do not produce
burnout (Leon-Perez et al., 2016), but rather are linked to negative emotions (Rispens & Demerouti, 2016) that over time may translate into depression. This suggests that process conflicts may not be as high in intensity as relationship conflicts, but instead slowly wear employees down.

Despite the dominant societal norms of men and women exhibiting dichotomous behaviors (Hirdman, 2001; Keisu, 2009; Wikander, 1994), or research findings showing that men display more competing behavior, a forcing conflict style and a less compromising conflict style in comparison to women (Holt & De Vore, 2005; Thomas et al., 2008), no gender differences were found in our study. Men and women experienced the same levels of intragroup conflict, and Hypothesis 2 was rejected. Hence, we can conclude that the idea that men experience higher levels of intragroup conflict compared to their female colleagues ruptures the gender myth of dichotomous conflict behavior between the sexes. From a feminist perspective, this is not a surprising finding. It shows that women and men within the same occupation have similar experiences of intragroup conflicts, which may be due to a shared experience of the work environment (e.g. Kanter, 1977).

The comparison between how men and women react to conflicts in terms of reduced well-being are, however, more unexpected. We found no support for Hypothesis 3, which suggested that women would suffer more from intragroup conflicts than their male colleagues. The ongoing tension for care workers is the contradiction between seeking to balance their own needs (benefit to self) and the needs of patients (benefiting others) (Lawless & Moss, 2007). For women, this is a continuous activity during non-work hours as well, due to the fact that women still do more unpaid household work, despite their high level of participation in the paid labor market in Sweden (SCB, 2018). But it is also due to gender identity, whereby women in comparison to men are trained in curing and caring for others, putting themselves and their own emotions aside (Acker, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). One explanation for our findings may be that there is a self-selected group of men working within these occupations. They are as socialized and trained in caring behaviors as women. Or are the findings revealing that women’s vulnerability (due to their high level of unpaid as well as paid work) is a strength, instead of a weakness, because women may have greater social support than men?

Implications

From a practice perspective, it is important to remember that not all intragroup conflicts are destructive. Task conflicts are common in interdependent teams of professionals and contribute to improved quality in the work performed. The contesting of ideas and solutions to complex problems leads to professional and nuanced decisions, as well as creativity and work engagement (Levine & Moreland, 1990; McGrath, 1984). However, constructive task conflicts need to be handled with attention and precautions, because if they become prolonged, they risk turning into more destructive relationship or process conflicts. When task conflicts start to cause tension, friction and dislike, or when a group disagrees about who is responsible for what and how much responsibility everyone has, the work environment and employees’ health become jeopardized. This is something that could be prevented through proactively institutionalizing and providing forums and time for the discussion of problems and conflicts. Questions about constructive and destructive conflicts should be included in recurrent employee surveys and actively discussed as a work environment issue. Managers could help situate these conflicts in its organizational and societal context, to enable a move away from individualistic interpretations as well as unnecessary and destructive scapegoating. In these workplace discussions, it is important to bring to surface preconceived ideas about gender and conflicts, to talk about understandings about gender that permeate all organizations, and in doing so enable a move away from gender blind organizations toward gender awareness.

From a research perspective, our findings conclude, in concurrence with previous studies, that task conflicts should for the most part be considered constructive. Similarly in agreement with previous research, we conclude that relationship conflicts are predominantly destructive for the work environment and employees’ health. On the other hand, the consequences of process conflicts on the
work environment and employees’ health are less conclusive and need to be studied further. This study’s particular contribution to the field of research is our analysis of the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflicts for women and men within the same occupations, from a gender perspective. This is something that has not been studied before. Previous research within this field has solely considered individual experiences, and we conclude from our findings that a group perspective is much needed to understand the prevalence and consequences of intragroup conflict in women-dominated work environments.

**Limitations and future directions**

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design prevents us from drawing conclusions regarding the direction of relationships in our study. It could be the case that employees with depression, for example, perceive a larger number of relationship conflicts, or that employees with depression, whose interpersonal skills may be hampered due to negative emotions, find themselves more often involved in relationship conflicts. Longitudinal studies examining how relationship conflicts impact upon employee well-being over time are therefore needed to confirm our findings. Secondly, our response rate was rather low. Although unfortunate, this is quite common in larger population studies like ours. Nevertheless, one strength of our study is that we have a sample that is representative of its population, which also builds confidence in our findings. Thirdly, we had issues with multicollinearity when comparing the consequences of intragroup conflicts between men and women, which prevented us from including depression in our analysis. Future studies with larger samples are needed to further compare the impact of intragroup conflict on depression in men and women.

Our study examined the role of intragroup conflict in women-dominated occupations. Future studies may also examine if the same pattern of findings is found in gender-integrated and male-dominated occupations. Studies of women in male-dominated occupations have shown that women experience higher levels of sexual harassment compared to their male colleagues (Keisu, 2009). Building on these findings, it may be the case that women in male-dominated occupations experience higher levels of intragroup conflict and as a consequence suffer more, in terms of reduced well-being. Future studies are also needed to replicate our findings in countries with different welfare systems, to establish whether our findings can be generalized beyond the Swedish context.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, our study suggests that not all intragroup conflicts may be harmful to employee well-being. Our findings reveal that it is relationship conflicts in particular that reduce well-being, followed by process conflicts, while task conflicts are unrelated to well-being. Our study also demonstrates that it is not only work-related well-being that is affected by intragroup conflicts, we also found that it is related to depression. In addition, we found no differences between how men and women perceived and suffered from conflicts at work.

**Data availability statement**

The data in this study is available by request from the first author (susanne.tafvelin@umu.se).

**Disclosure statement**

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