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Effects of a Cultural Reconciliation Procedure on Multinational Collaborative Decision Making

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Abstract: *Collaborative decision making in culturally diverse teams is common in a variety of organizational settings. Individuals from different cultural backgrounds bring with them unique knowledge and perspectives that, when brought together, should yield ideas and problem solutions that are more creative and of higher quality than culturally homogeneous teams. However, research has shown that cultural diversity in teams often leads to decreased performance. The purpose of the current study is to examine the effects of reconciling cultural differences on multinational collaborative decision-making. Two groups of culturally diverse teams completed both an idea-generation task and a rank ordering task. Both tasks were completed in a distributed fashion using a web phone. Half the groups engaged in a cultural reconciliation procedure prior to completing the experimental tasks, the other half engaged in a control activity. The results indicated that the groups that had experienced the reconciliation procedure performed significantly worse on the idea-generation and rank ordering tasks, and they experienced lower overall team efficacy. The results suggest that future research should examine procedures and reconciliation concepts calling attention to cultural commonalities between team members, rather than differences. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.*

Keywords: *Culture; Multinational; Cultural Commonalities; Collaboration; Decision making*

1 Introduction

As is necessarily the case in an increasingly global environment, a great deal of collaboration takes place between team members who have different cultural backgrounds. Correspondingly, increasing interest in the research community has turned towards identifying the relative value of multinational teams as well as the elements necessary to ensure that multinational teams are successful (e.g. Earley and Gibson, 2002). Perhaps the dominant approach to bridging cultural differences is to promote awareness of those differences. The effects of making cultural differences more salient have not previously been empirically tested. The present study examines the effects of promoting awareness of cultural differences on the collaborative decision making process in multinational teams.

1.1 The Cultural Diversity Paradox

Cultural diversity in a decision making team is often considered a potential performance enhancer, yet multinational teams often end up suffering performance decrements. Diversity in knowledge has indeed been found to improve divergent decision tasks, such as brainstorming. For example, Gettys, Pliske, Manning, & Casey (1987) found that participants generated far more solutions to a parking problem collectively than individually because of wide differences in background knowledge. This has sometimes been referred to as a cultural diversity paradox (McHugh, Smith, & Sieck, 2007).

The existence of the cultural diversity paradox points to cultural variation in two distinct kinds of knowledge: Content knowledge and process knowledge. Content knowledge refers to the unique knowledge and perspectives about the substance of the decision problem members of multinational teams can bring with them (e.g. McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Thomas et al., 1996). Process knowledge variation refers to cultural differences in understandings about how the group should work together on the decision problem. That is, individuals from different cultures are likely to have different ideas about how a team should collaborate, i.e. how the team shares information, develops alternatives, and how they reach agreement and a decision. These differences reflect cultural variations in the individuals' mental models of collaborative decision making (McHugh, Smith, & Sieck, 2007). These differences in mental models of decision processes can, and likely do, produce tension and impair the interaction patterns within culturally diverse teams. This account can in part explain the result that multinational teams either fail to outperform or perform worse than culturally homogeneous teams on short term tasks (Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993; Staples, & Zhao, 2006).

Earley and Mosakowski (2000) have proposed that teams who work together over a period of time essentially do reconcile their process differences naturally, and develop what they refer to as a hybrid culture. Earley et al. propose that teams composed of members with different national backgrounds do not have shared meaning systems outset. Through the experience of interacting with each other, culturally diverse teams can develop a simplified set of rules, norms, expectations and roles (Hambrick, Davison, Snell, & Snow, 1998). The emergence of a hybrid culture within nationally heterogeneous teams has been demonstrated to strengthen the group-specific identity of the group and thereby facilitate interaction and performance (Casmir, 1992). Studies examining the performance of culturally diverse teams over time have shown significant improvements in interaction processes as well as performance. For example, Watson, Kumar, and Michaelson (1993) examined the performance on several collaborative decision making tasks of culturally diverse and homogeneous teams over a 17 week period. Both groups received process feedback based on a group style inventory. Groups were also given time to discuss how they could improve their processes and performance on future tasks. The results of their study showed that, initially, homogeneous groups scored higher on both process and performance measures. Over time, both types of teams showed

improvements on both kinds of scores. By week 17 the diverse groups had essentially converged with the homogeneous groups. Since both groups received process feedback, it was not clear what role that feedback had on these findings.

In line with the concept of hybrid cultures, reconciling cultural differences is about converging team members on their process knowledge so that they can take advantage of the divergent content knowledge present within their diverse team. According to Earley and Mosakowski (2000) hybrid cultures develop over an extended period of team interaction. However, the specific mechanisms by which hybrid cultures develop are left open, as is the question of whether and how the development of hybrid cultures can be accelerated. For example, do “cultural orientation” programs that seek to highlight cultural differences in order to increase sensitivity and promote reconciliation aid the development of hybrid cultures? Or, should differences be downplayed, at least initially?

1.2 Highlighting Cultural Differences

Traditionally, the philosophy underlying programs designed to prepare people for cross-cultural interactions has been to provide orientation to the differences in social interactions between the two cultures in question. Such efforts were appropriately referred to as Cultural Orientation Programs (e.g. Brislin, & Pedersen, 1976). More recently, a more training oriented approach has been adopted, which, in addition to calling out the differences, introduces people to and lets them practice culturally appropriate behaviors (Brislin, & Bhawuk, 1999; Triandis, 1995). The underlying method is one that sensitizes people to the existence of cultural differences.

An implicit assumption behind this kind of an approach is that attempted reconciliation of differences improves cultural interactions. This assumption is consistent with other thinking, as well. For example, Nemeth (1992) suggests that the mere expression of alternative views can increase the attention of the group to the decision-making process itself, which in turn can have a positive influence on the quality of the group's decision making and performance. However, to our knowledge, the idea that promoting awareness of cultural differences has beneficial effects on cultural interactions has not been directly tested. Furthermore, some recent research suggests that downplaying cultural differences during early interactions may instead be helpful, suggesting that highlighting cultural differences could actually hamper performance.

1.3 Downplaying Cultural Differences

In contrast to the ideas inherent in cultural orientation programs, some recent research suggests that making cultural differences explicit up front could hamper performance in multinational collaborations. Staples and Zhao (2006) examined the performance of culturally diverse and culturally homogeneous teams in the context of distributed or face-to-face interaction. Staples et al. found no overall differences between the culturally diverse and homogeneous teams in performance levels. Members of heterogeneous teams were generally less satisfied with their team experience; were less cohesive, and they had more conflict than indicated by members of the homogeneous teams. However, interestingly, the culturally diverse, distributed teams performed significantly better than the diverse, face-to-face teams. Staples et al. propose that the level of anonymity offered by virtual environments has a positive effect on the performance of culturally diverse teams. Carte and Chidambaram (2004) also propose that virtual environments reduce the immediate salience of surface-level diversity, which means that members of virtual teams are less able to engage in categorization behaviors and this in turn makes it less likely that sub-groups form.

In short, virtual modes of interaction remove cues to identity and constrain interactions in a way that make it less likely that cultural differences are perceived. Technology appears to have the effect of making it less likely that cultural differences affect group processes and outcomes. According to this logic, therefore, it could be expected that attempts to reconcile cultural differences will serve to make them more salient and therefore have a negative influence on performance.

2 Experiment

The purpose of the present study is to determine whether highlighting and reconciling cultural differences in mental models of collaborative decision making has a positive or a negative influence on decision making performance. In order to test between these competing proposals, we manipulate whether or not a team is instructed to describe critical aspects of their decision processes, prior to engaging in divergent and convergent decision making tasks. This manipulation allows us to investigate the effects of reconciling potential differences at an early point in the team formation process. The reconciliation procedure focused on four areas in which expectations with regard to collaborative decision making can differ between cultures (McHugh, Smith, & Sieck, 2007). These four areas address how the team generates and shares ideas, how conflicts or disagreements are resolved, and how commitment to the decision is achieved.

These four areas formed the basis of the procedure, and were targeted in four questions:

1. How will team members make their ideas known to the team?
2. How will team members encourage a willingness to listen to one another in an open way?
3. What are ways that team members will handle disagreements in a respectful manner?
4. How will the team get commitment to the team's decision from each member?

McHugh, Smith, and Sieck (2007) found differences between cultures in the divergence phase of the decision-making process (questions 1 and 2), the convergence phase (question 3), and the means by which commitment to the decision is achieved (question 4). For example, cultures that place a high value on 'face', such as Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, are less likely to regard heated disagreement and public conflict as a productive means of reaching a decision, than cultures, such as the US, in which a high value is placed on freedom of expression.

We chose to examine collaborative decision making in a virtual environment because many multinational collaborations take place in such environments. This means of interaction also allowed us to capture the interactions and products directly on the computer.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 36 students from a large Midwestern university. One third of the participants were American citizens and were included in the study based on the requirement that they were born and raised in the United States, and their parents were born and raised in the United States. Two-thirds of the participants were international students and were included in the study based on the requirement that they were neither born nor raised in the United States and similarly their parents were neither born nor raised in the United States. In the experimental group, 58% of the international students were Chinese, and 17% were Indian. In the control group 42% were Chinese, and 33% were Indian. In both groups, the remaining 25% were from other countries outside the US. There was not a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the number of years the participants have spent living in the US. Participants were compensated for their time at a rate of \$11.25 per hour of participation or by receiving class credit counting towards the completion of a required introductory psychology class.

3.2 Materials

The participants were placed in three separate rooms with doors which were kept closed during the experimental sessions. The facilitator worked in a fourth room. The participants and the facilitator used computers and wore headsets with built-in microphone and speaker to communicate with each other. We used the web-phone program Skype to set up a conference call including all three

participants as well as the facilitator. The Skype plug-in Powergrammo was used to record and create digital files of the dialogue. Microsoft Messenger was used to share files between the facilitator and participants during the reconciliation process.

3.3 Procedure

After filling out the consent form participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental condition or the control condition. If participants were not in the experimental condition they were asked to write a 150-200 word paragraph about their best vacation using Word to type their answer. These paragraphs were not shared with the group. If they were assigned to the experimental condition, they participated in the cultural reconciliation procedure. All participants then completed a collaborative decision making task. After completing this task, participants were asked to complete a team efficacy questionnaire and a demographics questionnaire. Participants were then debriefed, thanked for their participation, and received a gift card for a local grocery store in the amount of \$22.50.

3.4 Cultural Reconciliation Manipulation

Participants in the experimental condition were shown an Excel document containing the procedure questions with three empty cells below each question in which participants were instructed to indicate their answers. A facilitator then read the instructions for filling out the questions out loud over the headset and invited participants to start answering the questions. In answering the questions, team members were asked to provide suggestions as to how the team they were about to work in should function within the four areas. When all three participants had finished the questions, they were instructed to save their answers and to send them to the facilitator using MSN Messenger. The facilitator then compiled the team's suggestions into one document using a macro and shared all suggestions with the team by sending the compiled document back to them.

Team members then read all the answers and were instructed to vote for all of the suggestions they would like to implement within their team. After voting, the participants sent the file containing their votes back to the facilitator who now compiled the votes and shared those with the group. The team was instructed that the suggestions receiving the majority of the votes would be the rules or norms their particular team should follow in a subsequent team interaction. Each team member received a document showing them the tallies for each suggestion and the facilitator had highlighted in yellow the suggestions which had received the majority votes. The facilitator then read out loud the suggestions that had received majority votes. This anonymous, iterative voting procedure for achieving consensus on the decision process followed the structure of the Delphi method (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963).

3.5 Decision Tasks

When participants had completed the paragraph or finished the reconciliation procedure, they started working together as a team to complete two decision making tasks, an idea-generation and a rank-ordering task. Our task structure follows that of Vician and DeSanctis (2000).

First, the teams completed an idea generation task in which they were asked to provide the most suggestions/solutions to the following problem "*How can parking be improved at [name of school]*" A parking problem was chosen to enhance the likelihood that our university student participants would have content knowledge they could apply to solve the problem. Participants were instructed that each team member should keep their own written record of the team's answers. Teams were given 12 minutes to generate as many answers as possible and were instructed that their written record should indicate the answers agreed upon by the entire group.

The dependent measures in the idea generation task included number, creativity, and quality of the ideas generated:

3.5.1 Number of ideas

This measure indicates the number of unique (non-overlapping) ideas generated by groups within the 12 minute time limit. All group members were asked to write down the group's ideas. All group members did not in fact maintain a complete record of all the ideas, so the ideas were counted using the record created by the team member who managed to capture most of the ideas and did so most eloquently (which made it easier to judge uniqueness and idea quality).

3.5.2 Idea creativity

In addition to total number of ideas, we generated an index of creativity that evaluated the groups' breadth of ideas relative to the total breadth across the groups. To that end, we created a list of all the unique ideas generated across the groups; 29 unique ideas total. We sorted these ideas into seven categories: Number of spaces, use of spaces, number of cars, pricing/monetary concerns, scheduling, infrastructure, and maintenance. Some of these categories were represented by more ideas than others, ranging from two to 8 ideas within a category, of the 29 total unique ideas. Based on the reckoning that groups would have a higher likelihood of generating an idea that comes from a category with many ideas representing it, we assigned scores between one and 5 to reflect that difference. Therefore, an idea from the category representing 8 ideas would receive a score of 1 and an idea from the category representing two ideas would receive a score of 5.

3.5.3 Idea quality

The quality of each idea was determined by an itemized comparison of the group list of ideas to the final list of ideas generated by a university parking and transportation official. If a group's non-duplicate idea appeared on the official's list, the idea was given a score equivalent to the rank value from the official's list of ideas. A decision quality (ideas) score was calculated for the group by summing all of the idea quality scores. This method for determining idea quality is consistent with Vician and DeSanctis (2000).

After completing the idea generation task, each team received instructions for and began the rank-ordering task. In this task the team was given a Word document containing a list of ten solutions to the parking problems that had been generated by an independent consulting firm hired by WSU to evaluate the university's parking and transportation system (Martens, 2004). Participants were instructed that they were seeing 10 suggestions generated by an independent consulting firm and that the suggestions were presented in random order that did not imply importance. Participants were asked to evaluate the suggestions and provide their best guess as to the order in which the consulting firm would have presented them. That is, they were asked to guess which suggestion the firm believed was most feasible and rank order that suggestion number 1 all the way down to the least feasible suggestion, which they should rank order number 10. The team members were each given a 3D, color, paper map of campus to help them visualize the changes to parking lots and additions suggested by the consulting firm. This map would also assist them in considering the non-cost related implications of adding parking spaces, such as loss of green-space or football fields, walking distances, etc, should they decide to consider those. Participants were asked to write down the rank ordering as well as pros and cons for each suggestion to make it possible to keep track of the criteria they were considering in creating the ranking scheme. The team was given a maximum of 45 minutes to generate their rank ordering scheme.

The dependent measures in the rank ordering task included the accuracy of their order, the number of pros and cons, and their overall confidence:

Rank order error. The quality of the group's rankings on the decision task was assessed by direct comparison of group answers to those of the expert. Error scores were computed as absolute differences from the expert rankings. A low rank order error score is indicative of good performance; a high score is indicative of poor performance.

Number of pros and cons. The number of non-overlapping pros and cons generated by the groups measured the extent of deliberation they engaged in.

Confidence. Individual participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1-11 how confident they were that their rank ordering matched that of the expert. Group averages of the confidence ratings were computed.

3.6 Covariate Measures

Upon completing the rank-ordering task, each participant was asked to indicate their confidence in the degree to which their rank ordering matched the consulting firm's. Subsequently each participant completed a team efficacy questionnaire assessing the team member's subjective experience of working with their particular team. The questions were adapted from Tjosvold, Hui, and Sun (2004) and assessed subjective experience of the degree to which team members' goals converged (Goal Interdependence), the degree to which team members respected one another (Social Face Measure), how comfortable participants felt in sharing their input with the team (Open-minded Interaction), perceived strength of the relationship with team members (Strength of relationship), perceived productivity, (Productivity), and assessment of future productivity (Future Productivity Measure). The phrasing of Tjosvold et al.'s questions was modified to apply to three-person teams. The questionnaire collected responses along an 7-point Likert-type scale. Lastly, participants filled out a demographics questionnaire, were debriefed, and received remuneration. The entire experiment lasted approximately two hours.

4 Results

T-tests were used to assess the statistical significance of differences between the experimental and control groups on the dependent measures of interest. Effects on the idea generation task, the rank-ordering task, and on subjective experience are presented separately below.

4.1 Idea Generation Performance

The control groups generated significantly more ideas in the idea generation task than did the experimental group, $t(10)=-2.89$, $p=.016$ (see table 1 for descriptive statistics). There was also a significant difference in idea creativity when it was assessed using the procedure suggested by the current authors. The control group earned a significantly higher idea creativity score than the experimental group, $t(10)=-2.69$, $p=.023$. However, there was no difference in quality between the ideas generated by the control groups and those generated by the experimental groups.

Table 1: Summary of the results for the idea generation task.

Measure		Experimental Group	Control Group	t	P
Number of Ideas	Mean	5.17	10.83	-2.89	.016
	SD	1.33	4.62		
Idea Quality	Mean	14.33	15.33	-.26	.798
	SD	8.33	4.13		
Idea Creativity	Mean	14.00	30.17	-2.69	.023
	SD	4.10	14.16		

This means that not only were the control groups generating more ideas, they were also generating more categorically different ideas.

4.2 Rank-Order Performance

The control groups generated significantly more pros and cons than the experimental groups, $t(10)=-2.51$, $p=.031$, indicating greater deliberation. Also, the experimental group had lower error scores ($M=29.33$) than the control groups ($M=38.67$), though the difference is not significant (see Table 2). The groups displayed about the same level of confidence in their performance on the rank-ordering task.

Table 2: Summary of the results for the decision task.

Measure		Experimental Group	Control Group	<i>t</i>	P
Rank Order Error Score	Mean	29.33	38.67	-1.63	.135
	<i>SD</i>	7.66	11.78		
Number of Pros/Cons	Mean	4.17	10.50	-2.51	.031
	<i>SD</i>	3.97	4.72		
Confidence (average)	Mean	9.21	9.20	.025	.980
	<i>SD</i>	1.05	1.86		

4.3 Subjective Assessment of Team Efficacy

The control group members reported significantly stronger agreement than the experimental group members that their team members were interacting in an open-minded fashion, $t(30)=-2.73$, $p=.010$ (see Table 3). Consistent with the behavioral results, the control group members reported higher perceived levels of productivity, $t(30)=-3.22$, $p=.003$ and marginally significant higher levels of future productivity. Overall, the control group members reported significantly greater team efficacy, $t(30)=-2.43$, $p=.021$.

Table 3: Summary of the results for the covariate questionnaire.

Dimension		Experimental Group	Control Group	<i>t</i>	P
Social Face	Mean	12.60	12.88	-.53	.599
	<i>SD</i>	1.35	1.62		
Open-Minded Interaction	Mean	71.61	79.83	-2.73	.010
	<i>SD</i>	12.10	4.11		
Strength of Relationship	Mean	17.33	18.72	-1.23	.226
	<i>SD</i>	4.00	2.61		
Productivity	Mean	16.61	19.72	-3.22	.003
	<i>SD</i>	1.27	2.85		
Future Productivity	Mean	11.67	13.06	-1.84	.075
	<i>SD</i>	2.85	1.30		
Overall Team Efficacy	Mean	5.90	6.55	-2.43	.021
	<i>SD</i>	1.06	.38		

5 Discussion

The results of this study provide support for the second hypothesis that diverse teams who have an opportunity to explicitly address and reconcile their differences perform *worse* on a decision making task than teams who do not have such an opportunity. In this experiment, the control groups, who did not experience the reconciliation procedure generated more, and more creative ideas. On the rank-ordering task, the control groups generated more pros and cons and they indicated higher levels of perceived productivity and perceived group efficacy than the experimental groups.

Consistent with past literature showing that de-emphasizing cultural differences improves performance (Carte, & Chidambaram, 2004; Staples, & Zhao, 2006)—our results indicate that increasing the salience of cultural differences has a negative effect on collaborative decision making. Several possible reasons for this finding exist. It is possible that people have a base assumption that mental models are shared. Therefore, if people do not have information to the contrary, that belief remains operative. It may be that the absence of face-to-face cues leaves out cues that would challenge the belief that mental models are shared, and the result is that it takes more time before team members realize that their mental models are not the same. Further, realizing that other team member's mental models are different could be de-motivating in the sense that it is going to be more difficult to make the team work together.

In line with the notion that mental models can be developed in a dynamic, ad hoc fashion (Earley, & Mosakowski, 2000) an alternative explanation of the poor performance of our experimental groups might be that our international participants have multiple mental models for collaborative decision making. The fact that our experiment takes place in an American university and that the tacit task constraints are Western in nature (for example, the communication channels only allows them to communicate with the entire group, not one on one) could serve to activate more Western expectations for collaboration. Further, when we asked them to talk about their mental models for collaboration they produced their national mental model. Having activated their national mental models could make it more apparent to them that the actual collaboration was conflicting with their national mental models.

The present findings do not imply that attempting to create shared mental models for interaction in cross-cultural teams will always have a negative impact. It is likely that a natural trajectory exists along which groups develop shared mental models. Certainly, the research of Watson, Kumar, and Michaelson (1993) as well as Earley and Mosakowski (2000) suggest that this is the case. Currently, we need a better understanding of that natural trajectory in order to determine when in the team formation process cultural differences should be made explicit in order to facilitate the development of shared mental models and when introducing cultural commonalities could have a constructive influence.

Our results suggest that attention to cultural differences early in the team formation process can have a negative influence on performance. Findings such as these are particularly significant in the context of preparing individuals for cross-cultural teamwork. A great deal of existing preparation processes focus on capturing cultural profiles along pre-specified dimensions and report these back to the individual. We have presented initial evidence that such an approach, as it explicitly highlights cultural differences is not the best approach, at least in the context of short term teams. Future research is needed to determine the ideal mix and timing of highlighting cultural differences and downplaying those differences, or even increasing the salience of cultural commonalities.

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