

Moderating Influences of Team Member Heterogeneity on Patterns of Participation and Voice: A Comparison across Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been paid in the literature to behaviours required for effective team performance, and to team behaviours associated with different national cultures. However, much less attention has been devoted to the issue of how individuals from different cultures may adapt and change their behaviour when placed in multicultural settings. Team member voice and participation are crucial for effective team performance, and differences in these have been reported across individualist and collectivist cultures. This paper examines how both individualists and collectivists may adapt their voice and participation behaviours when placed in heterogeneous as opposed to homogenous teams. The findings indicate that individualists are significantly more likely to hide their true voice and change their opinions in order to accommodate the team when working in heterogeneous contexts. Collectivists, who start from a baseline position of being significantly more likely than individualists to hide voice and change opinions to accommodate the group, even when working in homogenous teams, continue to display such behaviours in heterogeneous settings. The implications for team member selection, team development, and team leadership are then considered.

Keywords: cross cultural management, International OB, cross cultural behaviour, group dynamics, heterogeneous, homogeneous

PAPER TEXT

Increasingly workplaces around the world are characterized by interactions between people of different cultures, and a significant body of management research has emerged addressing cross cultural issues. A significant subsection of this literature addresses the subject of cross-cultural teams in the workplace and has focused, for example, on differences in issues of voice and participation, team leadership, and conflict resolution within multicultural teams. Most of this research, however, is comparative in nature focusing simply on identifying differences between defined cultural groupings. The potential to apply such knowledge is severely limited by the fact that for the most part such research has studied behavior in culturally homogenous groups. This problem gives rise to the question of whether comparative behaviors remain consistent as an individual enters teams consisting of members from multiple cultures. In the current study, we examine differences in voice and participation in collectivists and individualists as members of homogenous and heterogeneous teams.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In studying team performance, various factors have been shown to be associated with effective teams including, for example, high levels of discussion, information sharing and participation by multiple team members in team activities (Harper and Askling, 1980; Bunderson and Sutcliffe, 2002; Cooper and Kagel, 2005), all of which relate to team processes and member participation. From a cross-cultural perspective, one aspect of national culture has been shown to be particularly robust in the study of individual and team behaviour – *individualism – collectivism* (Hofstede, 1980). People from collectivist cultures (‘collectivists’) primarily derive their sense of identity from the roles they fulfil in groups to which they belong, and self-identity therefore derives principally from loyalty to the group. On the other hand, those from individualistic cultures (‘individualists’) see the identity of an individual as deriving from his or her own life, actions and achievements. In such cultures, group loyalty and role playing within groups is secondary to individual achievement. Early work by Hofstede, 1980) found that the cultures that ranked high on individualism were mainly from the Anglo cluster and would include the British, Irish, American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand respondents from our sample. Collectivist behaviours, on the other hand, would be expected from the Asian, Indian, and Pacific islanders taking part in our study (Hofstede, 1980; Wright and Bennett, 2009).

How, then, do patterns of team member behaviour differ between individualist and collectivist cultures? Studies have shown collectivists tend to be more sensitive to team conflict as it is seen as destroying group harmony, may try hard to help others save face and work to ensure that the team operates in harmony (Doucet and Jehn, 1997). They may even go so far as to either not voice their opinion or to change their views to go along with the team (Wright and Bennett, 2008). On the other hand, individualists come from cultures in which people largely make themselves heard (Cox et al, 1993; Takahashi et al, 2002). Ohbucci et al (1999) also reported collectivists to be more likely to pursue avoidance strategies, while individualists are more likely to behave in an assertive manner, being

primarily concerned about individual rights. Moorman and Blakely (1995) reported collectivists as being more likely to engage in acts of organisational citizenship (behaviours which promote team harmony), while Kirkman et. al. (2001) reported collectivists as showing higher commitment to the team and preferring teamwork.

Despite this substantial and growing body of knowledge regarding cultural influences on voice and participation, the literature remains at the level of cultural comparison while largely ignoring the potential moderating effect of group composition on relationships between culture and team member voice and participation. It is logical to question whether individual participation choices will vary according to group composition – culturally heterogeneous or culturally homogenous - and whether that variation differs across the individualism – collectivism divide.

HYPOTHESES

Previous research indicates that individual participation choices in team settings are influenced by the familiarity of the context (Gruenfeld, et. al., 1996). When collectivists operate within their own cultural context there exists a shared understanding of discussion norms, communication rules, and decision making practices. These norms may allow for an open exchange of views, though this is typically issue- as opposed to person- focused, as the latter inevitably leads to a reduction in team harmony (which collectivists seek to avoid). So, for example, a Japanese team member may not raise disagreement with a team decision in the presence of a senior leader's support for that decision as to do so would diminish team harmony. Similarly, a senior leader in a Japanese team might also not raise an objection to a subordinates suggestion in a confrontational way but might say something subtle such as, "that is an interesting idea that merits further study" in order to show disagreement.

Individualists in culturally familiar contexts, on the other hand, are accustomed to direct communication, where advancing one's views and contradicting those of others is considered

culturally appropriate. Such behaviours follow naturally from individualist values where one's identity is linked to personal accomplishments and differentiation from others rather than group identity. In such settings a British team member will expect to challenge and be challenged as the group works towards a team decision.

Individualists when placed in heterogeneous contexts will face uncertainty in respect of team roles and processes, communication norms, and so on. The natural tendency in such situation will be to respond with a strategy of accommodation, to engage in behaviors that are less assertive, taking more of a "watch and see" approach as they try to find their roles in the new context. Such behavior is consistent with the early stages of team development where tentative interactions characterize the orientation stage (Tuckman, 1965). Within the context of voice and participation, such uncertainty might cause individuals to withhold or change their views more often than they would in the familiar homogeneous context in order to accommodate others in the group.

As previously mentioned, such behavior is already characteristic of collectivists, even in homogeneous contexts. Predicting their behavior, therefore, is more difficult. It is expected, however, that when collectivists are placed in heterogeneous contexts, they too would have reason to remain accommodating or, perhaps, be even more accommodating as they deal with the uncertainty of the situation. In sum, in moving from a culturally homogeneous context to a heterogeneous one, it is expected that both individualists and collectivists would be less assertive in voicing and holding to their views, particularly in the earlier stages in accordance with Tuckman's model (1965). These projected tendencies lead to the following hypotheses:

H1a: Collectivists will report a greater frequency of not voicing disagreement with a team decision when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogeneous teams.

H1b: Individualists will report a greater frequency of not voicing disagreement with a team decision when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

H2a: Collectivists will report a greater frequency of changing their views to accommodate the team when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

H2b: Individualists will report a greater frequency of changing their views to accommodate the team when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The research study was conducted using a sample of undergraduate students from three universities. This facilitated the collection of data from both homogenous and heterogeneous student groups engaged in team-based project work. Brigham Young University Hawaii (BYUH) was used to collect sample data from both individualist students (mainly from the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand) and collectivist students (from a range of Asian and Pacific island nations including Japan, Korea, China, Philippines, Thailand, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and French Polynesia) who were working together in heterogeneous teams (i.e. teams composed of both individualists and collectivists). A sample of Anglos working in homogenous teams was collected from the University of Ulster, UK (UU - British and Irish students), and a further sample of collectivists working in homogenous teams collected from the Institute of Management Technology (IMT) in Dubai, U.A.E (Indian students). Questionnaires were distributed to both male and female students, and approximately 520 usable questionnaires returned. From this, the researchers were able to construct four sample groups for comparison purposes – individualists working in homogenous teams (the

University of Ulster sample, N = 90), collectivists working in homogenous teams (IMT, N = 70), individualists working in heterogeneous teams (BYUH, N = 130), and collectivists working in heterogeneous teams (also a BYUH sample, N = 230).

Instrument

Subjects were asked to evaluate the performance of a school project team in which they had participated in completing a group assignment. The research instrument was a self-report, behaviourally anchored rating scale, consisting of classification items and 32 items related to team functioning. Two of those items addressed issues of voice and holding to one's views including the two following questions:

How frequently did you have to change your views to accommodate the team?

Did you ever disagree with a team decision but not voice that disagreement?

In each case the response categories comprised: *never / rarely / sometimes / often*.

RESULTS

Initial inspection of the data collected from the two individualist samples (homogenous and heterogeneous teams) revealed considerable response bias, with those working in heterogeneous teams (largely Americans and Canadians) reporting higher scores than those working in homogeneous teams (British and Irish) across each team functioning item included in the full instrument. Significant differences were not observed amongst collectivists, irrespective of team composition. Given the possibility of response bias between the two individualist groups, individualists' scores were standardised using an ipsative within-subject process as reviewed in Fischer (2004). This involves subtracting the individual's mean score across all variables from the score recorded for the variable of interest. The resulting score represents the relative endorsement of the variable of interest in relation to other scores

(Hicks, 1970). As a further caution, the resulting score was then added to the grand mean for all individualists across all variables. In order to facilitate comparisons, this process was repeated for collectivists, with the ipsatised scores again being summed with the individualist grand mean. The statistical effect of this process is to minimise (or understate) cross-cultural differences, since in each case the relative strength of the individual's position is being related to the same baseline.

Difference of means results for participation choice variables

Table 1 presents the results of difference of means analysis for individual participation choices (hypotheses H3a, H3b, H4a, H4b). T-values and significance levels are presented in parentheses according to standard formats (*0.05 level; **0.01; ***0.001).

	Homogenous teams	Heterogeneous teams
Collectivists:		
hide disagreement	2.10	2.30 (-1.59)
change views	2.70	2.65 (0.51)
Individualists:		
hide disagreement	1.61	1.86 (2.47)*
change views	2.26	2.48 (2.37)*

Table 1 Difference of means results for participation choice variables.

As can be seen from the Table, support was provided for two of the four hypotheses, both relating to behaviour modification on the part of individualists.

H1b: Individualists will report a greater frequency of not voicing disagreement with a team decision when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

The findings clearly supported H1b, with individualists in heterogeneous teams reporting significantly higher incidence of hiding voice (mean level of 1.86 as compared with 1.61 in homogenous teams).

H2b: Individualists will report a greater frequency of changing their views to accommodate the team when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

The finding also supported H2b at the 0.05 level, with individualists in heterogeneous teams reporting significantly higher incidence of changing their views to accommodate the team (mean level of 2.48, compared with 2.26 in homogenous teams).

H1a: Collectivists will report a greater frequency of not voicing disagreement with a team decision when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

Hypothesis H1a was not supported by the results. However, collectivists in heterogeneous teams did report the predicted higher incidence of hiding voice, though not quite to accepted confidence levels.

H2a: Collectivists will report a greater frequency of changing their views to accommodate the team when in heterogeneous teams compared with homogenous teams.

This hypothesis was not supported. No significant differences were observed across homogenous and heterogeneous teams in the extent to which collectivists change their views to accommodate other team members.

DISCUSSION

The findings in relation to team member participation and voice across team contexts (homogenous or heterogeneous) show individualists to be much more affected by context than collectivists. Individualists were observed as adapting their patterns of participation in the predicted direction – in heterogeneous settings individualists are more likely to hide their true voice, and more likely to change their views to accommodate the team. No significant differences were observed in collectivists' behaviour across team contexts.

The findings in respect of individualists confirm the moderating influence of social facilitation or evaluation apprehension on individual behaviour (Gruenfeld, et. al. 1996; Zajonc, 1965). Individualists adopt behaviours more typical of collectivists when placed in heterogeneous settings, appearing to adopt a 'wait and see' approach to group development. However, that is not to say that they behave exactly as collectivists – significant differences continue to exist between individualists and collectivists in heterogeneous teams in the extent to which true voice is hidden and opinions changed to accommodate the team. Individualists in heterogeneous teams remain significantly less likely to hide true voice or change opinion than their collectivist colleagues – but are significantly more likely to engage in such behaviours than when working in homogenous teams.

The results indicate that collectivists' patterns of participation do not change across team contexts. However, collectivists in heterogeneous teams did engage in hiding true voice to a greater extent than when working in homogenous groups, although the difference was not quite significant to established acceptability limits. At face value the findings might be taken

as an indication that collectivists are less affected by social facilitation or evaluation apprehension than individualists. However, a more likely explanation is that collectivists – who engage in hiding true voice and changing opinion to accommodate the team to a much greater extent even in homogenous contexts – simply continue to display established and familiar patterns of behaviour when placed in heterogeneous contexts.

Taken together, the findings indicate that heterogeneous teams may take longer to progress through the forming and storming stages of group development (Tuckman 1965), due to the increased incidence of members hiding true voice. This has important implications both for team member selection in multi-cultural contexts and for team leadership. Leaders in heterogeneous teams may need to implement training in exercising voice, or similar management interventions aimed at establishing communication ground rules and processes during the early stages of team development. A major point for consideration is that, when managing heterogeneous teams, it is not enough simply to know the cultural norms of the different nationalities involved – attention must also be devoted to understanding how differences between collectivists and individualists play out in those settings.

Directions for future research include experimental analysis of the same subjects working in different contexts. In particular, this should address the issue of whether effects continue over time, which is important from two perspectives. Firstly, such research could address the issue of whether individualists continue to suppress voice and seek to accommodate the team in the latter stages of team development, or do they revert to individualist behaviour once familiar with the context. Secondly, how does previous experience working in heterogeneous teams affect the behaviour of individualists? The argument could be made that individualists who have previous experience of working in heterogeneous contexts may not feel the same pressure to suppress their true views or seek to accommodate the team.

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