

When and how do differences matter? An exploration of perceived similarity in teams

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Abstract

In this paper, we directly assess *perceived similarity*—the degree to which members view themselves as having few differences—because we want to understand when teams notice diversity on various member characteristics and how they interpret it. Our results indicate social category diversity was related to initial estimates of both perceived social category similarity (SCS) and perceived work style similarity (WSS). And, whereas perceived SCS did not change over time, perceived WSS decreased significantly over the period of our study. We suggest this change in perceived WSS can be explained by an information-processing/decision-making framework. We found informational diversity was positively related to conflict in teams, and in turn conflict was negatively related to subsequent estimates of perceived WSS. However, informational diversity was positively related to information sharing in teams, which in turn was positively related to subsequent estimates of perceived WSS. Finally, these updated estimates of perceived WSS affected subgroup formation and team process effectiveness. We discuss how our research explores the subjective experience of diversity by team members, provides a dynamic view of the relationship between diversity and team outcomes, and informs emerging theory about the activation of faultlines in teams.

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Although past empirical research has invoked perceptions of difference as a theoretical mechanism to understand the effects of diversity in teams (Riordan, 2000;

Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), few studies have actually included a measure of such perceptions. Given that the psychological importance and substantive effect of diversity in teams is thought to be carried by perceptions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; cf. Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002), and that how team members react to and manage their diversity depends on the extent to which member characteristics are salient (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000), researchers ought to directly assess perceptions of difference to better understand how member characteristics influence team behaviors and outcomes (Lawrence, 1997; Riordan, 2000). If unnoticed

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by members, differences on a particular characteristic are unlikely to influence team behavior. Therefore, not all diversity present in a team should be assumed to impact team outcomes.

In this paper, we directly assess *perceived similarity*—the degree to which members view themselves as having few differences—because we want to understand the extent to which member characteristics are noticed and influence team outcomes. In that sense, we are interested in how teams perceive and interpret diversity on various characteristics. Considering perceived similarity over time may better illuminate the conditions under which, and the mechanisms through which, diversity influences team outcomes. Importantly, we do not view perceived similarity as a proxy or substitute for measuring diversity on member characteristics. Rather, we consider perceptions of difference as part of the process by which diversity is translated into thought and action in teams.

Studying perceived similarity not only allows us to empirically assess a key theoretical mechanism—the subjective experience of diversity by team members—by which differences in member characteristics affect team behavior and outcomes, but also allows for a more dynamic theory of diversity in teams (Mannix & Neale, 2005). Given that we already have evidence that the effects of diversity vary over time (Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993), that the effects of diversity on conflict are bounded by team longevity (Pelled, 1996), and that different types of diversity are not revealed simultaneously (Harrison et al., 2002), we should not expect the impact of diversity in teams to be static. Any social process theorized to intervene between diversity and team outcomes *should* capture and explain inter-temporal variation in this relationship. As a theoretical mechanism, perceived similarity satisfies these necessary conditions because it is a dynamic, “emergent state” in teams (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001), generated by a cognitive “abstraction process” (Park & Judd, 1990). More precisely, perceived similarity is influenced not only by the relative distribution of member characteristics, but also by new information about individual differences and preferences revealed during team interactions. In this way, perceived similarity is malleable, and studying it enables researchers to move beyond a static view of diversity in teams.

To develop a framework describing how perceived similarity forms, changes, and influences team outcomes, we adopt both a social categorization and an information-processing/decision-making perspective about diversity in teams. We assert that social categorization, conflict, and information sharing operate to influence perceived similarity, albeit at different points in a team’s tenure. Traditionally, the literatures on social categorization and information processing, as they relate to team diversity, have developed in separate domains (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan,

2004). Integrating these domains is likely to yield explanatory power and nuance to the conditions under which diversity improves and restricts team effectiveness (van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Dahlin, Weingart, & Hinds, 2005), particularly as they predict formation and change in perceived similarity. Indeed, it may be “impossible to understand the diversity-process-performance link” without integrating the social categorization and information processing approaches (Mannix & Neale, 2005, 43). Our work not only integrates these two approaches, but also extends each of them, by examining teams in an organizational context when most information processing research has been conducted in a laboratory, and by focusing on psychological and process measures that have not commonly been included in the social categorization research (Mannix & Neale, 2005).

Before turning to our theory and hypothesis development, we want to clarify the types of diversity we examine in this study, because researchers often fail to clearly identify what they mean by diversity (Harrison & Sin, 2006; Harrison & Klein, 2007). In this study, we investigated a parsimonious set of member characteristics that were relevant to our theoretical framework (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999) because it is neither methodologically possible nor theoretically desirable to study all possible sources of team diversity in any given study. Since our theoretical framework builds on theories of social categorization and information-processing/decision-making in teams, we studied member characteristics associated with task-unrelated, social category diversity (Jackson, May, & Whitney, 1995; Milliken & Martins, 1996) and task-related, informational diversity (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). We also considered the relevance of specific member characteristics to our research context (Harrison et al., 1998; Pelled et al., 1999), in which semester-long, full-time Master’s of Business Administration (MBA) student teams worked together on several group projects for multiple classes.

The member characteristics we included in our study were both salient to the MBA student population and relevant to the tasks required of these MBA “core” teams.⁴ For example, international MBA students are “noticed” and typically referred to as a single category. (e.g., “The international students” on our team do not speak up.) Likewise, sex is salient in this context because women typically make up only about 30% of full time MBA students in U.S. full-time MBA programs (Grad-

⁴ We have considerable experience interacting with students in these teams, and have had many occasions to observe them in class and during presentations. We have also discussed their experiences in the core teams after the semester is over as part of their elective coursework. These observations and discussions reinforce our choice of diversity types as important in this context.

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