



# The role of diversity of life experiences in fostering collaborative creativity in demographically diverse student groups



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## ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning becomes a key instructional tool in a variety of educational settings, from primary to higher education. This paper examines the role of demographic diversity (gender and nationality) on collaborative creativity. A self report questionnaire is used to evaluate students' life experiences in terms of diverse mindsets (diversity in interests, likes, and attitudes) and intergroup contact (interaction with dissimilar others), and a research report analysis reveals groups' collaborative creativity. The results show that diverse mindsets moderate the effect of gender diversity on collaborative creativity in such a way that groups whose members are more broadly oriented in terms of interests, likes, and attitudes benefit more from this form of demographic diversity as compared with groups whose members are less broadly oriented. No support is found for the moderating role of intergroup contact for the effect of demographic diversity on collaborative creativity. The results presented in this paper suggest that diversity of life experiences is a moderator worthwhile considering in the group diversity–group creativity relationship and provide insights into the necessary conditions for collaborative creativity.

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In higher education (especially in management programs), educational activities extensively use collaborative learning groups in order to help students develop collaboration and teamwork skills (Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004). Oftentimes, educators are advised to compose heterogeneous groups (especially with respect to gender and nationality) so as to let students interact with different others and as such allow them to benefit from exchanging and working with a large variety of ideas (Lou et al., 1996). Whereas scant literature is available studying demographic diversity in the context of collaborative learning, previous research reports positive effects of gender heterogeneity on such outcomes as group cognitive complexity (Curşeu & Pluut, 2013; Curşeu, Schruijer, & Boroş, 2007) and group creativity (Curşeu, 2010; Schruijer & Mostert, 1997) as well as beneficial effects of nationality diversity on group creativity, especially in later stages of group development (Milliken & Martins, 1996). However, little to no interest has been shown in investigating students' skills to work with diversity as a contingency factor when exploring the diversity – group performance link. In other words, previous research did not explore whether groups consisting of members who have a broad personal experience with and hold positive attitudes towards social diversity benefit more from demographic diversity as compared to groups whose members have been less

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engaged in interacting with dissimilar others and have more negative diversity attitudes. The aim of this paper is therefore to test the effect of demographic diversity on collaborative creativity and the extent to which students' life experiences moderate the impact of gender and nationality diversity on group creativity in collaborative learning settings.

## 1. Collaborative creativity

Collaborative learning is an instructional method widely used in educational settings (Craft, 2008). In such collaborative learning settings, the notion of learning comes close to the notion of creativity, and effective collaboration is often described as creative collaboration (Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008). Yet, collaborative creativity as an outcome in collaborative learning groups is not self-evident. As Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye, and O'Malley (1996) put it, "collaboration is a social structure in which two or more people interact with each other and, in *some circumstances, some types* [emphasis added] of interaction occur that have a positive effect" (p. 205). In other words, collaborative learning groups can also engage in negative interactions that interfere with the processes resulting in collaborative creativity. Therefore, in the study of collaborative creativity, researchers have focused on identifying those conditions which enable collaborative learning groups to be effective, and they turned to the field of group dynamics (Grossen, 2008). In the group dynamics literature, group diversity is one of the key phenomena explaining whether negative social interactions (i.e., social categorization) or cognitive gains (i.e., elaboration of task relevant information and perspectives) occur within the group (Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004). Demographic diversity has become of particular relevance to higher education, as campuses become increasingly international and diverse (Summers & Volet, 2008), where gender and nationality are among the most salient attributes on the basis of which students differ. Gender and nationality are also extensively used as compositional characteristics in group design in collaborative learning settings (Davies, 2009). It is therefore remarkable that the impact of demographic diversity forms on collaborative creativity has not received much attention.

### 1.1. Demographic diversity and collaborative creativity

Integrative models of group diversity–group outcomes relationships (Harrison & Klein, 2007; Milliken & Martins, 1996; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004) suggest that the relationship between demographic diversity and collaborative creativity is complex and depends on several contingencies. On the one hand it has been argued that demographic diversity results in process losses (e.g., relationship conflict) and therefore is negatively related to cognitive performance. Yet, on the other hand it has also been argued that people with different demographic backgrounds have qualitatively different life experiences and thus differ in their knowledge, attitudes, and opinions, implying that demographic diversity increases the knowledge pool of the group and as a consequence has positive implications for group cognitive complexity (Curşeu, Schrujjer, et al., 2007). That is, debating opposing ideas and viewpoints has the potential to spur collaborative creativity. The inconsistent findings with regard to the effect of demographic diversity on group processes and outcomes are related to two opposing mechanisms that are at play in diverse groups; negative effects on cognitive performance are explained through social categorization processes exacerbated in diverse groups, while the positive effects are explained by more effective elaboration of task relevant information in mixed groups (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Contingencies that make one of the two mechanisms more salient are likely to foster either the beneficial effects or the detrimental ones. This study attempts to contribute to the stream of research which focuses on moderators for the effect of gender and nationality diversity on cognitive performance, to unravel under what circumstances these forms of demographic diversity can in fact be seen as variety (Harrison & Klein, 2007) and therefore positive for group creativity in collaborative learning environments.

### 1.2. Diversity of life experiences and receptiveness to dissimilar others

It is as necessary for group members to differ from each other as to value this diversity in order to have a fruitful collaborative learning experience. Group members' positive attitudes towards and beliefs about diversity increase the potential benefits of group diversity for collaborative creativity (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). These so-called diversity mindsets address the issue of openness towards other viewpoints and perspectives, which are likely to impact on cognitive performance (Simmons, 2011) and creativity in divergent thinking tasks (Goçłowska & Crisp, 2012), yet appreciation of and respect for diversity are not self-evident. Denson and Zhang (2010) found that university students benefitted in this respect from being confronted with different perspectives and interacting with dissimilar others. Collaborative learning practices in higher education provide an opportunity for such encounters and are found to influence both cognitive and affective outcomes as well as students' openness to diversity (Cabrerá et al., 2002). However, receptiveness to diverse others is not only likely to be influenced by one's current experiences but perhaps even more by one's upbringing and previous life experiences (Douthitt, Eby, & Simon, 1999). For instance, Brand and Glasson (2004) found that teachers' early life experiences and pre-existing beliefs influenced their current beliefs about diversity, which influenced teachers' instructional practices in diverse classrooms. Similar relations between life experiences, diversity beliefs, and behaviours can be expected for students. In fact, diverse life experiences are strongly related to such variables as openness to experience, attitudes towards racial diversity, and willingness to work in diverse teams (Douthitt et al., 1999). Building on Douthitt and colleagues (1999) we argue that high diversity in (previous) life experiences can be understood as a proxy for high receptiveness towards dissimilar others,

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