Team diversity and team helping behavior: The mediating roles of team cooperation and team cohesion

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ABSTRACT

This study regards team helping behavior as a collective phenomenon that happens at the level of work teams. We argue that both the surface-level demographic diversity and deep-level trait diversity of team members are negatively related to team helping behavior. We further argue that team cohesion and co-operation will mediate the effects of team members' demographic characteristics and trait diversity on team helping. Collecting survey data from 558 employees in 133 work teams in Taiwanese firms, we use a hierarchical regression to test our hypotheses and find that they are partially supported. Since some of the hypotheses based on the similarity–attraction perspective were not supported, it appears that not all types of team diversity influence team outcomes in the same way. The widely-accepted similarity–attraction perspective may thus be too broad and too general to explain the effects of team diversity on team processes and outcomes.

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Introduction

The helping behavior that occurs among team members can improve the performance of work teams, and thus has been the focus of considerable research attention (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997; Farh, Zhong, & Organ, 2004; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). However, these beneficial effects come from team members' aggregated helping behavior, and isolated incidents of helping with regard to individual team members do not contribute significantly to better team performance (Bommer, Dierdorff, & Rubin, 2007; Ehrhart, 2004). It is thus argued that the helping behavior that occurs in work teams should be analyzed as a collective phenomenon (Choi, 2009). Consequently, this study defines team helping as the voluntary helping behavior of work teams that provides assistance intended to either prevent or resolve the work-related problems of their teammates (Choi, 2009).

Although much research has examined how helping behavior in work teams can promote work team performance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000), comparatively few works have examined the factors that may promote team-level helping (Ehrhart, 2004). The extant research on the antecedents of team helping generally has focused on various styles of leadership, such as transformational or ethical leadership (Lau & Lam, 2008; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005). Although companies are increasingly assem-bling teams composed of members from diverse backgrounds, few studies have examined how a more varied team composition may affect team-level helping.

One study that has explored the relationship between team composition and team helping was conducted by Choi (2009). It examined this issue in a large Korean company. Examining team members' demographic diversity in terms of gender, education, tenure, and organizational hierarchy, Choi (2009) found that gender and educational diversity are negatively related to team helping, while tenure diversity is positively related to it. Although the study offered several reasons for these results, the work itself was not aimed at explaining the mechanisms through which team diversity affects work outcomes. Moreover, since Choi's (2009) study examined only demographic diversity, his research was not able to reveal how other types of team diversity, such as differences in members' personality traits, may influence team helping behavior.

This study extends Choi (2009) by examining how the surface-level demographic diversity, as well as deep-level personality diversity of team members may be related to team helping. We also explore the mechanisms through which these forms of diversity can affect team helping behavior. Based on the similarity–attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) and the social categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), we argue that both surface- and deep-level diversities will be negatively related to team helping through the effects of reduced team cohesion and cooperation.

It is thus anticipated that this research may clarify how various types of team diversity may affect team states of cohesion and

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cooperation and, in turn, influence team helping behavior. Our findings may also verify whether the widely-accepted similarity–attraction perspective (Byrne, 1971) is generally applicable in explaining the effects of various kinds of team diversity on team outcomes.

Theory and hypotheses

Team level organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)

Over the past two decades numerous empirical studies based on the organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) perspective have examined the impact of an individual's OCB on organizational, team, and individual performance (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Organ (1988) found that the potential benefits of OCB for organizational performance accrue from the aggregate effect of OCB, not from single incidents. Researchers have thus examined OCB as a team level phenomenon, using construct labels such as unit level OCB, group level OCB, team OCB, team citizenship collective OCB, and so on (Bommer et al., 2007; Ehrhart, 2004). These studies have posited that there is a significant team level variation in OCB, indicating that it might be a team level phenomenon (Schnake & Dumler, 2003). Our study focuses on team level helping behavior for three reasons. First, while OCB has been seen as having various dimensions, such as conscientiousness and loyalty, helping behavior is regarded as the most typical discretionary behavior, and is thus the most studied dimension (Organ et al., 2006). Second, Van Dyne and LePine (1998) carried out some of the earlier research in this field and noted that the literature on OCB and helping behavior have evolved separately (Choi, 2009; Kacmar, Carlson, & Harris, 2013; Liao, Chuang, & Joshi, 2008; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008). Thus, we should examine the extent to which these behaviors are related to OCB. Third, helping behavior has been shown to have consistent and significant positive effects on organizational performance to a greater degree that has been found for the other dimensions of OCB (Ehrhart, Bliese, & Thomas, 2006). It is thus proposed that helping behavior has a more stable and sustained impact on outcomes at the team level of analysis.

Team helping behavior

Helping behavior is a type of interpersonal, cooperative, and affiliative extra-role behavior directed toward members of one's work team (Liao et al., 2008; Van Dyne et al., 2008; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Helping behavior is not specified in workers' job requirements, meaning that they may not be rewarded by the organization's compensation system (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). In contrast, in-role behavior tends to be specified in job descriptions and reflected in the organization's official salary system. Members of work teams generally have discretion in deciding whether or not to go beyond their call of duty to help other members. However, when team members willingly engage in such helping behavior toward them, then this will enhance overall team effectiveness (Liao et al., 2008; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991). Helping behaviors are thus especially important for team effectiveness when roles are interdependent and when greater team member cooperation can enhance team performance (Nemeth & Staw, 1989).

Although much research has been carried out on helping at the individual level (e.g., Liao et al., 2008; Organ et al., 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2000; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), scholars have argued that the potential benefits of helping on the performance of a collective, such as the performance of an organization or a work team, accrue through the aggregated effects of such behavior, rather than as a result of isolated incidents (Organ, 1988), and so should also be studied as a collective phenomenon in this context (Bommer et al., 2007; Choi, 2009). Previous studies have posited that the construct of team-level helping is similar to that of positive team processes, which have been defined as team members' affect, attitude, motivation, and behavior to promote collective goals (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2007; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). For this reason it is necessary to consider team-level helping as part of team processes (Choi, 2009; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001).

This study thus follows previous authors in defining team-level helping as "team members' voluntary helping behavior that provides assistance for preventing or resolving work-related problems of other members" (Organ et al., 2006, p. 308).

Surface- and deep-level team diversities

Surface level diversity refers to visible biological differences among team members, such as differences in age, gender, and ethnicity (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). The surface level diversities this study examines are team member diversities related to age and gender. On the other hand, deep level diversity refers to team members' perceived differences in regard to non-visible underlying characteristics (Harrison et al., 1998), such as personality, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Liao et al., 2008). Previous authors have argued that team members detect the personalities of their teammates through interactions and through observing their verbal and non-verbal behavior (Harrison et al., 1998).

Team diversity and team helping behavior

The social categorization perspective (Hogg & Terry, 2000) maintains that demographic similarity among individuals engenders feelings of connectedness and community, which increases the empathic concerns that are responsible for inducing helping behavior (Sturmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005). Social categorization theory suggests that in diverse groups, members tend to favor in-group/similar members over out-group/dissimilar members and to trust in-group members more and to be more willing to cooperate with them (Brewer, 1979; Brewer & Brown, 1998).

Following the social categorization perspective (Turner et al., 1987, 1994), we propose that team members superficially categorize team members based on surface-level characteristics, such as age and gender. In this way, work teams function more smoothly when teams are more homogeneous rather than diverse (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). In diverse teams, members tend to perceive out-group members as less trustworthy, less capable, and less cooperative than in-group members (Choi, 2009). Empirical research finds team members' age and racial diversities to be negatively related to cooperative activities (Milton & Westphal, 2005). Such evidence suggests that teams whose members differ in regard to surface-level characteristics may experience negative interpersonal exchanges and reduced team-level helping (Choi, 2009). Therefore, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 1a.
Surface level diversity will be negatively related to team helping.

The similarity–attraction perspective has been used extensively in deep-level diversity research (Pitcher & Smith, 2001; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002), and it proposes that when free to choose, people are more likely to be attracted to those who are similar to them in some way (Byrne, 1971). In line with the above perspective, Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith (1995) argued that members who are similar to others in an organization in regard to personality, attitudes, and values will be attracted to, selected by, and remain in the organization. This selective process may engender the classification of others as either in-group or out-group, creating categorizations that may affect group processes and outcomes, as noted above (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).