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A look at the bright side of multicultural team diversity

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Summary Current research on multicultural teams tends to exhibit a bias towards studying the negative effects of team diversity more than the positive. This negative bias has limited our understanding of the conditions that promote the benefits of diversity and of the mechanisms that foster these benefits. In this article, we highlight a complementary perspective, namely the idea that cultural diversity and cultural differences can be an asset rather than a liability. This perspective has been present in the practitioner and anecdotal literature, but has thus far not received much rigorous research attention. Using a lens of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), we draw upon recent research on cultural diversity in teams to explore the positive aspects of cross-cultural dynamics in teams and identify some of the processes underlying these effects in more rigorous ways, proposing a future research agenda.

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Introduction

Multicultural teams have been a central focus of research for many years in the international business context. With the rapid rise of multinational and even global interactions, the

multicultural team – defined as a group of people from different cultures, with a joint deliverable for the organization or another stakeholder – has become both more common and more important. To enable high performance in international organizations, teams must first overcome the barriers inherent in the cultural differences – problems of communication, value incongruence, and other such obstacles. Then performance will follow.

Practitioner and anecdotal accounts of multinational teams often paint a subtly different picture. They frequently begin with a frame of promoting the potential synergy effects stemming from cultural differences, while acknowledging the “dark side” of overcoming barriers. Managers are encouraged to use their different perspectives, leverage their various networks that are embedded in different contexts, and draw on the synergies arising from differences to enable innovation. This positive perspective seems useful for our endeavors towards increased team effectiveness – yet, it

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is remarkably rare in rigorous theoretical and empirical research.

Current theory and research in international and cross-cultural management indeed tends to overemphasize problems and barriers instead of making room for aspects that potentially could enrich cultural encounters and interaction (Drogendijk & Zander, 2010).⁴ For example, the “cultural distance” hypothesis (e.g., Shenkar, 2001; Ward, 2003), in its most general form, proposes that the difficulties, costs, and risks associated with cross-cultural contact increase with growing cultural dissimilarity between two or more individuals, groups, or organizations. Barriers to performance have been explained in terms of concepts “cultural friction”, “cultural incompatibility”, “culture clash”, “culture novelty” and “cultural risk”, among others (e.g., Shenkar, Luo, & Yeheskel, 2008; Stahl & Voigt, 2008). These variables have been shown to be significantly and negatively related to foreign market entry (e.g., Harzing, 2004), cross-border transfer of knowledge (e.g., Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002), organizational learning across cultural barriers (e.g., Barkema, Bell, & Pennings, 1996), international mergers and alliances (e.g., David & Singh, 1994), and multinational teams (e.g., Kirkman, Tesluk, & Rosen, 2004), to name a few. Associated research findings make it clear that cultural differences can pose barriers to performance, and leave managers in multinational teams and companies discouraged about their chances of achieving potential synergies.

On the other hand, managers looking for research on how to realize the positive in multicultural teamwork – not just to overcome the negative – are faced with a real scarcity. Some scholars have highlighted potentially beneficial effects of cultural differences in various contexts: For example, there is some evidence that cultural differences can help firms engaged in cross-border alliances, mergers and acquisitions to develop unique and potentially valuable capabilities, and foster learning and innovation (Björkman, Stahl, & Vaara, 2007; Morosini, Shane, & Singh, 1998; Reus & Lamont, 2009; Vermeulen & Barkema, 2001), not just counterbalancing negative aspects of cultural differences but contributing positively to organizational outcomes. In the context of culturally diverse teams, mixed and often contradictory results have led researchers to conclude that diversity presents a “double-edged sword” or a “mixed blessing” (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010; Williams and O’Reilly, 1998), in such a way that cultural differences among team members can be both an asset and a liability. Conceptual perspectives on the positive potential of such teams are emerging (e.g., Bachmann, 2006; Butler & Zander, 2008; Maloney & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2006), but it is clear that we know

much less about the positive dynamics and outcomes associated with cultural diversity than we know about the problems and obstacles caused by cultural differences (Brickson, 2008; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008).

In this article, we seek to address this research gap between the dominant negative problem-focused perspective and a more positive opportunities-focused one, by exploring the positive aspects of cross-cultural team dynamics and identifying some of the processes underlying these effects. In what follows, we first give a brief explanation for why there is a dominant negative perspective concerning cultural diversity in teams. We then introduce the lens of “Positive Organizational Scholarship”, which we use to unpack the positive aspects of cross-cultural dynamics by specifying the key mechanisms, conditions, and processes through which diversity may enhance team outcomes. We focus on creativity, member satisfaction and communication effectiveness, which have been identified in recent research as positive team outcomes (Stahl et al., 2010), as well as elaborate on the learning ability of teams and their integrative role in multinational organizations. Finally, we develop an agenda for future research.

Negative dynamics in culturally diverse teams

While there are mentions in the literature suggesting that cultural diversity can be an asset rather than a liability (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Stahl et al., 2010; Williams and O’Reilly, 1998), most theoretical perspectives and empirical research have focused on the processes and dynamics responsible for the problems associated with diversity. This “problem-focused view” (Stevens et al., 2008) of cultural diversity is prevalent in a broad range of international business research contexts, including the choice of foreign entry mode and the perceived ability to manage foreign operations (Harzing, 2004; Kogut & Singh, 1988), the longevity of global strategic alliances (Parkhe, 1991), post-acquisition integration outcomes (Krug & Nigh, 1998; Slangen, 2006), cultural adjustment of expatriate managers (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991), and team cohesiveness and social integration (Martins, Miliken, Wiesenfeld, & Salgado, 2003; Watson & Kumar, 1992), among others. By contrast, relatively little attention has been given to the conditions under which firms may benefit from cultural diversity and the mechanisms responsible for such benefits. In the context of team diversity, Ancona and Isaacs (2007) have noted that current work on groups and teams seems to suffer from a “disease orientation” (p. 227), in that there is a lack of research on effective team functioning and outcomes.

There are several possible explanations for this negative bias. In general, the predominance of the negative over the positive in the social sciences can be explained by basic cognitive processes and theories of intensity, novelty, adaptation, and singularity. For instance, Kramer (1999) has shown that negative, trust-destroying events are generally more visible than positive, trust-building events; that trust-destroying events carry more weight in judgment than trust-building events of comparable magnitude; and that sources of bad, trust-destroying news tend to be perceived as more credible than sources of good news. In a similar vein,

⁴ It is worth noting that we are not suggesting that the more traditional, problem-focused perspective on cultural diversity does not add value. On the contrary, it has been immensely helpful in highlighting some of the important dynamics in cross-cultural encounters. However, Cameron and Caza’s (2004) observation that “[t]o date, . . . the conscious examination of positive phenomena is vastly underrepresented in organizational science” (p. 733), seems to aptly characterize current theory and research in international and cross-cultural management, and thus a complementary positive focus is called forth.

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