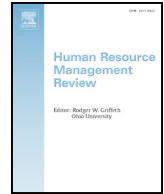




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The world is not flat: Examining the interactive multidimensionality of culture and virtuality in teams

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ABSTRACT

As organizations continue to spread their influence into foreign countries and take on increasingly complex tasks, the need for an accurate understanding as to how global, virtual teams function becomes more integral. At this time, although there are many organizations utilizing global, virtual teams, there is a dearth of literature that examines the impact of cultural differences within these teams. This paper aims to bridge this gap by offering an integrative interdisciplinary theoretical review, merging a lens of relevant cultural values, including Hofstede's five dimensions and extending to other conceptualizations such as the Triandis (1995) typology, with the Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) conceptualization of virtuality. Ultimately, theoretical propositions are provided for future examination of each cultural dimension. Finally, implications and future research are discussed in the hopes of providing invaluable insight as to the currently under-researched 'global' aspect of global, virtual teams.

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As tasks become increasingly complex and organizations spread their operations to a plethora of different countries, it is necessary for workers to find an effective method of coordinating and interacting across time and space with others from around their parent nation, or even the world (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010). Indeed, research has pointed to the fact that multicultural teams are becoming increasingly prevalent within organizations, thus emphasizing the importance of taking cultural issues such as differences in norms and traits into consideration when attempting to understand the modern workplace (Burke, Shuffler, Salas, & Gelfand, 2010).

Further, as research has progressed over time, we have developed an increasingly rich understanding regarding the advantages and challenges of virtual teams. For our purposes, virtual teams are conceptualized as interdependent groups which span physical and organizational boundaries and are dependent upon technology for communication and proper functioning (Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007). For instance, we know that utilizing electronic media can provide a team with increased flexibility and aid in the development of effective communication techniques (Sole & Edmondson, 2002). However, the lack of face-to-face communication can cause decreases in team cohesion, cooperation, and efficiency (Fjermestad, 2004; Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005). Although we may have a relatively good perspective regarding the role of virtuality, when coupled with the fact that these virtual teams are also likely to be culturally diverse, our current understanding of virtuality in these types of teams may not be enough.

The aforementioned gap in the literature is exemplified in the dearth of articles examining both virtuality and culture. Indeed, a recent review by Gibson, Huang, Kirkman, and Shapiro (2014) found that, from the year 2000 to 2013, only eighteen articles empirically analyzed culture in virtual teams. Yet, a recent survey by SHRM showed that 49% of organizations employing virtual

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teams use them as a collaborative tool to bring together employees in different geographic locations (SHRM, 2012). Without taking cultural factors into consideration, a number of different problems can emerge such as increased conflict, lower levels of cohesion, decreases in trust, or the creation of demographic faultlines which, in turn, can affect team performance and effectiveness (Edwards & Sridhar, 2005; Polzer, Crisp, Jarvenpaa, & Kim, 2006; Staples & Zhao, 2006). Furthermore, although there are numerous different conceptualizations of culture (e.g. Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), a majority of researchers focus on Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions and simply use country of origin as a proxy for the individual differences within a team (Gibson et al., 2014). This can serve to limit our understanding of culture's impact in virtual teams and fails to take into consideration such cultural differences as how individuals from different countries interpret contextual cues in their environment.

Therefore, the aim of the current paper is to bridge this gap between research and practice by offering an integrative, interdisciplinary theoretical review which maps relevant cultural values onto virtuality dimensions. Ultimately, this paper will disentangle our present knowledge surrounding global, virtual teams and provide propositions for future research. Furthermore, to answer the call of multiple researchers (Gibson et al., 2014; Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2011; Taras et al., 2010), while we will incorporate an examination of the traditional Hofstede (1984) dimensions of culture, we will move beyond these to examine other cultural dimensions that directly relate to how an individual reacts to his or her environment, such as high and low-context cultures and levels of tightness and looseness. Not only do cultural dimensions such as these have blatant implications for virtual teams, but their inclusion broadens our understanding of how culture and virtuality interacts in teams. In the sections that follow we first offer a detailed understanding as to the Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) three-dimensional conceptualization of virtuality. Utilizing this as a guiding framework, we examine how Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Triandis' cultural typology, Trompenaars' model of national cultural differences, high- and low-context cultures, and tight versus loose cultures can each result in different reactions to the role of virtuality in teams. Associated propositions regarding future areas for research exploration are presented with the discussion of each cultural value perspective. Finally, we conclude with suggestions regarding a future research agenda aimed at more broadly advancing our knowledge of global virtual teams, in order to better facilitate their practice in organizations around the world.

1. Defining virtuality in teams

Amid the increasing examination of virtual tool use in organizational, team settings, there have been a number of different conceptualizations of what is meant by 'virtuality.' Ranging from frequency of virtual interaction (e.g. Lu, Watson-Manheim, Chudoba, & Wynn, 2006) to how distributed the team actually is (e.g. Cohen & Gibson, 2003), researchers have adopted multiple, unique methods for examining this construct. Most of these frameworks are multidimensional and address physical and temporal dispersion to some degree (e.g. O'Leary & Cummings, 2007). Moreover, it is understood that distributed teams rely upon virtual tools, defined as the modes of communication used by teammates to interact virtually, to perform the functions essential to a standard team (Hertel, Konradt, & Orlikowski, 2004). The focus of the following review will examine how diverse cultural beliefs can lead to differential interactions with virtual tools across cultures. Therefore, similar to the aforementioned distribution framework, we conceptualize the measurement of virtuality is a multifaceted process requiring a focus on more than one dimension to fully understand how virtual a tool is (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). For these reasons, we utilize the Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) framework throughout.

Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) delineated three dimensions that together comprise team virtuality: the extent of reliance on virtual tools, informational value, and synchronicity offered by such tools. The first dimension, extent of reliance on virtual tools, describes the proportion of team interaction that occurs via virtual means. On one end of this continuum, teams are completely face-to-face in terms of interacting and use no virtual tools whatsoever. On the other end are teams that interact solely through virtual means. Teams can fall anywhere along this continuum, for example, having a face-to-face kickoff meeting but interacting for a majority of the time using virtual tools such as teleconferencing and email, or vice versa. Informational value is the extent to which virtual tools transmit data that is valuable for team effectiveness. Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) argue that, when technologies convey rich, valuable information, exchanges are less virtual than those which provide less rich information. For example, videoconferencing serves to offer greater informational value than email, as such media provides not only dialogue but also the verbal and non-verbal social cues that may help to facilitate team interactions. Finally, synchronicity is the extent to which team interactions occur in real time or incur a time lag. For example, email is much more asynchronous than phone conversations or video conferences where team members can interact synchronously in real time. Ultimately, these three dimensions combine to determine a team's overall level of virtuality.

In this sense, a highly virtual tool can be thought of as one which has little informational value and low synchronicity. Indeed, common virtual tools that are considered to be highly virtual include email, message boards, and instant messaging (Kirkman, Corderly, Mathieu, Rosen, & Kukenberger, 2013). Conversely, tools that fall on the other end of these spectra include video-conferencing and tele-conferencing. This is due to the fact that, unlike their highly virtual counterparts, tools exhibiting low virtuality permit more detailed forms of communication such as the ability to non-verbally communicate. Specifically, tools that are low in virtuality are said to be richer media because they often include the social cues and real-time communication that one would experience in a face to face situation (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Although this explanation seems to leave out a discussion of reliance on the virtual tool, it is important to consider the fact that most virtual teams are hybrid, in that they may leverage a range of different media to some degree during their lifespan. The degree to which these meetings happen via richer media (i.e., face to face, videoconferencing) has been found to be important for such team processes as knowledge sharing

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