



A Japan–US cross-cultural study of relationships among team autonomy, organizational social capital, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of the present study are to explore how team autonomy, organizational social capital, and worker attitudes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment are related to one another, and the similarities and differences in the relationships between Japan and the US. For this purpose, a survey of incumbent workers was conducted in Japan and the US on the basis of Web-based sampling. In Japan, questionnaires were distributed in mid-January 2009, and 536 incumbent Japanese workers responded. In the US, questionnaires were distributed in mid-April 2009, and 532 incumbent American workers responded. As a result of multi-group analysis by structural equation modeling, the following differences in the theoretical models were revealed between Japan and the US: (1) team autonomy was not related to structural social capital (i.e., density of network) outside of teams for Japanese workers but positively related for American workers; (2) the mediating effects of structural social capital on the relationships between team autonomy and both job satisfaction and organizational commitment were different between Japan and the US; and (3) the negative relationship between structural social capital and job satisfaction was significantly stronger for Japanese than American workers. The mediating effects of relational/cognitive social capital (i.e., trust) on the relationships between team autonomy and both job satisfaction and organizational commitment were not different between them. We discuss academic and practical implications suggested by these results.

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1. Introduction

Studies on self-managed teams have indicated the importance of autonomy in work teams. According to Kirkman and Rosen (1999), autonomy is analogous to self-management and the term “autonomous teams” have been used synonymous to “self-managed teams”. However, the effect of team autonomy on worker attitudes is controversial. Although certain studies have shown the positive effects of self-managed teams (i.e., teams with high autonomy) on worker attitudes (e.g., Batt, 2004; Erez, Lepine, & Elms, 2002), others have reported the possibility of the negative aspects of team autonomy such as opportunism (Davis, 2001) and iron cage control (Barker, 1993, 1999). Those undetermined findings suggest the effects of mediating variables on the relationship between team autonomy and worker attitudes.

Several studies have reported that self-managed teams are related to the function of organizational communication. Belasen (2000) notes the importance of the roles of communication, such as communication skills and constant sharing of information for successful self-management of teams. Other studies, such as those on Communication Audits,[†] have also

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found that human communication in organizations (i.e., organizational communication) is related to worker attitudes (e.g., Carriere & Bourque, 2009). This suggests that communication in organizations can be the variable that determines positive or negative relationships between team autonomy and worker attitudes.

Organizational social capital is one of the themes on organizational communication that has recently been studied in the field of organizational theory. In studies on organizational social capital, concepts related to both organization and communication studies are combined, as “Social capital is part of a social structure that is embedded in personal and organizational contacts” (Greve & Salaff, 2001, p. 110), and such studies observe that “social capital accrues from relationships such as those embedded in communication networks” (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 143). According to Putnam (1993), the concept of social capital contains social trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement. Applying the concept to organizations, organizational social capital focuses on human communication of trust, mutual-support relationships, and network communication among members. In the present study, organizational communication of organizational social capital is presented as a mediating variable in the relationship between team autonomy and worker attitudes.

It is interesting that in Japanese companies, human relations, a basic concept of social capital, have been weakened and disregarded. According to a whitepaper by the Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (2007), one in seven workers has no person with whom they can consult in their workplace (based on 1656 Japanese respondents aged over 20 years). The whitepaper also reports that increasing numbers of Japanese workers want to have looser, not stronger, relationships with colleagues than before. Tokoro (2005) also reports that “in 1985 and 1990, as well as in 1995 and 2000, the desire for ‘close social relations’ is falling in every age group” (p. 36). In Japan, human relations in organizations used to be emphasized, workers were cohesive, and the workplace was homogenous, all of which are assumed to have developed positive worker attitudes of satisfaction in work life (i.e., job satisfaction) and an affection for their organizations (i.e., organizational commitment) because they are relatively group-oriented people (Hofstede, 1980). It was assumed that such naturally nurtured social capital leads to Japanese workers’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Potential or unconscious social capital existed there and functioned well.

Today, however, Japanese companies need to create and utilize social capital intentionally. Such “strategic” social capital has been studied in the US (e.g., Baker, 2000; Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). It is ironic that today Japanese companies need to adopt a human relationship strategy developed in the US which value individualism (Hofstede, 1980). In such a situation, it is worth studying the relationships among team autonomy, organizational social capital, and worker attitudes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in cross-cultural comparison between Japan and the US.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Relationships between team autonomy and organizational social capital

A self-managed team is usually provided a great degree of autonomy, and “autonomy” means nearly the same as “self-management” (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999) as mentioned above. The self-managing practices Manz and Sims (1995) presented indicate the provision of great discretion for teams, such as setting a team’s objectives, job rotation or allocation, and selection of leaders. Thus, the degree of team autonomy depends on the combination of a range of self-managing practices and the measurement of autonomy. Based on these former studies, in the present study, team autonomy is defined as the degree to which a team and a work group are given autonomy to make decisions on various matters in their daily work.

Social capital specific to organizations is called “organizational social capital.” Organizational social capital is defined as “a resource reflecting the character of social relations within the firm. . . an asset that can benefit both the organization. . . and its members. . .” (Leana & Van Buren, 1999, p. 538). Thus, social capital in organizations is “the glue that makes communities more than the sum total of their individual members” (Engeström, 2008, p. 169). Social capital comprises several dimensions. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) presented the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions. According to these authors, the structural dimension of social capital is represented by density, diversity, and centrality of the network; the relational dimension of social capital is trust; and the cognitive dimension of social capital is a shared norm for common understanding. Kajisa and Aoki (2002) proposed two categories of social capital: structural and cognitive. The structural dimension includes the network and membership, and the cognitive dimension contains norms, the value system, and trust.

Esser (2008) presented a more elaborate categorization: two main forms, relation-based capital and system capital, with three subcategories each. Relation-based capital, which “resides in the social relations of individuals” (p. 37), comprises position-based capital, trust-based capital, and obligation-based capital. According to Esser, position-based capital is based on the structural hole (Burt, 1992) and strength-of-weak-tie (Granovetter, 1973) theories, while trust- and obligation-based capital have strong-tie structural conditions. Therefore, the former is close to the structural dimension, while the latter two correspond to the relational and cognitive dimensions that were presented by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and Kajisa and Aoki (2002). Referring to these former studies, structural social capital and relational/cognitive social capital are proposed in the present study, with “network density” used as a proxy for structural social capital, and “trust” for relational/cognitive social capital.

Barker and his colleagues (Barker, 1993, 1999; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Barker, Melville, & Pacanowsky, 1993) revealed that teams with high autonomy produce self-control situations. Self-managed teams need to control and regulate themselves by making their own rules. This situation makes the team culture strong and contributes to the team solidarity by forming human relationships that are very close, homogenous, and intimate. The network among team members can be highly dense.

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