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## Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Project Partnerships and Teams

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### Abstract

This chapter examines conceptual and empirical research into the impact of language and culture on project partnerships and teams. Research on this topic takes place in several different disciplinary fields, with international business/management being particularly dominant. This chapter thus includes work in this area, as well as in pragmatics/discourse studies. The first main section, which takes a historical perspective, argues that much work in the international business field has attempted to demonstrate the impact (positive or negative) of the diversity of team members on team performance, yet has found a complex picture that requires a more contextual and process-oriented approach. Early work on language demonstrated the importance of language choice as well as the need to pay close attention to the construction of mutual understanding. The following sections explore ways in which this can be carried out, including research into critical issues such as the benefits and challenges of teamwork, virtual teams, team life cycles, and the impact of culture. Current research foci are reviewed, including the impact of faultlines, power relations and language proficiency, and team relations, as well as the wide variety of research methods used to investigate such issues. The chapter ends with several recommendations for practice and future research directions, including the need for more case studies that are longitudinal and/or process-oriented.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines conceptual and empirical research into the impact of language and culture on project partnerships and teams. According to Kozlowski and Bell (2001, p. 6), workplace teams have the following characteristics:

[They] (a) are composed of two or more individuals, (b) who exist to perform organizationally relevant tasks, (c) share one or more common goals, (d) interact socially, (e) exhibit task interdependencies (i.e., workflow, goals, outcomes), (f) maintain and manage boundaries, and (g) are embedded in an organizational context that sets boundaries, constrains the team, and influences exchanges with other units in the broader entity.

Project partnerships are very similar and share almost all of the characteristics listed by Kozlowski and Bell. The main difference is that their members are typically from different organisations and thus differ from teams in the last of the listed characteristics. In other words, instead of a single organizational context, project partnerships usually span two or more organizational contexts. They are particularly common in academic research and in aid programmes, where people from different organisations join together to achieve a particular goal.

Despite their slight differences, we do not distinguish them systematically in this chapter and only separate them out when it is specifically relevant. Our focus is rather on the impact that linguistic and cultural factors can have when people from different backgrounds work together on a time-limited task and how these factors can be managed. A key issue of debate is whether the diversity enhances or undermines the effectiveness/achievements of the collaborations, and much research focuses on the elements and processes involved.

## 2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Research into linguistically and culturally diverse teams takes place in a number of different disciplinary fields, and especially in international management, international business communication, and pragmatics/discourse studies. Proportionately, far more research within the international business fields than in linguistics, which is understandable given that teamwork is much more core to business than to linguistics. Their foci have also been different, as the sub-sections below indicate.

### **Historical perspectives: diversity and team performance**

The main concern within the international business field has been the effect that diversity may have on team performance. A widely used framework is input-process-outcome (known as the IPO framework). Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, and Gilson (2008, p. 412) explain this as follows:

*Inputs* describe antecedent factors that enable and constrain members' interactions. These include *individual team member characteristics* (e.g., competencies, personalities), *team-level factors* (e.g., task structure, external leader influences), and *organizational and contextual factors* (e.g., organizational design features, environmental complexity). These various antecedents combine to drive team *processes*, which describe members' interactions directed toward task accomplishment. Processes are important because they describe how team inputs are transformed into outcomes. *Outcomes* are results and by-products of team activity that are valued by one or more constituencies [...]. Broadly speaking, these may include *performance* (e.g., quality and quantity) and members' *affective reactions* (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, viability).

With regard to input, the field has been grappling with a fundamental question: does diversity of team membership aid or hinder team performance and output? Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, and Jonsen (2010) propose three possible ways in which diversity could conceptually have an effect, two negative and one positive. They explain that according to both similarity-attraction theory and social identity and social categorization theory, people usually prefer to work with those who are similar to themselves and/or belong to the same social group as themselves and may regard others less favourably. These two theoretical perspectives thus both suggest that diversity will have a negative impact. On the other hand, according to information-processing theory, diversity can bring fresh ideas that promote creativity, new thinking, and enhanced problem-solving, and so can be highly beneficial for team performance and goal achievement.

A large amount of research in international business has explored these diverging predictions. Behfar, Kern, and Brett (2006) maintain that there have been two broad approaches to handling diversity. One examines the impact of team members' demographic differences (e.g. age, race-ethnicity, gender) and the other explores the effect of members' cultural orientations/values/beliefs. Stahl, Maznevski, et al. (2010) refer to these as surface-level and deep-level aspects of culture respectively. These authors undertook a meta-analysis of research on diverse teams, examining 108 empirical studies covering 10,632 teams, but their study did little to resolve the issue. They found both positive and negative effects for both demographic and value-based differences – that both types of diversity led to process losses through task conflict and decreased social integration, yet also led to process gains through greater creativity and higher levels of satisfaction. They further found that contextual factors were having a moderating effect. Studies by Ely and Thomas (2001) and DiStefano and Maznevski (2000) both offer some insights into this.

Ely and Thomas (2001) carried out a qualitative study of three multicultural teams, two of which had reputations for being high-functioning while the third was experiencing conflicts and performance quality issues. They found that one major influential factor was the value that group members and their respective organizations attributed to cultural diversity. Focusing on race, they identified three main attitudes:

- High value: cultural diversity is a beneficial resource for learning, change and renewal;
- Moderate value: cultural diversity is a beneficial resource for market entry;
- Low value: cultural diversity is necessary for ensuring justice and equality.

These attitudes had a major impact on the functioning of the group, the quality of group relations, as well as people's morale, stemming from their sense of being valued and respected for who they are.

DiStefano and Maznevski (2000) also conducted qualitative research into global teams and noticed that the teams seemed to fall into three performance categories: high performing, mediocre, and problematic. They labelled these types of teams respectively as 'creators', 'equalizers' and 'destroyers'. They found that the key distinction between them was in

team members' willingness to talk about their differences. The 'creators' explicitly recognized and probed their differences and used them to help nurture innovative ideas. The 'destroyers' held no genuine discussions, but rather made assumptions (frequently negative) about the others, without exploring how valid or otherwise their assumptions were. The 'equalizers' were the most surprising. Members felt they were getting on very well; there were no real differences of opinion and they quickly agreed ways ahead. Yet according to their senior managers, their performance could be summed up in one word: mediocrity.

Another issue associated with the IPO framework is the limited research into the third element, the outcome. This is an aspect that needs further research, as Mathieu et al. (2008, p. 415) point out:

Interestingly, in teams research the focus is predominantly on *who* is a member of the team, *how* they work together, and *what* they do to perform their work—hence, the construct of performance has been “less systematically addressed”.

Altogether then, these studies show that input variables alone are very unreliable predictors of team performance and that contextual factors are of particularly key importance. We explore some of these further below.

### **Historical perspectives: Language and communication**

Early language-related research into project partnerships and teamwork focused on two main elements: (a) equivalence of meaning and mutual (mis)understanding, and (b) the choice and impact of the working language.

For instance, Oatey (1984) reported the different interpretations of the term 'teacher training' in a British Council/Chinese Ministry of Education project partnership, in which British teachers were recruited to run teacher training programmes at selected Chinese universities. The British (both in the British Council and the teachers themselves) interpreted this to mean that the courses would focus on teaching methodology and would include topics such as introduction to linguistics and English for science and technology. So, this was how the programme was designed and run in the first year of operation; however, the Chinese participants were all expecting to be given almost nothing but language improvement classes and did not perceive the relevance of the courses they were being taught. Needless to say, the expectations of both parties were breached, primarily because no one had taken the time to clarify their respective understandings of a term that they both assumed the other party interpreted similarly.

Similar issues have been reported in the business field. For instance, Nunamaker, Reinig, and Briggs (2009) report the following example:

We once worked with a distributed group of 32 stakeholders who were negotiating the requirements for a large online bookstore. Progress broke down over the term, “affiliate.” Stakeholders could not agree on what rights and privileges affiliates should have. It turned out that among the 32 stakeholders

there were five different meanings for the term, “affiliate”. The team agreed to use a different term for each of those five meanings, and agreed that nobody would use the term, “affiliate” for the rest of the project, to minimize confusion.

Nunamaker et al., 2009, p.115

They then explain how a very large contract was lost because of inconsistent use of terms and standards and they emphasise the ongoing need for managing this issue. In line with this, Jankowicz and Dobosz-Bourne (2003, p. 123) argue as follows: “To the extent that people in different cultures understand the world differently, they must expend deliberate effort in trying to come to terms with each other’s meanings, over and above their translated vocabularies, if they are to collaborate successfully.”

This process of meaning construction is even more challenging when there are difficulties in finding equivalent words in different languages. For instance, Jankowicz (1994) reports that a British and Polish university project partnership in the management field had major difficulty in finding equivalent terms for core vocabulary, such as manager, marketing, accounting, and training.

Another key language and communication issue relates to choice of working language. Kingston (1996), for instances, describes the issues that arose when a French and British company merged to form GEC Alstom and English was made the ‘corporate language’. Both French and British staff needed to make adjustments, and this raised identity issues for the French in particular, as well as language and communication issues for both parties. Uneven amounts of work can also sometimes occur in these circumstances, and this can lead to resentment. Spencer-Oatey (2012), for example, reports that the choice of English as the working language of the eChina-UK Programme significantly increased the workload of the Chinese partners and was problematic for several reasons. Some members felt quite strongly about this issue, and one commented as follows:

I think we should show consideration for each other in terms of language. China is now developing very fast; they should know some Chinese to communicate with us. ... We have learned a lot of English, it’s their turn to learn some basic Chinese, as it is two-way communication. I find it weird that they don’t know even a word of Chinese. (p.251)

Spencer-Oatey (2012) points out that as the projects progressed, most of the British realized the importance of having a Chinese speaker to work with them in Britain, and so identified suitable people to bring in on an ad hoc basis. In addition, several of them started to take Chinese language lessons.

### 3. CRITICAL ISSUES AND TOPICS

#### The benefits and challenges of diverse teamwork

As explained above, a key issue in relation to diverse teamwork is the extent to which the diversity brings benefits or challenges. Stahl, Mäkela, Zander, and Maznevski (2010, p. 439) argue that “Current research on multicultural teams tends to exhibit a bias towards studying the negative effects of team diversity more than the positive.” A possible reason for this is suggested by Behfar et al. (2006) who compared the management challenges faced by same-culture teams with those faced by multicultural teams. Table 1 summarises their lists, but it is not exhaustive of course. It perhaps needs to be supplemented with some higher-level challenges, such as motivating members and creating a common culture (Earley & Gardner, 2005).

Management challenges in same-culture teams	Management challenges in multicultural teams
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personality and communication conflict</li> <li>2. Differences of opinion about work</li> <li>3. Deciding on a work method or approach</li> <li>4. Issues with timing and scheduling</li> <li>5. Problems with contribution and workload distribution</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Direct vs indirect confrontation</li> <li>2. Norms for problem solving and decision making</li> <li>3. Differences in work norms &amp; behaviours</li> <li>4. Time, urgency and pace</li> <li>5. Violations of respect and hierarchy</li> <li>6. Inter-group prejudice</li> <li>7. Lack of common ground</li> <li>8. Fluency (accents &amp; vocabulary)</li> <li>9. Implicit vs explicit communication</li> </ol>

Table 1: Management challenges faced by same-culture and multicultural teams, according to Behfar et al. (2006)

Behfar et al. (2006, p. 252) maintain that while both types of teams face similar procedural and interpersonal challenges, “the sources and consequences are more complex” in multicultural teams. Schneider and Barsoux (1997) divide the challenges of multicultural teamwork into two broad categories: task-related challenges and process-related challenges. They point out that both aspects can be affected by differences in cultural values and cultural practices, listing the following: hierarchy/power, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, being versus doing, task versus relationship, monochronic versus polychronic, high versus low context (p.186).

Stahl, Mäkela, et al. (2010) point out that diverse teams can bring two positive advantages: creativity and satisfaction yet, as explained above, there has been difficulty obtaining objective evidence to demonstrate when and how this occurs.

#### Virtual teams

Virtual teams refer to collaborations among people who work in different places, often in different time zones, and who predominantly use electronic communication media to

interact. With globalisation, combined with flexible working, this phenomenon is increasing rapidly. Lockwood (2015), in fact, reports a study of global multinational companies that found 80% of the respondents were members of virtual teams. Such teams are typically very diverse, often differing in demographic characteristics, such as nationality, professional backgrounds, languages spoken, and level of fluency in the various languages. Such teams are widely regarded as facing even more challenges than co-located teams, and Baan and Maznevski (2008) propose that there are three key elements that make them critically different from traditional co-located teams: complexity, invisibility and restricted communication. They explain these elements as follow:

*Complexity:* Virtual teams and work groups typically face a greater degree of complexity in their working environment than face-to-face groups do.

*Invisibility:* The greater complexity is not highly visible, which easily leads to incomplete understanding and incorrect conclusions.

*Restricted communication:* Communication using electronic media (telephone, e-mail, instant messaging, and others) is significantly less effective in articulating viewpoints and nuances than direct face-to-face communication; however, this apparent deficiency can create some counterintuitive advantages in the right context.

Baan and Maznevski (2008, pp. 346-347)

One of the complexities that both Baan and Maznevski (2008) and Lockwood (2015) mention is matrix management and reporting. This approach aims to break down silos and facilitate working across different business functions, resulting in employees working in multiple teams and reporting to several different managers. This makes communicative interactions more complex and task achievement more challenging. When people are physically not present, it is more difficult for them to keep abreast of relevant information and the modes of communication add a further challenge. People need to decide which channels are most suitable for what kind of communication, and there can be cultural differences with respect to this. For example, Spencer-Oatey (2012, p. 252) reports a difference in email protocols experienced by team members of the eChina-UK programme. When sending emails, the British programme manager had been copying in all team members for whom a particular email was relevant, but after several months of collaboration, she received feedback that this was inappropriate when dealing with Chinese superiors.

## **Team Lifecycles**

An alternative to the IPO framework for researching teams is to study them from a lifecycle perspective, since by definition they are temporary collaborations. Several different lifecycle stages have been proposed, both in terms of content and number (e.g. Canney Davison & Ward, 1999; Spencer-Oatey & Tang, 2007; Teagarden, Drost, & Von Glinow, 2005). Broadly, they can be divided as follows:

Phase 1: Preparation (e.g. Vision, task specification, personnel selection)

Phase 2: Launch and initial stage (e.g. First meetings, goal clarification)

Phase 3: Execution (e.g. Performance management, team development, working through conflicts/strategic moments)

Phase 4: Closing (e.g. Review, dissemination of achievements, future planning)

Canney Davison and Ward (1999, p. 34) identify five 'cultural' and three 'organisational' factors that affect interaction across the phases. These are listed below:

*Cultural factors*

1. The degrees of difference or similarity that exist between the cultural norms of the individuals in the team
2. The degree to which individuals might manifest their cultural norms
3. Differences in language fluency, communication patterns, non verbals and who says what when
4. Culturally different leadership styles
5. The different expectations about key team processes

*Organisation factors*

6. The status of different cultures within the organisation
7. The geographic spread of the team members
8. The similarity or difference between functional, professional and other cultures.

They refer to these in a chapter focusing on 'know your team'. They also point out that research on cultural norms should always be applied with caution, because various factors, including personality, can affect their manifestation. They argue that the key issue is "to be prepared, to have the ability to analyse a situation if it does arise, and to know that something quite different may actually take place." (p.63)

## **The impact of culture**

As the previous sections have indicated, there is widespread agreement that while team member language and culture affect the performance of teams, it happens in complex ways. Results from IPO oriented research, which treats these elements as input variables, have not been convincing.

In a life cycle approach, the characteristics of the team members, while still treated as important, are accorded this importance for procedural reasons; in other words, to encourage the team leaders and all team members to get to know each other.

In a discourse approach, Barinaga (2007) demonstrates how team members use their cultural identity (especially their nationality) strategically to position themselves in specific ways in teams and how they adjust their behaviours according to these local positions, rather than according to some overarching cultural behavioural rule. She also shows how

members sometimes (e.g. in a research bid) use cultural factors as a justification for a collaboration and to emphasise the value of each participating member.

#### **4. CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESEARCH**

##### **Identity faultlines and team cohesion/divisions**

Some researchers have turned to the concept of faultlines to gain further insights into the impact of team member demographics. This concept was first put forward by Lau and Murnighan (1998, 2005) who argued, on the basis of their findings, that this variable can explain more of the variance across teams (such as in team learning, sense of satisfaction, and team performance) than any single demographic feature.

Faultlines are potential dividing lines among group members that, as in geology, can lead to fractures or splits along the faultline if pressure mounts. When teams are formed, members tend to use key demographic information, such as nationality, language fluency, age, gender, educational level, and professional role, to implicitly categorise themselves as similar or different to other members. This can lead to subgroups forming. Strong faultlines emerge in a team when key demographic attributes form distinct, nonoverlapping categories. For example, a strong faultline will emerge if all men in an international team are over 50 years old and fluent speakers of the team's working language, French, and all the women are under 30 and less fluent speakers of French. In this example, gender, age, and language fluency have formed a single, strong faultline. Weak faultlines can emerge in two rather different configurations: either when all the members of the team are rather similar (for example, the same age and job function) or else when they are all very different from one another (for example, different ages and working in different job functions).

Faultlines are important because when fractures occur, the result is typically a breakdown in trust and goodwill across the sub-groups, with people becoming reluctant to share important information with members of the other sub-group or sub-groups. Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman, Weber, and Ernst (2009), in their qualitative study, found five key triggers of faultline fracture: differential treatment of subgroup members, clashes of fundamental values/beliefs (e.g. moral, religious or political), conformity demands (i.e. leading to assimilation of a subgroup), insults or humiliating action towards a subgroup, and simple contact when intergroup anxiety is high.

Vigier and Spencer-Oatey (2018), in a study of French and English speaking teams who worked for a French-based multinational company, found that team members formed sub-groups on the basis of fluency in the working language of the team. Moreover, when other variables, notably professional sector, gender and age, were also aligned with the language fluency faultline, the fractures were very sharp and deep and difficult to overcome.

This finding suggests that the effectiveness of team communication is not simply a question of language proficiency. More broadly, the concept of faultlines and the research

outcomes associated with it, provide support for social categorization theory (Tajfel, 1982) and its impact on interpersonal interaction.

### **Power Relations and Language Proficiency**

While research on teams in general is abundant, research on team communication and team interaction is comparatively limited. Research to date has mostly investigated two (often interconnected) aspects of communication in intercultural teams: The role of language proficiency in communication, and the *team meeting* as a specific contextual genre of team communication.

Meetings are seen as particularly important sites of team interactions. Talk in meetings can either be organised by a meeting chair, who to some extent controls the interactional floor, or – where such a chair is absent – talk and turn-taking is typically organised informally. However, in either case, imbalances in participation rates have frequently been reported, with less proficient team members consistently speaking less frequently than their more fluent counterparts (e.g. García & Cañado, 2005; Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014; Vigier & Spencer-Oatey, 2017). The reasons and impact of this imbalance seem multifaceted.

Investigating 15 teams in the German automotive sector, Tenzer, Pudelko, and Harzing (2014) found that individuals with lower language proficiency were seen as having less technical competence and also as being less dependable and less trustworthy. These perceptions were also found to be very stable over time and persisted in teams even after years of collaboration. In line with this, García and Cañado (2005) reported large power differences between team members of equal teams based on how fluent they were in the main working language. According to their participants, being very fluent was highly advantageous for future leadership positions for the following reasons:

- places you in a favourable, less fragile position when it comes to negotiating and dealing with people from different countries;
- compels others to turn to you first as a time-saving device;
- helps avoid conflict;
- empowers you, by reducing inhibitions, by increasing your amount of participation and hence, power, and by helping you believe you can contribute to the discussion to a greater extent. All in all, it promotes your leadership within the group.

(García & Cañado, 2005, p. 96)

In one of the few studies directly investigating team interactions, Debray and Spencer-Oatey (2019) found cultural stereotyping to play a role in the silencing of less proficient team members and their exclusion from important decisions. The subtle positioning of less proficient speakers as different, difficult and less competent perpetuated their silence even in a team where all members explicitly agreed that the situation was not desirable and was negatively affecting their work. Team members nonetheless continued to interact differently with their less proficient team member, leading to marginalisation and exclusion from the teamwork – even though team members got on well socially.

Hinds et al. (2014), investigating the perspectives of the less fluent speakers, reported that their participants had strong emotional reactions to perceived power asymmetries including stress, anxiety and frustration, in addition to the anxiety they felt over speaking the company language in front of others. This led to two different avoidance behaviours in the German organisations they investigated: Team members concerned about their English would avoid going to meetings where they would be forced to speak English and, when in charge, attempted to only invite employees who were fluent in German, thus eliminating the need to speak English.

Exclusion and power imbalances can of course occur due to many reasons not only language proficiency. Lockwood (2015) argues that attributing communication problems to ethnicity or language fluency issues alone can sometimes mask more fundamental problems. In her study of a multinational financial company, she found that there were some underlying issues that had a significant effect, including misalignment around corporate values, professional identity struggles, and fear of (and resistance to) offshoring.

### **Team relations**

In addition to power and communication issues, cultural and linguistic diversity can have an important impact on team relations (Kassis-Henderson, 2005).

In a study of knowledge sharing in a dispersed team in a multinational company, Lagerström and Andersson (2003, p. 94) concluded that “the core of knowledge management is social interactions”, in that it helps build mutual understanding and trust, and thereby helps members become more “motivated, committed, and secure in engaging in knowledge creation and sharing.”

To help achieve this, Pullin (2010) emphasises the role of small talk in and around team meetings in establishing solidarity, showing interest and care. In her data participants spoke about uncontroversial shared interests such as music or food at work, positively affecting the mood and the collaboration more broadly. Debray (2018) found similar effects with regard to troubles talk. In her data, team members extensively engaged in talk about shared troubles during team meetings including about workloads, clients, long meetings or events, weather and other colleagues. Through this, previously unfamiliar team members gradually managed to establish common ground and shared perspectives on their work and institutional context, which facilitated decision-making in the team. Troubles talk also facilitated information sharing: Team members got to know each other better and could relate more to each other’s perspectives and approaches. In addition, they began sharing not only personal information but also information was work-relevant and facilitated collaborations. Troubles talk was also regularly done after disagreements and conflicts and thus seems to be one of the ways in which relationships in teams can be repaired and harmony restored.

Thus, case study research into intercultural teams has consistently found that social interactions and good rapport are crucial for strong performance and goal achievement.

## **5. MAIN RESEARCH METHODS**

A wide variety of research methods are used to explore the role of language and culture in project partnerships and teams and, understandably, reflect the various research goals and underpinning conceptual orientations of the authors.

### **Researching the role of input variables**

Researchers who take an IPO framework approach typically take a positivist research approach and seek to determine the effect of input variables, using various methodologies.

Kirkman, Tesluk, and Rosen (2004) and Earley and Mosakowski (2000) both used mixed methods. For example, Earley and Mosakowski (2000) carried out a series of studies to explore the impact of national diversity on team outcomes, in terms of team performance and team satisfaction. First, they investigated five managerial teams, observing them, interviewing them, and obtaining effectiveness ratings from the general manager. After various analyses of this data, they carried out two quantitative follow-up studies to explore their emerging findings.

Dekker, Rutte, and Van den Berg (2008), on the other hand, took a 'critical incident' approach. They interviewed professional virtual team workers from large multinational corporations in four different countries and asked them to report one or more critical incidents. They then transformed the critical incidents into lists of behavioural items, so they could conduct statistical analyses to explore whether people from different cultures have different opinions on what behaviours are critical for effective team functioning.

Yet other researchers (e.g. Joshi & Roh, 2009; Stahl, Maznevski, et al., 2010) have carried out meta-analyses in which they examine data on the same topic from a number of different, independent studies, in order to determine overall trends. The overall consensus from all the input-focused studies is that intervening variables have a major impact on outcomes. This has resulted in a greater focus on team processes, which we turn to next.

### **Researching team processes**

Einola and Alvesson (2019, p. 4) maintain that despite the consensus that more studies on team dynamics and processes are needed, there are still too few such studies, perhaps because they are time-consuming and require methodological sophistication. They also point out that the term 'process' is wide and vague, covering positivist predictive interpretations, as in the IPO model, to more dynamic and fluid interpretations as in sense-making approaches.

Einola and Alvesson (2019) themselves report a case study in which their aim was to gain a deep understanding of the 'teaming process' as it unfolded dynamically over time, with the team members each making sense personally of the different task and relational challenges that came up. They collected multiple types of data from 'global virtual teams' taking an MBA strategy course: task-related team video presentations and associated individual essays, loosely structured team interviews, individual reflective essays about

their team experience, individual learning, and team dynamics, observational data on interactions both within the classroom and outside, and both formal and ad-hoc electronic communication. They analysed this data from an interpretive sensemaking perspective to explore how teams are 'made' and 'unmade'. Using a 2-dimensional model of teaming up/down (effort and commitment to the task versus limited or fragmented efforts) and teaming in/out (group/social concern versus self/individual focus), they plotted the teaming trajectories of their case teams and found a very variable picture. They conclude that team work requires people not only to make sense of situations for themselves, but also to make sense of other people's sensemaking and to engage in ongoing efforts to align individual understandings.

An alternative approach to studying team processes is a discourse one. Barinaga (2007), for instance, examined the use of 'national culture' as a discursive resource. She followed an international project group over a 17-month period who met together periodically for workshops. Barinaga attended all their workshops, observing and recording all their work meetings, participating in social events, and keeping detailed field notes. She also collected relevant documents. When coding this data, she found that references to 'national culture' were particularly abundant and rich and so focused on them. She summarises her findings as follows:

... group members shaped and developed their international project in important ways by using the discourses of 'national culture' and 'cultural diversity' to excuse confusion and misunderstanding, to position themselves vis-à-vis the group, to justify decisions, and to give the group a *raison d'être*.

Barinaga (2007, p. 315)

Case study approaches have generated yet another type of insights. Debray (2018) and Debray & Spencer-Oatey (2019) have explored different features of communication in an in-depth longitudinal study of a single intercultural team. They have identified both relationally positive communicative activities in form of shared troubles talk and quite negative communicative issues in form of marginalisation and exclusion that existed in the same team and among the same team members. This highlights some of the complexities involved in the management of relationships and interactions in teams. Such longitudinal perspectives provide interesting insights as it can be traced how relations between team members become fixated over time and how this effects the actual work processes and team dynamic, but also how changeable team dynamics can be where tasks or team managers change. This provides an important counter-point to many of the quantitative studies that have taken these processes as static, investigating results either at a single point in time or simply aggregating process data (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001).

### **Researching team lifecycles**

A third main focus of teamwork research is the different stages that make up a team's lifecycle. Teagarden et al. (2005, p. 303) argue as follows:

Each stage exhibits different challenges and opportunities that influence the quality, reliability and validity of the final research output and the overall viability of the knowledge-creation project.

In other words, different actions and behaviours are needed at different stages, and these affect the level of productivity and collaboration at both that stage and subsequent stages. Studies that take this approach (e.g. Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005; Spencer-Oatey & Tang, 2007; Teagarden et al., 2005) obviously need to collect longitudinal data and often it is (some of) the team members themselves who do this. The data that are typically collected include project reports, interviews with team members and stakeholders, and sometimes recordings of meetings and email exchanges. This data is then analysed from a team phase perspective, paying particular attention to what is done when and how effective that is.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Some of the most helpful recommendations for practice have emerged from research into team processes and team lifecycles. For instance, DiStefano and Maznevski (2000, p. 48) argue that the key to “unlocking creative synergy” in teams lies in their interaction processes. Canney Davison (1996) identifies five processes that she believes are particularly important, as well as 18 more specific steps to be used at different stages in the team’s lifecycle. This section explains some of the recommendations that researchers such as these have made.

### **Know your team**

Several authors (e.g. Canney Davison & Ward, 1999; DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000) strongly recommend spending time near the beginning of a team project on getting to know each other. In fact, Canney Davison (1996, p. 171) gives the following adage: “Start slowly and end fast; start fast and maybe not end at all.” By this she means that teams need to take time to build a solid foundation for their collaboration: understand the task they need to work on, discuss and prioritise their objectives, build relationships within the team (preferably face-to-face), explore cultural similarities and differences in ways of working, openly share each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and agree a first set of action plans.

Similarly, DiStefano and Maznevski (2000, p. 49) recommend an initial Map, Bridge, Integrate (MBI) process in order to foster high quality, innovative team interaction:

1. Map: Understand the differences
2. Bridge: Communicate, take the differences into account
3. Integrate: Bring together and leverage the differences

In principle this sounds very good, but talking openly about cultural similarities and differences, such as preferred communication styles (direct/indirect) and ways of giving/receiving feedback, can be very difficult during the early stages. On the one hand, members may be unaware of the differences that may arise, because many aspects of their

working patterns and preferences may be subconscious. They may only become consciously aware of them when some kind of clash occurs. On the other, for members with a preference for indirect communication, talking explicitly about such matters could be very face-threatening. Spencer-Oatey and Tang (2007, p. 173) raise similar questions, and recommend a tandem approach:

Our experiences in the *eChina-UK Programme* are that a tandem approach is needed. It is impossible to gain a deep understanding of each other's professional beliefs and practices, or preferred protocols for communication and collaboration, prior to starting the task. Yet it is unwise not to address such issues until problems emerge. Rather, engagement with the task, and reflection on the process and perspectives of those involved, need to go hand in hand every step of the way, with each continually informing the other and each continually moving the other forward. This is very time-consuming, and stakeholders need to be fully aware of this, yet only in this way can synergy truly be created and the richest outcomes achieved.

Spencer-Oatey and Tang (2007, p. 173)

Certainly, relationship building in the early stages is extremely valuable and important. Differences of opinion and conflict are almost bound to arise sooner or later, and having strong interpersonal relations can enable team members to deal with them more effectively than if they barely know each other personally/socially.

### **Manage power differences**

Several studies (e.g. Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019; Rogerson-Revell, 2008) have reported calls by team members for help in solving participation issues. These are not easy to overcome, but Brett (2014) suggests that there are three ways in which the power relations among team members may operate and she proposes that hybridity and fusion can be helpful alternatives to subgroup dominance. With fusion teamwork, different procedural approaches to teamwork are preserved, while hybrid teamwork goes a step further and requires team members to set aside their own preferred ways of working and operate according to ones that are shared across the whole group. Brett (2014) points out that hybrid teamwork is most likely to evolve when members are culturally highly heterogeneous and are also particularly concerned about task achievement. It also requires time, so if a team has a short expected lifespan, then a fusion model may be more feasible.

### **Manage language and foster 'good' communication**

Several authors have highlighted the need for clear communication in intercultural teams, maintaining that the key to this lies in social interactions and good rapport (e.g. Lagerström & Andersson, 2003, p. 94). Cohen and Kassis-Henderson (2012, p. 198), however, state that "establishing rapport is difficult, time consuming and requires effort" – thus managers and organisations need to account for this. Small talk and social talk have been found to enhance team relationships and allow teams to familiarise themselves with each other's

communication styles, to develop common ground, solidarity and shared perspectives (Debray, 2018; Pullin, 2010), however, participating in these types of talk can be even more challenging than technical talk for a second language speaker (Kassis-Henderson, 2005). Therefore opening-up space in meetings and endorsing social interactions by managers might facilitate second language speaker's inclusion in these types of talks. The same is true for the imbalance found in participation in meetings more generally. Chairs can control access to the floor and can encourage and discourage contributions of team members. Chairs, however, do need to do more than this and show awareness for active listening and uptake, as Debray and Spencer-Oatey (2019) have shown that team members would sometimes elicit a silent members contribution but fail to actually engage with it.

## **7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The research reviewed in this chapter has demonstrated the complex interconnections between language and cultural diversity in project partnerships and teams. In light of this, and in line with Jonsen, Maznevski and Canney Davison's (2012) recommendations for next wave research, we suggest that a future research agenda needs to focus particularly on the following:

- Case studies of successful team working so that we can gain a richer picture of the bright side of multicultural team working (Stahl, Mäkela, et al., 2010);
- Longitudinal case studies of multicultural teams so that we can gain insights into developments in team relations over time (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019);
- Discourse-based studies of multicultural teams so that we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which team members use cultural identity as a way of positioning themselves and each other (Barinaga, 2007);
- Longitudinal, observational/discourse-based studies of multicultural teams so that we can gain insights into helpful and less helpful interactional strategies (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Vigier & Spencer-Oatey, 2018);
- Greater use of digital research methodologies, such as social network analysis, so that we can gain greater insights into issues such as member identification or communication and trust (Sarker, Ahuja, Sarker, & Kirkeby, 2011)

As Jonsen et al. (2012, p. 387) point out, "Only to the extent that we can explore questions like these, will we be able to provide guidance to organizations to help them prepare for the future."

## **8. RELATED TOPICS**

Culture, communication, context, and power; Language, identity, and interculturality; Researching multilingually; Speech acts, facework, and politeness: Sociopragmatics, facework, and intercultural relationship-building; Language: An essential component of intercultural communicative competence; Intercultural business education; Professional and workplace settings.

## 9. FURTHER READING

- Berger, M. (Ed.) (1996). *Cross-cultural Team Building. Guidelines for more Effective Communication and Negotiation*. London: McGraw Hill. (This edited collection offers both theoretical and practical insights into multicultural team-building in a wide range of different contexts. Despite its publication date, its content is still very timely and relevant.)
- Debray, C., & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2019). 'On the same page?' Marginalisation and positioning practices in intercultural teams. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 144, 15–28. (This article provides an in-depth, longitudinal analysis of the impact of language proficiency issues on interaction in a multicultural team.)
- Einola, K., & Alvesson, M. (2019). The making and unmaking of teams. *Human Relations, Online first*. (This article reports a longitudinal study of three culturally diverse teams, with a particular focus on team dynamics and the process of 'teaming'.)
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012). Maximizing the benefits of international education collaborations: Managing interaction processes. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(3), 244–261. (This article reports on a transnational educational project partnership. It discusses the challenges that team members faced and the ways in which they responded.)

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