

Short critique paper

Gibson, C. B., & Vermuelen, F. (2003). A healthy divide: Subgroups as a stimulus for team learning behavior. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 48(2), 202.

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Gibson and Vermeulen's paper "A Healthy Divide: Subgroups as a Stimulus for Team Learning Behavior" makes a significant contribution to the study of group composition. In contrast to the past forty years of research summarized in Williams and O'Reilly's paper, "Demography and Diversity in Organizations: A Review of 40 Years of Research" which looks at demographic attributes of groups in a primarily binary and additive manner, "A Healthy Divide" considers the impact of gradations of heterogeneity and subgroup strength on group behavior. Investigating the relative homogeneity/heterogeneity of groups and their related propensity to form subgroups of differing strengths, Gibson and Vermeulen introduce a framework that reveals the significance of considering subgroup variables when attempting to describe team learning behavior. This is especially meaningful as previous findings in group composition that have associated group diversity with negative group behavior.

"There is substantial evidence from both laboratory and field studies conducted over the past four decades that variations in group composition can have important effects of group functioning. These studies show that increased diversity, especially in terms of age, tenure, and ethnicity, typically has negative effects on social integration, communication, and conflict (p. 115, Williams & O'Reilly).

While leveraging previous work on the impact of group heterogeneity on group behavior and previous work on the role of subgroups within teams, this paper contributes a level of conceptual complexity not represented Williams and O'Reilly's summative findings or Lau and Murnighan's conceptual framework for the role of subgroups within work groups.

Lau and Murnighan explore the potential impact of the formation of subgroups within groups by equating the aggregation of demographic differences within a group across group members to the development of fault lines. Lau and Murnighan attribute the development of subgroups to primarily negative group processes. “Group faultlines represent a potential for the formation of subgroups and the acceleration of subgroup conflict within a group. The actual formation of subgroups, rather than just their potential, can have a number of negative effects of internal communications and general group functioning” (p. 336, Lau & Murnighan).

In contrast to Lau and Murnighan, “A Healthy Divide” provides arguments for the formation of moderately strong subgroups in heterogeneous groups as a mechanism to enable effective team learning behavior. Premising their model on the idea that subgroups can become “supportive cohorts within a team, (p. 203, Gibson & Vermeulen)” the authors suggest that “negative influences of differences between team members identified in the literature (e.g., tollsome communication and integration) may be associated with heterogeneity in the absence of subgroups, while the positive effects (e.g., a richer array of perspectives) may materialize through subgroups” (ibid.).

“A Healthy Divide” takes into consideration the differing effects organizational design features have on team learning depending of the strength of subgroups. Performance management by an external leader, team empowerment, and the availability of a knowledge management system are related to subgroup strength. Supporting the hypothesis that moderately strong subgroups facilitate team learning behavior, study findings reveal that team empowerment and knowledge management systems are most utilized by moderately strong subgroups while teams with weak

or extremely strong subgroups rely more strongly on performance management to facilitate team learning behavior.

Limitations

Part of this study's contribution to the literature is its' use of demographic variables previously utilized in many existing studies. This enables findings from this study to influence understanding of previous work and potentially reinterpretations. At the same time, the use of existing demographic categories does limit the ways in which the influence of personality and sub-cultures may influence group behavior. By verifying the existence of subgroups by correlating demographic features to general individual interviews, there is the possibility that existing subgroups were not actually identified or were misidentified: subgroups may have formed on other variables not accounted for in the study. Additionally, the reliance on self-report at the individual level aggregated to the group level may be misleading as individuals in groups and groups (or subgroups) as a whole may see themselves in different ways.

The focus of this paper on team learning behavior without tying team learning behavior to more general process and performance measures limits its utility as a tool with which to change the research climate associated with group composition. While team learning behavior can be considered a group process measure, it is unfortunate that objective group performance measures were not included.

FUTURE WORK

As mentioned by Gibson and Vermeulen in stating the limitations of their research, this study did not look at the internal workings of the teams. In addition to the opportunities the authors identified for this sort of investigation, it may be of interest to consider their framework from the perspective of conflict management. Specifically, does the development of moderately strong subgroups encourage conflict avoidance in the group as a whole? If so, can the use of resources provided by the organizational design features be external mechanisms through which the groups manage and avoid conflict? For example, might the use of the Knowledge Management System act as a resource to guide group process and resolve conflicting perspectives. Is it possible that groups with moderately strong subgroups have specific incentives to avoid conflict and foster cooperation?

A second area for further investigation is to consider the relationship that performance management by an external leader may have to Pinto et al.'s superordinate goals, "goals that are urgent and compelling for all groups involved but whose attainment requires the resources and efforts of more than one group," or in this case more than one subgroup. It is possible that performance management by an external leader and superordinate goals both function to facilitate cross-functional and cross-subgroup cooperation.

References:

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