

Reflections of Cross-Cultural Collaboration Science

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The notion that effective collaboration benefits team and organizational performance has been around for many years. Interest in the construct of collaboration is a dominant area of research not only in the fields of industrial organizational psychology and organizational behavior but also in other areas of study such as sociology and medicine (Bedwell et al., 2012). Most recently, the prevalence and growth of global work, consisting of activities such as trade, off-shoring, and economic activity across national borders, has aroused the interest of cross-cultural psychologists in studying collaboration. The articles presented in this special issue provide evidence of this growing area of inquiry.

Looking across this growing body of theoretical and empirical research, we observe that the use of a common definition of this construct could help future cross-cultural and multicultural research to be more fruitfully conducted. Hence, our goal here is to highlight several fundamental questions that exist regarding collaboration within and across national and cultural borders. We will not attempt to review or summarize the literature that has been amassed over the past few decades. Rather, we seek to provide an integrated view of the key questions, problems, and opportunities that pose a direct challenge to our field. By highlighting these areas, we seek to stimulate others to conduct needed research.

We believe that several fundamental questions regarding the nature of collaboration within and across cultures still exist. These questions are as follows: (i) What can be gained by studying collaboration from a cross-cultural perspective? (ii) What do we know (and not know) about collaboration within and between cultures? (iii) What do we need to know in order to effectively manage multicultural collaborations? (iv) How should we advance scholarship about cross-cultural and multicultural collaborations? The remainder of this paper is organized around these focal questions. Prior to answering these questions, we start with the presentation of a unifying definition of collaboration and the value for studying collaboration from a cultural perspective in the first place. We conclude with recommendations for future directions.

What is This Thing Called “Collaboration”?

Providing the field with a common definition of collaboration is a critical starting point for advancing theory and research. Defining collaboration is not an easy task given that over 20 different definitions of it across 10 different disciplines have been identified in the literature (Bedwell et al., 2012). Scholars have also conceptualized collaboration across levels of analysis defining it at interpersonal, team, organizational, and interorganizational levels. Further complicating matters, the literature has also been murky on the relationship between collaboration, teamwork, coordination, and cooperation.

The inconsistent use of the term collaboration creates confusion and inhibits the theoretical and empirical exploitation of this construct. The definition established by Bedwell et al. (2012) stating, “collaboration is as an evolving process whereby two or more social entities actively and reciprocally engage in joint activities aimed at

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achieving at least one shared goal.” This definition provides clarity to questions that existed in the literature such as about whether collaboration is a process or an outcome, what levels of analysis it occurs at, and who participated in collaborations. This definition of collaboration characterized is valuable because it is sufficiently narrow in that key features of collaboration are specified yet broad enough to account for variation in levels of analysis, participants, multiple and perhaps competing goals, and duration.

Studying collaboration from a cross-cultural approach, defined as the study of similarities and differences in the processes and behavior at work across different cultures (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007), provides much value to our theory and empirical research. First, studying collaboration across countries helps us to understand the conditions and input factors that promote and hinder effective collaborative outcomes across cultures at interpersonal, team, organizational, and interorganizational levels of analysis. Through comparative analysis, scholars can discern the factors that inhibit and promote high performance in teams across cultures. In this special issue, Severance et al. (2013) provided critical insight into how people from dignity, honor, and face cultures vary and converge on their understanding of the dimensions of aggression. The cross-cultural differences and similarities uncovered in this important research provide guidance for potential barriers and opportunities that may ensue when conflict arises during intercultural interaction. With the continued contribution of research such as that of Severance et al. (2013), the field may amass sufficient understanding of what conditions universally support effective collaboration and those that are only effective in specific cultural contexts.

Second, studies on collaboration can inform predictions about when collaboration between people from different cultural or national backgrounds will be challenging. By shedding light on differences in how individuals perceive, approach, and evaluate collaboration across cultures, scholars also elucidate potential cultural incompatibilities that can surface during intercultural collaboration and how they may be overcome. When working together on global work, conflict between collaborating entities may potentially arise about how much time and effort are allocated to task-related versus interpersonal aspects of the collaboration. In this special issue, Dibble and Gibson (2013) elucidated the conflicts that arise in temporary multicultural collaborations and how strategic adjustment processes enable effective performance outcomes. This work expands our understanding of multicultural collaboration beyond the narrow focus on teams and uses qualitative methods to uncover how challenges that arise are overcome.

The third reason that studies of collaboration across cultures have value is that it may help practitioners to gain insight that enables them to diagnose and improve collaboration across a variety of culture and nations. In other words, cross-cultural research on collaboration can help us to gain a better understanding of collaboration beyond the United States or the West. The identification of the enabling conditions that support collaboration within and across national borders would be of great value to managers and practitioners who seek to foster effective collaboration within multinational firms conducting global work. In this special issue, Salmon et al. (2013) provided practical insight into when particular mediation tactics will be most likely to help to reach conflict resolution during intercultural negotiation. Research such as this that provides insights that can be readily translated and applied to the work of individuals working at the intersection of cultures such as ambassadors, expatriates, and international mediators is a welcomed addition to the field.

What Do We Know (and Not Know) About Collaboration from a Cross-Cultural Perspective?

To answer this question, it is important to review current research around the core elements of collaboration. Research on collaboration across cultures could advance greatly by continuing to focus on the following collaboration components: (i) evolving temporal process; (ii) social entities; (iii) reciprocal interaction; (iv) joint activity; and (v) the goal of achieving at least one shared goal. Although we do not provide an extensive review of the literature, we do provide examples of research that has been conducted within each area and also identify critical research gaps.

Temporal differences across cultures affect collaboration...

First, collaboration is an evolving process that develops over time. This notion requires drawing upon theoretical and empirical research about how individuals view time. Extant research suggests that individuals across cultures vary in their perception of time, deadlines, and their preferences for how time should be utilized. The study of how temporal perspectives and styles affect collaboration across collaboration could provide great insight. For instance, research has found that individuals with interdependent self-construal view future events as more proximal than individuals with an independent self-construal (Lee, Lee, & Kern, 2010). Moreover, when individuals were presented with an unpleasant or pleasant task at a temporal distance that fit their self-construal, they viewed less motivated toward the former and more motivated to accomplish the latter. This finding suggests that individuals, with different temporal distance, within the same team may be likely to view temporal aspects of collaboration, such as deadlines, through different lenses and respond to them with varying degrees of motivation over time. Although research has begun to explore temporal diversity across and within cultures (e.g., Arman & Adair, 2012; Gibson, Waller, Carpenter, & Conte, 2007), many open questions still remain about how temporal and dynamic aspects of collaboration are perceived, interpreted, and responded to.

Self-construal differences across cultures affect collaboration...

The second element of collaboration consists of the *social entities* involved, which may be individuals, teams, or organizations. This aspect of the collaboration definition requires understanding the way that people see themselves and collectives, such as groups, in terms of agency, autonomy, and situational constraints that affect action. For instance, a dominant paradigm in organizational psychology argues that individuals, especially from North America, have the motivation and the autonomous freedom to make choices that please the self rather than others in the groups to which they belong (Gelfand, Leslie, & Fehr, 2008). On the other hand, research acknowledges that some individuals, especially those from Asian cultures, tend to be motivated to act in ways that promote group cooperation and harmony (Nisbett et al., 2001) and to meet the expectations of those in their social environment (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). These two perspectives provide insight into how individuals across cultures may behave differently when participating in a collaboration based on the way that they see themselves in terms of agency, autonomy, and motivation. Similar cross-cultural variation exists about the agency and autonomy that groups are believed to possess. North Americans, for instance, tend to view groups to be more constrained by situational contexts, whereas Asians view groups as more agentic and autonomous (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000). Additional research that explores the implications for cross-cultural variation with regard to the agency, autonomy, and motivation that are attributed to individuals and groups on collaboration would be an important contribution to our field.

The content and nature of exchange differ across cultures and affect collaboration...

Our third category involves the processes of *reciprocal interaction*. The exchange of resources such as information and knowledge is an example of the reciprocal process of interaction that occurs during the collaboration process. Cultural differences can affect reciprocal interaction in terms of the kind of knowledge resources exchanged, the structures that foster exchange, and the psychological factors that motivate the willingness to engage in reciprocal interaction. Contextual information, for instance, is both perceived and incorporated into the information processing of individuals more among people from Asian cultures than to those from North American cultures (Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, & Larsen, 2003). This finding suggests that the content of information exchange within collaboration is likely to differ in the extent to which it incorporates contextual aspects of tasks across these two cultures. The degree to which information is shared between specialized units within collaboration can depend on the value cultures place on practices, such as coordination. For instance, Walsham and Sahay (1999) argued that

coordination between role specializations is not as critical in India as it is in the United States and that information technologies that are developed based on this value will not be effective in other cultural contexts such as India. Finally, the motivation to engage in reciprocal interaction is different across societies. Research elucidates that individuals from collectivist cultures are motivated to interact less with strangers and more with individuals from the group to which they belong than people from individualist cultures (Buchan, Croson, & Dawes, 2002). The research cited earlier motivates the need to further understand reciprocal interaction and how it is influenced by cultural values as well as by additional contextual factors such as technology, norms, and practices.

Mental model differences regarding joint work across cultures affect collaboration...

Collaboration requires some level of interdependent effort focused on a *joint activity*. Individuals across cultures vary in their willingness to exert effort toward accomplishing the aims of the collaboration and the way that they define joint activities. Drawing on a sample of individuals from Belgium, Finland, the Philippines, and the United States, Kirkman and Shapiro (2001) identified reluctance on the part of individuals with high individualistic cultural values to want to participate in teams. Moreover, the model that individuals from different cultures use to conceptualize working on joint activities has also been shown to vary. Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001), for example, found that models of collaborating within the context of a team differ around the globe. For instance, countries high in individualism, such as the United States, tended to use sports metaphors, whereas countries high in power distance often talked about teamwork using metaphors of the military or family. These different models of teamwork changed expectations about team roles, scope, membership, and group goals.

In this special issue, Fisher & Hutchings (2013) also elucidate how Australian expatriates operating at the intersection of cultural groups made sense of intercultural interaction during the Vietnam war. Schemata consisting of aspects of the situation that were most salient to these boundary spanners, such as language and face management, are identified. These schemata, in turn, are shown to be critical in shaping expatriate adjustment as they guide what is noticed and responded to in the environment. Differences in these individual schemata are also suggested to affect how workers perform as intercultural boundary spanners in extreme contexts.

Goal definition and prioritization differences across cultures affect collaboration...

One key facet of collaboration is at least *one common goal*. Unfortunately, agreeing on this goal can be a challenge because members of collaborations from different cultures may have different models of what defines effective collaboration. For instance, Mexican Americans have been found to have a stronger preference for workgroups with an interpersonal orientation compared with Americans who prefer to focus on task-oriented work (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000). Moreover, Mexicans were also found to view teams with greater interpersonal interaction as more successful than teams focused more on task accomplished. When members of collaboration come together to work on a common goal, these preferences and definitions of team success may be a source of conflict when some team members may want to spend more time on social compared with task-related functions. Failure to understand these fundamental differences can be divisive and hinder members' progress toward identifying and achieving a common aim.

One potential opportunity for cross-cultural scholars is to identify not only the cross-cultural differences in how people around the globe engage in collaboration but also the universal conditions that support effective collaboration. A focus on conditions would seek to identify the minimum number of conditions, which, when present, could increase the likelihood that particular collaborative outcomes within multicultural teams could be achieved. For instance, effective teamwork has been found to foster through enabling conditions such as clear norms for member conduct and having a compelling direction or purpose. Condition-focused theorizing about multicultural collaboration by management scholars may help us to identify the factors that will lead naturally to desired outcomes even in the face of exogenous factors that may have a mitigating impact.

What Do We Need to Know in Order to Effectively Manage Multicultural Collaborations?

Despite the growing number of studies conducted from a cross-cultural perspective on different elements of collaboration, much of this research did not explore the implications of what happens when individuals are collaborating across national boundaries. Only 38 of all top management journals over the past decade have examined multicultural collaboration (Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2012), suggesting that there is much to be understood about the social, organizational, and cultural inputs, conditions, and processes that can facilitate effective multicultural collaboration.

An open question also exists within the literature about the aspects of multicultural collaboration (e.g., task-related knowledge or members' attitudes, values, and beliefs) that should converge and to what extent. We begin by considering task-related knowledge, defined as members' understanding about collaboration such as what it is, how it operates, and its importance. Some argue that team members need to have similar knowledge about teamwork in order to be effective (Rentsch & Hall, 1994). Given that models of teamwork vary across nations (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001), it is unlikely that culturally diverse members of a multicultural team will define it similarly or have common perceptions about how teams operate. Hence, it may be the case that some degree of convergence in terms of task-related knowledge may be necessary in order to foster effective multicultural collaboration. This lack of insight about the degree of convergence necessary for effective multicultural collaboration reflects a gap that exists with regard to our understanding about the extent to which convergence in multicultural teams related to task-related knowledge is necessary or warranted.

Do the diverse cultural beliefs and attitudes of members of a multicultural team need to be similar in order to accomplish their shared aim, or can it be beneficial to maintain some degree of heterogeneity for the sake of having more diverse perspectives? We posit that the answer to this question depends on the type of goal that the multicultural collaboration seeks to accomplish. If a variety of perspectives and insights will help to enhance performance, such as product development or marketing to a diverse pool of consumers, shared attitudes and beliefs among team members may do more harm than good. For instance, cultural differences in time perspective has been argued to be beneficial to multinationals seeking to innovate because teams will tend to draw from a breadth of experience as past-oriented team members will be more attuned to draw ideas from previous experiences that helped to achieve goals in the past, whereas experience that help to attain future objectives will be more salient for future-oriented team members (Gibson et al., 2007). In contrast, convergence of attitudes, values, and beliefs, which has been shown to promote performance in teams seeking to execute tasks expediently, make quality decision, and reduce errors (Cannon & Edmondson, 2001; Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001; Mohammad, Klimoski, & Rentsch, 2000) may be a requisite of multicultural teams seeking to achieve these types of outcomes as well.

Given cultural incompatibilities that are characteristic in multicultural teams, it can be a challenge for these types of teams to overcome motivational, cultural, social, and knowledge barriers that inhibit their ability to work together. To date, scholars have started to make initial strides toward factors promote effective multicultural collaborations. First, a shared identity, where members perceived themselves and others to be working together on the same global work team, has also been shown to foster the formation of a common framework for understanding collaborative tasks and a shared vocabulary to discuss work-related tasks (Orlikowski, 2002). Second, contextual features of organizations, such as organizational vision, have been found to support intercultural interaction by smoothing cultural differences (Gibson et al., 2007). Group-based performance appraisals or other forms of profit sharing, for instance, may promote cooperation between individualists and collectivists who might otherwise be predisposed toward individual goals or group goals, respectively (cf. Ramamoorthy & Flood, 2002). Third, procedures and norms for intercultural interaction also seem to support collaboration in global teams. Coordinating mechanisms, for example, were found to help to manage time in global teams and ultimately enhance performance (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001). Agreement upon norms or rules for interaction also enhanced effective collaboration within five teams operating within a multinational clothing firm (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Finally, Nouri et al. (2013) in this special issue elucidated an additional factor of importance for improving intercultural collaboration—the task context. This research investigates and finds that high task specificity fosters better outcomes by reducing

the impediments that are likely to occur in intercultural teams when the performing convergent or executive type tasks. In contrast, low task specificity is found to enhance performance in more divergent or creative tasks in an intercultural collaborative context.

The identification of additional conditions that can foster effective multicultural collaboration is also welcomed and needed. Future research that identifies additional factors and to also examine the generalizability of these established collaboration-enabling conditions across multicultural global work teams composed of individuals from a broader array of cultural background is warranted.

How Do We Continue to Advance Scholarship of Collaboration from a Cross-Cultural and Multicultural Perspective?

An issue to studying collaboration from a cross-cultural and multicultural perspective is measurement. To start, we argue that the systematic study of collaboration using our recommended definition from a cross-cultural approach can help us to be much more precise about the specific input and process elements of collaboration that foster effective teams globally and locally.

We also encourage authors, like others have, to move beyond the use of nation of origin as a proxy for culture and to draw upon a broader conceptualization of culture than is provided by the value-based approach (Gelfand et al., 2007; Hinds et al., 2012; Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007). Although studying collaboration from a value-based perspective yields interesting results, its myopic view of culture as in the minds of individuals omits culture as it exists within localized contexts (Gelfand et al., 2007; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Salas, Salazar, & Gelfand, 2012). Drawing on the notion that culture is a system of meaning would include the study of social interaction, practices, and norms that are often locally defined within cultural contexts (Earley, 2006). Multicultural collaboration studies that examine the intersection of practices and norms derived from distinct cultural contexts are vastly missing within the literature. For this reason, we see the research of Uhlmann et al. (2013) presented in this special issue, illustrating how norms about the appropriateness of references non-work roles affect impressions of colleagues who violate or adhere to these norms as a much needed contribution to the field.

Additionally, intracultural and intercultural collaborations tend to be embedded within team, organizational, or national contexts (Salas et al., 2012). This nesting arrangement of entities requires the use of multilevel models (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). Conducting such analyses can enable a better understanding of how environmental (e.g., national context) and organizational factors impact the nature and use of norms, routines, and practices in collaborating intercultural and multicultural teams. Placing a greater emphasis on the macro-organizational and national contexts in which collaborations are nested may provide for more interesting theory related to how contextual influences affect collaboration within and across cultural boundaries. Highlighting the importance of examining the effect of culture at multiple levels of analysis, Marcus & Le's (2013) meta-analysis in this special issue demonstrates that measures of individualism–collectivism at the individual, organizational, and societal levels vary in their impact as moderators in multilevel models.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Given what we have said, it is obvious that the concept of collaboration is neither simple nor unitary. In fact, the term has been used to mean so many different things, that it may be on its way to being meaningless. In order to keep that from happening, we offer the following proposals. First, we recommend that when researchers are studying collaboration, they should be very specific in defining it and delineating what element of the definition they are studying from a cross-cultural or multicultural perspective.

Second, we recommend that not only more empirical studies be conducted that study cross-cultural differences that highlight potential cultural incompatibilities in multicultural collaboration but also that greater effort be exerted

by the scholarly community to understand collaboration within teams composed of culturally and nationally diverse team members.

Third, we simply need to expand our study of cultural differences beyond the value-based framework and approach. By expanding we mean research that studies the implications for multicultural collaboration when norms, practices, and rituals that have diverse cultural meanings clash. In addition, it would be helpful if efforts were conceptually linked to the definition of the collaboration.

Finally, we must begin to build evidence of what matters in multicultural collaborations. We need to inform those in policy-making, security, and/or on the front line on how to behave, think, and feel in successful multicultural collaborations. It is imperative. Lives depend on it, in many cases.

As stated at the onset of this paper, we posed a number of questions here but did not offer many solutions. We hope that the community of researchers working to understand collaboration from cross-cultural and multicultural perspectives benefit both from the work included in this special issue and from the provocations in this commentary. Clearly, there is much to be gained by having a deeper and more accurate understanding of collaboration in organizations that increasingly operate across national boundaries.

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