



Individualism–collectivism and the quantity versus quality dimensions of individual and group creative performance



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ABSTRACT

Using experiments, this research examines the effects of individualism–collectivism (I–C) on creative performance in solitary and group brainstorming contexts. Affirming the individualistic and collectivistic character of the Canadian and Taiwanese samples, the quantity of ideas generated was substantially higher for Canadians whereas the quality (originality) of ideas generated was higher for Taiwanese, within both independent/interdependent contexts. Canadians were more confident in their creative abilities (in both solitary/group settings), and had a greater propensity to voice disagreement (both quantity/intensity of negative verbalizations uttered) within group contexts.

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1. Introduction

Increased competition has propelled companies to source managerial and technological knowhow globally. As cross-border business activities continue to intensify, and as workforces become increasingly diverse, understanding culture's impact on group performance is crucial to the conduct of multinational firms. Research into these issues is especially pertinent, with the rise of Asian-based multinational juggernauts, and as the globe's economic center of gravity shifts towards East Asia. In 2002, China supplanted the USA as the largest recipient of foreign direct investment, and in 2009, China superseded Germany as the world's biggest exporter (The Economist, 2010). Beyond its attraction as a manufacturing base, China is an important R&D center for many Western firms (e.g., *Microsoft Research Asia*, *Siemens Mobile*); demonstrating that firms are decentralizing creative management tasks, particularly within the high-technology sectors.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for foreign firms seeking to benefit from establishing operations in Asia is the profound cultural gap between Western and Eastern societies. Many studies examine how cultural values shape thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). None has received more attention than

what Triandis (1995) calls the most prominent facet of cultural variation, individualism–collectivism (hereafter, I–C). Western and Asian cultures are primarily distinguishable by their individualistic and collectivist orientations, respectively. This study seeks a greater understanding of how I–C influences creative performance. A long-held stereotype is that whereas Asians excel in the logical/scientific domains, they are weaker in the abstract domains requiring creativity. For example, some have portrayed the Japanese as copyists and adaptors rather than truly original thinkers (Torrance & Sato, 1979), and Japanese companies as focusing on incremental improvements rather than radical innovations (The Economist, 2007). Others assert that Asians are no less—and perhaps more—creative than their Western counterparts (Erez, 1992). Regarding the interdependent character of Asian societies, Pye (1985) argues that individuals “...who are secure in their immediate settings, and who have supportive superiors, can be boldly aggressive and creative in their risk taking” (p. 335).

Despite voluminous I–C research, there is a scarcity of investigations into how I–C impacts creative task performance. Concerning the few existing studies, the task nature or character of the contrast groups limits generalizability of the findings. Niu and Sternberg (2001) assess I–C influences on creativity, from the perspective of subjective judgments on the creativity of artworks produced by American/Chinese students. Jung and Avolio (1999) study I–C under the contexts of leadership and individual vs. group task performance, however their contrast of Asian/Caucasian students living in the United States compromises generalizability. Goncalo and Staw (2006) examine the IC's role on group creativity;

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however all subjects are American, and assigned to conditions whereby I–C salience was manipulated via priming. The latter study also does not vary the task environment—i.e., contrasting I–C across individual vs. group problem solving. The paucity of group (vs. individual) creativity research (Nemeth, Personnaz, Personnaz, & Goncalo, 2004) is curious, since firms rely heavily on groups for problem-solving.

This study considers quantitative and qualitative indicators of spontaneous creative performance, comparing collectivist Taiwanese and individualist Canadians. Are individualists and collectivists equally more productive and creative within independent vs. interdependent problem-solving settings, or vice-versa? Insights into how culture impacts decision-making is valuable for firms' internal/external conduct. Companies can harness this knowledge to foster cooperation among culturally-diverse workforces and for decentralized organizations, among units scattered across countries. An appreciation of the culture-bound properties of decision-making can help to optimize inter-firm negotiations, and to predict the strategies of international competitors (Tse, Lee, Vertinsky, & Wehrung, 1988). The intention is not to establish that any one culture will categorically be more creative, but rather, to elucidate indicators of creative performance manifesting within brainstorming contexts.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Creativity and brainstorming

The importance of creativity cannot be overstated. Progress—which creativity is so often the impetus—is essential for corporations, if not all forms of social organization. Yet defining and operationalizing creativity is thorny. Achieving measurement consensus is elusive, due to the subjectivity of creativity and whether its nature and subsequent definition is truly cross-culturally invariant (Eysenck, 1994; Niu & Sternberg, 2001). Simonton (1999) invokes a Darwinian perspective, arguing that since a creative idea must prove to be adaptive, "...the creative act may approximate a variation-selection process" (p. 21). Many definitions have emerged over six decades. Stein (1953) defines creativity as that process resulting in a novel work that is acceptable as tenable, useful, or satisfying by a group. Torrance (1971) conceives creativity as a combination of ability, skills, and motivation. Piaget (1962) holds that the creative process evolves as a child advances through the developmental phases. In Western cultures, the criteria for assessing creativity are subjective; consequently there is no way to tell whether a thought is new or valuable until it passes social evaluation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Simonton (1999) asserts that originality and adaptiveness of an idea are judged not by the innovator but rather by the recipients. Thus, creativity manifests itself via the interaction of the person's thoughts and a sociocultural context. The Eastern viewpoint of creativity is somewhat different. In Hinduism, creativity is a spiritual/religious state, rather than an innovative problem solution (Lubart, 1990). With Zen Buddhism, the self is the means to enlightenment and creativity (Wonder & Blake, 1992). These divergent perspectives aside, Eastern and Western conceptualizations view creativity positively (Boden, 1994). Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) definition for creativity guides this research: the ability of a person or a group to generate ideas or products that others deem as novel and appropriate.

Extant research on creativity concentrates mostly on the individual, however inside organizations much creative work unfolds within team settings (Nemeth et al., 2004). The assumption is that teams can better gather together the diversity of information and backgrounds necessary to generate a creative solution or to otherwise achieve optimal task results. However, these diverse aspects require successful management so as to mitigate the problems of coordination, motivation, and conflict that are intrinsic to teams (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Brainstorming is a widely-employed technique for reducing these troubles. The objective is to generate a plethora of ideas, under the premise that the larger the number, the greater the yield of high quality ideas. To

maximize output, idea evaluation is restricted until all possibilities are exhausted. Osborn (1957) argues that the quantity and quality of ideas produced is greater within a group vs. independent contexts. Yet most research since Osborn's proclamation has found the opposite for the quantity metric: within-group brainstorming productivity is below the sum total produced by the same number of individuals working in isolation, i.e., nominal groups (Mullen, Johnson, & Salas, 1991). Diehl and Stroebe (1991) propose several effects to account for this gap: production blocking (only one of N persons can speak at any moment, with $N - 1$ listening), evaluation apprehension (the reluctance of members to offer half-baked ideas that might elicit negative responses), and social loafing (i.e., free-riding). Group size is another inhibiting factor, with diminishing returns of individual output for larger groups (Thornburg, 1991). Finally, Paulus and Dzindolet (1993) posit that members adjust their contribution standard downwards, due to the lack of performance incentives.

Most studies operationalize brainstorming performance quantitatively as the number of non-redundant ideas. Some also consider measures for idea quality, including ratings of: originality (Goncalo & Staw, 2006), feasibility (Diehl & Stroebe, 1991), practicality (Buyer, 1988), effectiveness (McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996), and frequency of idea suggestion (Wallach & Kogan, 1965). The plethora of methods for assessing idea quality explains why the findings are equivocal when compared against idea quantity results. Notwithstanding mixed results, brainstorming remains the most frequently used creativity technique (Dugosh & Paulus, 2005). Group brainstorming is valuable when the information required is dispersed across individuals. Thus, one key issue is group diversity. Within group creativity contexts, Thornburg (1991) defines diversity as the number of interacting orientations brought to bear on a problem. Different knowledge levels, experiences, flexibility and perceptions means that diverse groups offer greater creativity potential by cross-fertilizing members' ideas (Murray, 1989). Among the many bases of diversity, perhaps none is more important than culture.

2.2. Creativity and culture

Cultural values serve as the basic motivators in life. As with creativity, culture is general, abstract, and complex; consequently eluding definitional consensus. Sifting through the hundreds of definitions, a common thread emerges, namely that culture is learned, shared, and transmitted. Culture is to society what memory is to individuals, conceptualized as "the sum of learned beliefs, values, and customs that create behavioral norms of a given society" (Yau, 1994, p. 49), or, "the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). At the group level, the role of culture is to: institute rules of conduct, set performance criteria, and, establish ways of construing environmental inputs and interpersonal signals.

Self-identity comprises two aspects: personal identities (founded on individual traits, attitudes, and preferences), and social identities (derived from membership in groups). Intergroup behavior distinguishes itself from interpersonal behavior, as the locus of control in the former is on social rather than personal identities (Chen et al., 1998). Intergroup behavior manifests itself when social identity is salient. Social identity theory concerns how self-perceived group membership shapes perceptions and attitudes. Social identity is "that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). National culture provides a reference framework through which people interpret their daily reality. Defined as patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting rooted in common values and conventions of a society (Nakata & Sivakumar, 2001), national culture is a potent social identity construct that can explain decision-making in international contexts. Cultural diversity exists within borders and subsequently the

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