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Brief report

Language use and value orientations in multinational work teams in Luxembourg: Conflict or harmony? ☆



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ABSTRACT

Due to globalization and international expansion of enterprises, cultural diversity in the workplace becomes more and more frequent. The present study focuses on two key issues regarding multinational work teams: language use and differences in value orientations of the employees of different cultural backgrounds and their potential effects on perception of team conflicts and team atmosphere. Results showed a relation between the perception of difficulties due to language use and the perception of conflicts in the team. Also, the difference between own and estimated value orientations of colleagues was positively related to the perception of conflicts and negatively to the evaluation of the team atmosphere.

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1. Introduction

In a world of globalization, intercultural interaction becomes more and more frequent. In the workplace, people from different cultures encounter each other either in multinational teams or while interacting with companies located in different countries. On the one hand, this cultural diversity may provide synergy effects and increase competitiveness, as multiple cultural influences might enrich the perspectives of team members regarding work and life, for instance, by introducing new ideas or alternative work approaches to the team. On the other hand, organizations often also have to cope with distractions or conflicts due to cultural diversity in multinational teams (see Phillips & Sackmann, 2002).

Regarding *language use*, members of multinational teams often speak mother tongues that differ from the language generally used at work. Differences in proficiency in the work language may constitute a barrier for communication as it can lead to misunderstandings or even harm coordination (e.g., Luring & Selmer, 2010). The communication style might also differ between team members depending on their cultural background, as some cultures prefer a more direct, others a more indirect communication style (e.g., Park et al., 2012), and this can constitute a further source of misinterpretations or conflicts. Last not least, language can be an important aspect of identification. Although multinational organizations often adopt a common official language in order to facilitate communication between their collaborators, further languages might be used in informal situations between coworkers (Luring & Selmer, 2010); consequently, employees might identify rather with group members of the same mother tongue in the sense of social categories of inclusion and exclusion (Giles & Johnson, 1981).

☆ This study was part of the bachelor thesis of the first author at the University of Luxembourg.

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Furthermore, team members from different cultural backgrounds might have different conceptions of what is good and desirable in line with their *value orientations*; they may thus differ in their preferences how to act and how they interpret and evaluate behavior of others (Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2004). Whereas similar approaches to handle tasks can favor a good team atmosphere, dissimilarities in the preferences and interpretation of behavior may negatively affect team effectiveness and performance if conflicts occur (see e.g., De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). In line with this, Jehn and Mannix (2001) found in their longitudinal study that value consensus in the work group was related to lower levels of conflicts. They further suppose that value consensus among team members might create a positive group atmosphere in which different views about tasks can be openly discussed. Moreover, perceived similarities and differences in value orientations may again lead to ingroup–outgroup processes. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), one might feel closer to those team members who are perceived to share the same value orientations (and vice versa), whereas one might distance from those who seem to cherish different values (see also Festinger, 1957). Also, the relation between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction has been well established in social psychological research (e.g., Byrne, Griffitt, & Stefaniak, 1967).

On the basis of these theoretical assumptions, the present study was designed to answer the questions if (a) language use and (b) value differences between coworkers have an impact on perceived conflicts and team atmosphere in an intercultural work environment in a multinational enterprise situated in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Both criteria, perceived conflicts and team atmosphere, can be considered as crucial for organization development since they are both closely related to group performance and success of an organization (e.g., Souren & Sumati, 2009).

2. Research questions and hypotheses

With regard to *language use*, we focused on the subjective evaluation and comfort people feel with the generally used language both in team situations and during breaks. Whereas the effects of mere language proficiency have already been well studied in earlier research, the effects of subjective perceptions regarding language use have been rather neglected so far (see Lauring & Selmer, 2010). We hypothesized that the more comfortable people are while speaking the generally used language in their firm, the fewer conflicts they will perceive in their team (Hypothesis 1) and the more positive they will evaluate the team atmosphere (Hypothesis 2). In particular, we were interested to know if (a) the frequency of speaking a language other than the mother tongue at work, (b) the employees' feeling that language is a source for problems in their team, (c) their felt capacity to express any work related issue as well as (d) their degree of comfort with the generally used language, is related to perceived conflicts and team atmosphere.

With regard to *value orientations*, we started from the assumption that not only the own value orientations per se might have an influence on how people behave (Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2004), but – in line with social identity theory – the perception of the value orientations of colleagues in comparison to own value orientations may influence how people perceive conflicts or the team atmosphere (see also Jehn & Mannix, 2001). It was hypothesized that the more people's own value orientations differ from the value orientations they attribute to their colleagues, the more conflicts are perceived (Hypothesis 3) and the larger the dissimilarity between the own values and the estimated values of the colleagues, the worse is the perceived team atmosphere (Hypothesis 4).

The present research questions are especially pertinent for the Luxembourg work context. Due to the small country size, companies in Luxembourg generally employ a high rate of cross-national collaborators such as commuters from the neighboring countries (i.e., Belgium, France, and Germany); furthermore, many international firms have subsidiaries in Luxembourg which attract collaborators from all over the world, and frequent international contacts are common. According to a recent study in Luxembourg, enterprises generally choose one language as common standard between coworkers, however, second and third languages are usually also used in most firms. Although 30% of the business leaders that participated in the survey (Berlitz Luxembourg, 2012) did not report any difficulties due to multilingualism in their firms, a fourth of the respondents saw disadvantages due to misunderstandings as a consequence of a lack in language proficiency or due to a lack of intercultural understanding.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

The sample of the present study was randomly chosen at a multinational company in Luxembourg with around 1000 employees, where more than 40 nationalities are represented. The firm is part of a global network of professional firms providing Audit, Tax and Advisory services. The official company language is English.

For the present study, the human resources department at the participating firm sent the questionnaire to all the employees by e-mail. Participation was voluntary and confidential, anonymity was guaranteed. The time to fill out the form was about 15 min. The survey was open for three weeks. The final sample comprised $N = 87$ participants, $n = 43$ male and $n = 44$ female. They represented eleven nationalities with French (29.9%), German (23%), Luxembourgish (17.2%), and Belgian (11.5%) showing the highest percentages. Only 4 participants indicated a second nationality. Regarding the participants' mother tongues, 41.1% indicated French as the first language, 21.8% German and 16.1% Luxembourgish. A variety of further first languages

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