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Working with “The Others”: Immigrant academics’ acculturation strategies as determinants of perceptions of conflict at work

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ABSTRACT

Although workplace diversity is routinely associated with the expansion of talent pools and maximization of organizational productivity, research suggests that heterogeneous workplaces may also be more prone to organizational conflict. Studies have examined a variety of identity-based interpersonal differences as sources of organizational conflict, including gender, racial, ethnic, age, seniority, or personality type differences. In the light of the increasing effects of globalization on academic organizational landscapes, there is a dearth of research on the link between academic immigration and perceptions of organizational conflict. Using a sample of foreign-born professors at institutions of higher education in the United States, the present study examines how different types of acculturation strategies affect immigrant academics’ perceptions of conflict in the workplace.

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1. Introduction

Due to the mounting effects of globalization, academia is evolving toward organizational models increasingly similar to the general corporate workplace (Schrecker, 2010) and like many other organizations, is becoming increasingly diverse. In general, most organizations prize workplace diversity as a practice that allows them to draw from larger talent pools (Martin, 2006), maximize specialization, efficiency and productivity (Kochan et al., 2003), and incorporate different workstyles to ensure organizational success (Ely & Roberts, 2008). Such advantages notwithstanding, literature suggests that

workplace heterogeneity can also be a source of organizational conflict, along with decreased commitment and cohesion and a lengthier decision-making process (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Jehn, Bezrukova, & Thatcher, 2008; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). As employees bring markedly different backgrounds to the organization, overt or latent conflicts derived from identity-based differences become more plausible.

Studies have examined a variety of identity-based interpersonal differences as sources of organizational conflict, including gender (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002), racial-ethnic (Jehn et al., 1999), age (Parry & Urwin, 2011), politico-ideological (Haidt, 2012), seniority (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989) or personality type (Zhang, Stafford, Dhaliwal, Gillenson, & Moeller, 2014); yet there is a dearth of research on the link between immigration and organizational conflict. Although national culture background is an increasingly important dimension of workplace diversity, research continues to treat foreign-born employees as

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a relatively homogeneous category assumed to naturally assimilate into host and organizational cultures (Mayda, 2006; O'Connell, 2011). Academia is a profession with one of the fastest growing number of foreign-born employees (Open Doors, 2015) and a distinct organizational culture. Today, approximately 22% of professors in the US are foreign-born, with some departments counting as much as 40% or more foreign faculty (Lin, Pearce, & Wang, 2009). Pettigrew (1979) defined the concept of organizational culture as a mixture of beliefs, ideology, language, rituals and myths agreed upon and transmitted by the majority of employees in an organization. Academic organizational culture is characterized by growing diversity which combines with the relatively autonomous, self-directed and critically-oriented nature of academic work to accelerate both enriching collaborations and identity-driven conflicts. Using a sample of foreign-born professors at institutions of higher education in the United States, the present study examines how different types of acculturation strategies impact foreign-born academics' perceptions of conflict in the workplace. The study's objective is to shed light on how differential adaptation to host culture can shape conflictual dynamics in professional work environments with growing international interactions.

2. Sources of organizational conflict

Organizations are inherently competitive and conflict-ridden (Jehn, 1994; Jehn et al., 1999; Pondy, 1992). Because workplace conflict is not always overt and rarely becomes violent (Fitness, 2000; Umbreit, 2006), this area of investigation has been traditionally under-examined. Originally, organizational conflict was approached mostly from a management perspective, with the aim of controlling the labor force for profit maximization purposes (Bendix, 1963; Harvey, 1982). As human relations became recognized as an equally important factor for organizational success (Mayo, 2004; Pfeffer, 2010), scholars shifted focus to the effects of interpersonal conflict on employees' well-being and organizational outcomes, proposing various interventions for conflict resolution and settlement (Ayoko, Callan, & Härtel, 2003; De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004; Raines, 2012; Roche, Teague, & Colvin, 2014).

Interpersonal conflict has been identified as an onerous work stressor (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Frone, 2000), along with job role ambiguity (Tubre & Collins, 2000), job insecurity (Ferrie, Shipley, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2002), differences in leadership style (Meyer, 2004) and lack of work autonomy (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Although definitions of interpersonal conflict vary substantially, consensus points to phenomena that occur between two or more interdependent parties who perceive differences in values, beliefs, interests, allocation of resources and impingement on freedoms (Barki & Hartwick, 2001; De Dreu & Gelfand 2008; De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999). Such phenomena can give rise to a variety of negative affective, cognitive, motivational, or behavioral outcomes, including declining job performance, increasing levels of anxiety and depression, decline in general state of health and high turnover rates

(Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Dijkstra, De Dreu, Evers, & van Dierendonck, 2009; De Dreu et al., 2004).

In a comprehensive review of the literature on conflict in organizations, De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) classified work stressors leading to interpersonal conflict in three major categories: scarce resources, socio-cognitive inconsistencies, and identity. The first is common in most organizations as allocation of resources is usually competitively granted (Pfeffer, 1977). The second, also known as "information" or "task-related" conflict, emerges when two individuals or groups interpret identical situations in different ways (Brehmer, 1976). The identity-based conflict, however, is the most common type in diverse work groups (Jehn, Chadwick & Thatcher, 1997; Jehn et al., 2008), and is rooted in individual's fundamental need to maintain a positive sense of self through loyalty to specific ideologies or values (Steele, 1988). At the individual level, the need to convey a sense of worth, attractiveness, and morality is manifested through self-promotion, enhancement or protection of the self (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). At the group level, a positive sense of self is created and maintained based upon identification with labeled in-groups and comparison with out-groups (e.g., females, Asians, football players, Christians, foreigners, etc.) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When efforts to enhance the self are not rewarded, individuals may intentionally or inadvertently hurt another's positive self-view and conflicts are likely to emerge (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005).

Empirical findings point to a variety of socio-demographic variables as sources of organizational conflict. Gender, for instance, was identified as a discriminant factor in conflict management styles and resolution, with men generally favoring a more contending approach. Women, on the other hand, adopt the contending style only in female-predominant groups but gravitate toward a compromising or problem-solving approach when in gender mixed groups. By comparison, androgynous individuals tend to integrate contending and compromising styles (Brewer et al., 2002; Papa & Natalie, 1989). Differences in conflict management styles were also identified across generations, especially in more traditional countries. While the young prefer a more problem solving approach, the older tend to compromise more in conflictual situations due to "face-saving" considerations (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005). Racially mixed groups are more likely to give rise to stereotypes, prejudice and out-group discrimination (Jehn et al., 1999, 2008; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999) and dissimilarity across demographic characteristics may negatively affect supervisor-subordinate relationships (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Personality types, including agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, extraversion and openness (McCrae & John, 1992) were also identified as predictors of interpersonal conflict. Extroverts report more conflict and address it in more contentious ways. Conscientious, open, or agreeable personality types prefer problem solving approaches, whereas neurotic and agreeable personalities favor the avoiding style (Antonioni, 1998; Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauver, 2002; Kilmann & Thomas, 1975).

Finally, acculturation approaches as reflected in attitudes toward home and host culture, can supersede mere

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