



Differences in the way we decide: The effect of decision style diversity on process conflict in design teams



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ABSTRACT

Extending the decision style literature to the team-level of analysis, this study examined the effects of decision making style diversity on how members handled disagreements regarding the logistics of task accomplishment (process conflict). Majority rule moderated the relationship between decision making style diversity and process conflict, but rational and spontaneous styles exhibited distinct interactive effects. Higher decision style diversity was associated with greater process conflict when reliance on majority rule was high for the spontaneous style but when reliance on majority rule was low for the rational style. Majority rule also positively affected process conflict. Our results show promise for continued investigation of the compositional effects of decision style at the team-level.

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1. Introduction

People differ in how they make decisions. Some are quick, and others are slow. Some are more cognitive, and others are more affective. Given these differences, what happens when individuals with diverse decision styles comprise the same team and are tasked with making collective decisions regarding what to do and how to do it? Do differences in decision styles contribute to dysfunctional conflict? What factors influence whether decision style diversity will result in more positive or negative team functioning? The purpose of this study is to address these questions by examining the moderating role of decision rule (majority rule) on the relationship between decision making style diversity (DMSD) and process conflict (disagreements regarding how tasks should be accomplished).

The present study makes several contributions to the decision making, team diversity, and conflict literatures. First, we draw attention to a previously unexplored form of diversity operating in teams: decision making styles. Because most group tasks require that members come to agreement, DMSD is likely to emerge as a salient individual difference operating in teams. At the individual-level, the importance of decision styles has been demonstrated by their association with a variety of work and health outcomes (e.g., Curseu & Schrujjer, 2012; Russ, McNeilly, & Comer, 1996). However their compositional impact at the team-level has been ignored, despite their potential relevance. As such, we answer the call of diversity scholars to expand beyond traditionally studied categories (e.g., demographics, Big Five Personality

traits) to explore task-based differences that hold promise for influencing team outcomes (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Second, integrating the decision making and team conflict literatures, we focus on process conflict as an outcome of DMSD. Whereas differences in opinions about task content (task conflict) and tension in interpersonal dynamics (relationship conflict) have received the most attention in the team literature, considerably less is known about the antecedents and outcomes of process conflict (de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). However, research addressing the factors that contribute to process conflict is especially important because disagreements concerning the delegation of tasks has been found to have long-lasting negative effects on team outcomes such as performance (de Wit et al., 2012). We therefore extend beyond traditionally studied demographic and functional differences as predictors of conflict (Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008) to examine DMSD as an antecedent of process conflict.

Third, our results specify the conditions under which DMSD heightens process conflict by examining majority rule as a moderator. As such, we answer calls for future research to adopt a contingency perspective by examining the moderating factors that influence decision styles (Appelt, Milch, Handgraaf & Weber, 2011; Mohammed & Schwall, 2009).

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Decision making styles

Decision making styles are defined as “the individual's characteristic mode of perceiving and responding to decision making tasks” (Harren,

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1979, p. 125). Two disparate decision making styles are emphasized in the current study: rational and spontaneous. The rational style indicates a reliance on thorough information searches and logical evaluation of alternative options (Scott & Bruce, 1995). By its very nature, the emphasis on detail and comprehensiveness requires a longer time frame than a spontaneous style which is defined by “impulsivity and spur-of-the-moment decision making” (Dalal & Brooks, 2013, p. 84). Thus, rational and spontaneous styles introduce a temporal dimension to the study of decision making that is not evidenced in other style combinations and has not previously been examined in teams. In addition, the conflicting nature of rational and spontaneous styles is especially appropriate for the study of intra-team diversity.

2.2. Process conflict

Examples of process conflict include member disputes over who should do what, who will take responsibility for particular duties, and how resources will be divided (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). The limited number of studies on diversity and process conflict have focused on surface-level characteristics and values (e.g., Jehn & Mannix, 2001). However, decision styles have been ignored, despite their relevance to process conflict.

2.3. Effects of decision styles on process conflict

2.3.1. Theoretical background

Previous research on team diversity (e.g., van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), intra-team conflict (e.g., Korsgaard et al., 2008) and cognitive styles (e.g., Priola, Smith, & Armstrong, 2004) converge to suggest that DMSD is likely to positively influence process conflict. First, the similarity-attraction paradigm proposes that individuals are attracted to others similar to themselves because they expect that their own beliefs will be reinforced (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). Therefore, in high diversity teams, members tend to have more negative attitudes toward each other (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Second, studies have reliably found that diversity intensifies intra-group conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Third, a qualitative study identified cognitive style diversity as a source of disagreement in teams (Priola et al., 2004). By extension, we propose that DMSD will be salient to members performing a decision making team task and quantitatively test whether such heterogeneity will contribute to higher process conflict.

2.3.2. Hypothesis development

Similar decision styles should contribute to less process conflict in teams. Hunt, Krzystofiak, Meindl, and Yousry (1989) found that individuals displayed a preference for decisions made by others who had a similar cognitive style as themselves. Extending to decision styles, team members should prefer to work with those with a congruent approach to decision making, as predicted by the similarity attraction paradigm. The shared decision making tendencies of homogenous team members would likely lead to mutual attraction, which results in less conflict (Byrne, 1971).

Alternatively, because decision styles represent distinct ways to approach problems (Gambetti, Fabbri, Bensi & Tonetti, 2008), DMSD will likely result in divergent opinions regarding delegating responsibilities to members. For example, individuals who employ more of a rational style are likely to conduct a systematic evaluation of various options and consequences using all available information. However, members with less of a rational style may view more rational decision makers as needlessly slow and inefficient. Individuals who employ a spontaneous style adopt a more impulsive approach, engaging in high-speed intuition (Thunholm, 2004). Contrastingly, members with less of a spontaneous style may be frustrated by the spur-of-the-moment approach of spontaneous decision makers, who they perceive to be irresponsible and uncommitted to task excellence. Thus, diverse decision

making tendencies are likely to produce significant tension among team members in collectively deciding how to delegate tasks.

Hypothesis 1. Intra-team diversity in (a) rational decision style and (b) spontaneous decision style will be positively related to process conflict.

2.4. Effect of majority rule on process conflict

2.4.1. Theoretical background

The diversity (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), team conflict (Korsgaard et al., 2008), and decision making (Payne, 1982) literatures all strongly emphasize the importance of adopting a contingency approach in examining relationships between variables. Specifically, authors have recently called for research to determine how individual differences in decision making interact with moderating factors to affect outcomes (e.g., Appelt, Milch, Handgraft, & Weber, 2011; Dalal & Brooks, 2013). In response, we examine the interaction between decision styles and decision rule on process conflict. Decision rules specify the process by which individual member preferences are converted into group decisions (Miller, 1985).

2.4.2. Majority rule

One of the most common forms of decision rule is majority rule, in which the final decision is based on the preferences of the largest subgroup in the team (Miller, 1985). On one hand, majority rule tends to be less time consuming, more efficient, and prevents impasses more than unanimity (Nemeth, 1977). On the other hand, majority rule has been shown to exert adverse effects because members focus on compromise instead of encouraging the sharing of minority viewpoints, comprehensively discussing differing opinions, and seeking integrative interests (Neale & Bazerman, 1991). Because majority rule forces group members toward less systematic processing of information, majority rule groups achieved lower levels of cognitive consensus (similarity in how key issues are conceptualized) than unanimity groups (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Lower cognitive consensus, in turn, reduced decision implementation expectations and decision satisfaction.

2.4.3. Hypothesis development

Mohammed and Ringseis (2001) found that groups with a majority decision rule experienced more disagreement on how underlying issues were defined. When members' views are excluded from the decision making process via majority rule, disagreements regarding task delegation may assume a more negative tone and become highly personal. Group members are more likely to interpret assigned task duties as insulting when they are already disenfranchised because their perspectives have been ignored and majority members have left them behind in proceeding with decision making. Falk (1982) reported that majority rule contributed to more task conflict than unanimity or no decision rule, but the impact of decision rule on process conflict is unknown.

Hypothesis 2. Majority rule decision making will be positively related to process conflict.

2.5. Moderating effect of decision rule

How groups make decisions may be a deciding factor in determining the specific manner by which decision style diversity influences process conflict; therefore, decision rule may also serve as a moderator. Majority rule is especially detrimental in diverse groups because it generally cannot resolve differing preferences in a manner that enhances effective team dynamics (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001). Regarded as a “lazy” way of reaching agreements since extreme preferences can be disregarded, majority rule may contribute to unfairness perceptions and an unfavorable group climate (Miller, 1985). Moreover, majority rule can mask deep disagreements in the team by merely compromising

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