Building Bridges in Global Virtual Teams: The Role of Multicultural Brokers in Overcoming the Negative Effects of Identity Threats on Knowledge Sharing Across Subgroups

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ABSTRACT

Global virtual teams experience difficulties in knowledge sharing, often related to identity threats that emerge across subgroups. In this conceptual paper we adopt the integrative model of subgroup relations to explore the role of multicultural brokers, i.e. team members or leaders who transcend different cultural boundaries and help to bridge differences among colleagues in different subgroups, in positively influencing the relationship between identity threats and knowledge sharing. We propose that identity threats across subgroups of global virtual teams have a negative impact on knowledge sharing quality and quantity. We contend that the presence of multicultural brokers help alleviate the negative effects of identity threats over knowledge sharing through a curvilinear moderating effect. We further propose that role (leader versus member), type of appointment (formal versus emergent), situated coworker familiarity with different subgroup members, and level of cultural intelligence of the multicultural broker play unique moderating roles on the relationship between identity threats and knowledge sharing quality and quantity. Our research offers theoretical contribution to the literature on subgroup relationships and knowledge sharing in global virtual teams and practical implications for managers and MNEs, helping guide management efforts.

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1. Introduction

As technology advancements continue to provide greater affordances for global work, employees are increasingly collaborating across multiple boundaries (Carmel and Agarwal 2002) to generate innovative ideas (Levina and Vaast 2008) and reduce costs (Dibbern et al. 2008; Levina and Kane 2009). The success of global collaborations is often reliant on the ability of individuals to engage in knowledge sharing (Fulk et al. 2005; Staples and Webster 2008; Zakaria et al. 2004). Yet, globalization trends, such as offshoring of knowledge intensive work towards emerging countries, are associated with employees who have an ever increasing number of identities—stemming from their nationality, their occupational background, their personal interests, their client, their organization, and their team(s), among others, which may be in conflict with one another (Espinosa et al. 2003; Mattarelli and Tagliaventi 2010; O'Leary and Mortensen, 2010; Scott 1997; Scott et al. 1998). The tensions associated with multiple identities are particularly relevant in the everyday work of global virtual teams, i.e. teams composed of members located in different geographic subgroups (O'Leary and Mortensen 2010). Global virtual teams are typically characterized by people with

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multiple identities (O'Leary and Mortensen 2010), which may significantly differ across subgroups. For instance, the IT offshore-onsite global virtual teams described by earlier studies are composed of geographically based subgroups that differ in terms of nationality (e.g. American vs. Indian), professional tenure (e.g. older in the US, younger in India), and degree of experience within the specific industry (e.g. higher in the US, lower in India) (Mattarelli and Gupta 2009; Metiu 2006). The subgroups in these studies are depicted as in conflict with each other due to status differences that threaten their subgroup identities.

Earlier studies have examined challenges associated with subgroups in global virtual teams and their resulting negative consequences on team functioning (Cramton and Hinds 2005; Polzer et al. 2006; O'Leary and Mortensen 2010). For instance, Polzer et al. (2006) empirically examined the effects of geographical subgroups on reduced trust and increased conflict while O'Leary and Mortensen (2010) examined the effects of subgroup configurations and imbalance on transactive memory, conflict, and coordination. In previous studies there is an underlying assumption that different subgroups hold potentially conflicting identities. Cramton and Hinds (2005) and Hornsey and Hogg (2000) used social identity theory to develop theoretical models of how the presence of subgroups may lead to identity related issues. In particular, Hornsey and Hogg (2000) underline that the different subgroup identities can create identity *threats* across subgroups and propose that social harmony is best achieved when the subgroups are well integrated with a superordinate team identity, but, at the same time, maintaining, not weakening, subgroups identities. This theoretical framework, however, does not describe mechanisms through which this harmony could be achieved in global virtual teams.

Given increasing prevalence of globally distributed teams, and the general lack of research focused on the mechanisms to help alleviate the challenges of identity threats associated with subgroups, the aim of this paper is to investigate the negative consequences of identity threats across subgroups on knowledge sharing and how global virtual teams can lessen such subgroup identity threats. In this paper we adopt the integrative model of subgroup relations proposed by Hornsey and Hogg (2000) as a theoretical framework to investigate the organizational mechanisms that facilitate knowledge sharing across subgroups in global virtual teams. Specifically, we focus on the role played by multicultural brokers, defined as team members or leaders who transcend multiple cultural boundaries and help to bridge differences among colleagues separated by geographical distance and other boundaries. Following the recent managerial contributions on distributed teams and global work, we conceptualize culture as multifaceted, dynamic, and highly contextualized (Brannen 2015; Cramton and Hinds 2014; Koppman et al. 2016). In doing so we move beyond studies that consider culture as a set of regular and static patterns that characterize large groups, such as nations and societies (e.g. Hofstede 1991). Thus, in defining the multicultural broker, we contribute to the literature by not just considering the broker's ability to cross boundaries related to *national* culture, as biculturals and expatriates are typically expected to do, and as has been the approach of earlier studies (e.g. Au and Fukuda 2002; Brannen and Thomas 2010; Dau 2016), but also other cultural boundaries that are often present in global virtual teams such as multiple professional backgrounds and organizational cultural norms embedded in each location specific context. This approach enables us to better understand the environment where team members increasingly have multiple identities stemming from their diverse backgrounds that are often impossible to tease apart, and to examine the multitude of different dimensions that make up a worker in today's world.
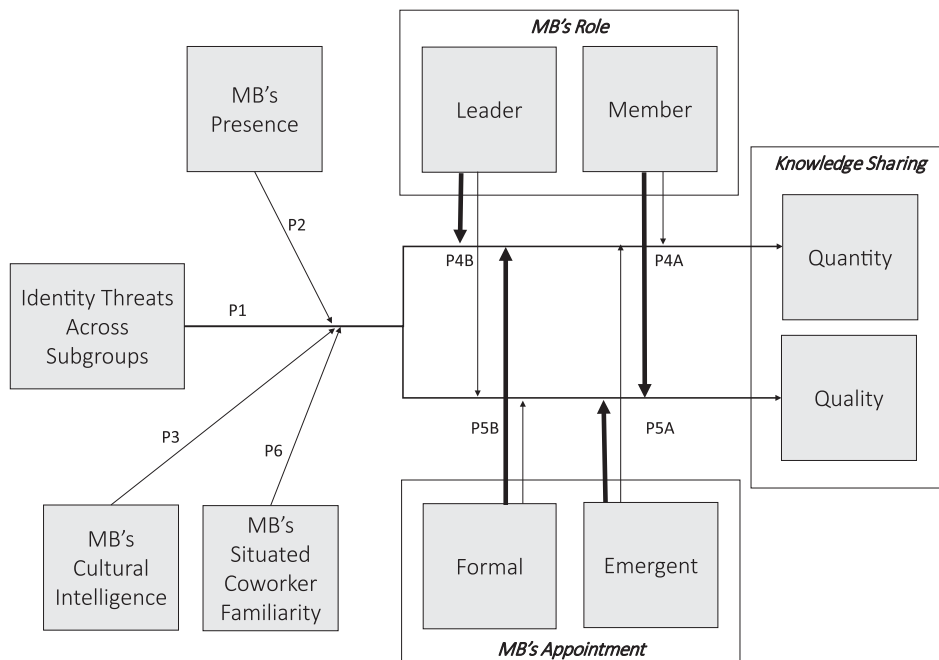

Fig. 1. A model on the moderating role of multicultural brokers (MB) in the relationship between identity threats across subgroups and knowledge sharing in global virtual teams.