Chapter 9
Creativity in Cross-Cultural Innovation Teams: Diversity and Its Implications for Leadership

Ricarda Bouncken

Firms are increasingly in need of their employees' creativity for delivering novel products to the global marketplace (West, 2002; Westwood & Low, 2003). Creative employees experiment with new ideas and concepts and thus contribute to the firms' success. Prior research has demonstrated that the diversity of team participants' knowledge, behavior, and values can promote creativity (Craig & Kelly, 1999; Kurtzberg, 2005; Milliken & Martins, 1996). Creativity through diversity can be amplified by team members' different national cultures as well. Such national cultural diversity also increases through improved market knowledge about the match between expectations and products delivered to customers of global markets. Thus, culturally diverse innovation teams are an option for coping with the challenge of globalizing markets. Despite these advantages of heterogeneity, however, firms are confronted with the negative consequences experienced in international teams whose members come from differing educational backgrounds. The diversity of national background can cause problems in interpersonal understanding and the work atmosphere—precipitating excessive disagreement, for instance—and can thereby adversely affect team moral and efficiency (Jehn et al., 1999), possibly dampening creativity.

In short, it is important to understand how cross-cultural diversity influences creativity and the innovation process. Yet research has sorely neglected these aspects. Comparative research on cross-cultural teams has focused on discovering intercultural differences within teams (Kirkman & Shapiro, 2005; Sagie & Aycan, 2003; Westwood & Low, 2003). One also finds studies on how one cultural dimension (e.g., collectivism) relates to competition between groups (Triandis et al., 1988) or to self-efficacy for teamwork (Eby & Dobbins, 1997). However, it has not been analyzed how a given constellation of cultural profiles affects creativity, innovativeness, and effectiveness.

R. Bouncken (✉)
Ernst-Moritz-Arndt Universität, Lehrstuhl für ABWL und Organisation,
Friedrich-Loeffler-Str. 70, 17487 Greifswald, Germany
e-mail: bouncken@uni-greifswald.de

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To shine light into the black box, I aim in this chapter to analyze culturally diverse teams for their functioning and its effects on creativity. Because the concept of teamwork quality has been proven to foster creativity and innovation (Hoegl & Gemünden, 2001), possible influences of cross-culturality on teamwork quality are warrant to study. In view of the limited research on the cross-cultural effects on creativity, I take an exploratory approach to cross-cultural teamwork, aiming to find patterns that will guide subsequent exploration of influences that culturally diverse teams have on teamwork quality and, hence, on innovation. Propositions on this basis are derived at the end of this chapter. A special focus is on the discussion and formulation of implications for the leadership that has been found most critical to the success of such diverse teams.

Culturally Diverse Innovation Teams

Innovation projects in a global context are rarely completed by a single individual but rather by a team that has to be creative (Janssen et al., 2004). Cross-functional teams, which deliver heterogeneous knowledge (see Fig. 9.1), improve innovation performance through increased creativity and teamwork quality (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1995; Gupta & Wilemon, 1996; Hise et al., 1990). However, if teamwork due to cultural misunderstanding produces a climate of mistrust, threat, and anxiety, it damages the innovation process (Janssen et al., 2004). In this vein Kurtzberg (2005) concludes that cognitive diversity negatively affects satisfaction among team members. Therefore, teamwork does not always guarantee creativity and successful innovation. Its strong links to creativity and innovation performance are nonetheless important to clarify.

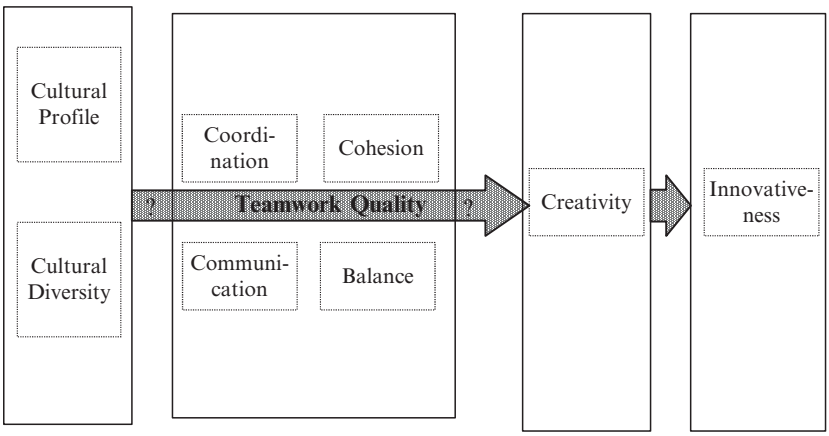

Fig. 9.1 Assumed chain of effects

Teamwork Quality in the Innovation Process

Hoegl and Gemünden (2001) present evidence that teamwork quality is related to the success of innovation projects. The two researchers define six components of teamwork quality: communication, coordination, balance of contributions by team members, mutual support, effort, and cohesion. Communication covers the frequency (time spent communicating), formalization (the degree of spontaneity with which members talk to each other), structure (communication with each other or via a mediator), and openness of the information exchange (nonwithholding of important information). Coordination describes whether the combination and status of individual tasks are synchronized and harmonized. By "balance," Hoegl and Gemünden (2001) mean an equal number of contributions by each team member. Mutual support requires intensive collaboration and cooperation between team members. Whereas mutual support can foster innovation, competitive behavior can lead to mistrust and frustration. Effort describes how important the team's work is considered to be in relation to other obligations of team members. Setting different priorities on the team's task can lead to conflict among team members, whereas a high level of effort shared by all team members will contribute to teamwork quality. Finally, cohesion refers to the strength of the team members' desire to remain on the team. Cohesion has three defined facets: (a) interpersonal attraction of team members, (b) commitment to the team's task, and (c) group pride and team spirit. Just as those three factors will promote teamwork quality, their absence will lead to a lack of togetherness and belonging. So far, the relationship between teamwork quality and the team members' dissimilar cultural backgrounds has not been researched.

Prominent Approaches to Describing National Cultures

National culture can be defined as the pattern of deep-level shared values by an interacting group and assumptions that influence societal effectiveness (Maznevski et al., 2002). So far, different approaches to understanding and describing national cultures have been developed. The most prominent ones are provided by Hofstede (1980, 1983), Hall and Reed Hall (1990), and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000). Their ideas can be investigated in terms of teamwork quality and creativity of innovation teams.

The concept by Hofstede (1980, 1983) consists of five dimensions:

- *Power Distance* (high/low) refers to how a society deals with differences in hierarchical status. Individuals with a high preference for power distance favor autocratic leadership and devalue a consultative leadership style.
- *Uncertainty Avoidance* (high/low) is based on an individual's motivation to avoid uncertainties and changes.
- *Individualism/collectivism* is a dimension in which values of leisure time, independence from one's company, and one's own activity are important.

- *Masculinity/femininity* describes how highly a society values income, recognition, and advancement. Whereas those aspects are key values in masculine societies, cooperation and safety are of higher concern in feminine societies.

Hall and Reed Hall's (1990) idea of difference between national cultures is based on numerous interviews with managers from France, the United States, and Germany. One important category for Hall and Reed Hall is context, that is, the degree to which information is directly or indirectly verbalized. If a person talks in an implicit manner, others have to draw the information out of the context of spoken words. These people are regarded as high-context persons. By contrast, low context means that the information is transferred directly. A second category for defining difference between national cultures—Hall and Reed Hall's (1990) concept of space—differentiates two kinds of individuals: those who prefer a strong spatial distance to others, and those who do not. Individuals who prefer distance to others will feel offended and disturbed if someone enters their personal space. Time (monochronic/polychronic) refers to the way people accomplish their tasks. Monochronic individuals prefer to finish one task before they start a new one. Polychronic individuals like to do many tasks simultaneously.

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) distinguish between six dimensions of national cultures:

- *Universalism/particularism* refers to the way people in a society deal with rules. In some societies rules apply uniformly to everybody (universalism). In other societies rules affect people differently depending on their status, friendships, and loyalty (particularism).
- *Individualism/collectivism* has to do with the importance of the ego or the inner-group. It is a dimension that both Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) and Hofstede (1980, 1983) use.
- *Affectivity/neutrality* describes the degree to which a society accepts the expression of emotions. Individuals in neutral societies tend to control emotions, whereas individuals in affective societies are described as more impulsive.
- *Diffusiveness/specificiality* refers to the extent to which private life and work life are separated or intertwined. Diffuse individuals tend to connect work life and private life.
- *Achieved status/ascribed status* differentiates two kinds of society: one in which the status of an individual derives from his or her performance and effort in the past (achieved status) and one in which that status derives from the person's heritage (ascribed status).
- *The relationship with time* includes several dimensions. On the one hand, it separates sequential from synchronized time use. This dimension has a strong similarity to Hall and Reed Hall's (1990) time dimension (monochronic/polychronic use of time). In addition, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) propose to differentiate societies in terms of whether they are oriented to their future, their past, or their present. The relationship between humans and nature differentiates people who believe they have control over nature from people who tend to feel that they are controlled by nature.

Methodology

This study on national cultural differences was designed to identify those national cultural dimensions that differentiate best between team members. The research, carried out by 32 people, was inspired by the thinking of Hofstede (1980, 1983), Hall and Reed Hall (1990), and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000). It is known that a qualitative design can be successfully used for teamwork in order to identify differences between cultures (Kirkman et al., 2006). For the present study of the often fuzzy and still largely unexplored nature of teamwork, creativity, and its antecedents embedded in national culture, the research in this chapter is therefore qualitative and exploratory in nature.

We selected firms that form global innovation teams with members from different national backgrounds. All of the teams that were studied had to be working on complex projects lasting at least two years. All projects had to be focused on disruptive innovation that required a large amount of creativity, and they all had to cover the entire innovation process, from idea generation to launch. Many of the 35 firms that were contacted did not have projects meeting these criteria. They either did not form culturally diverse teams or were not using such teams to pursue disruptive innovation. Ultimately, we interviewed six teams, each located in a different firm. The firms operated in various industries (food, plant engineering, pharmaceutical, safety, telecommunication, chemistry). All teams had five to seven members in the core-teams. All of the interviewees were working in projects that still had 12 months or more to run.

An interview template was developed from the literature on national cultures, teamwork, and creativity. One-on-one semistandardized interviews were then conducted with the culturally diverse team members from different countries (Brazil, Argentina, China, the Netherlands, Germany, the United States, and Sudan). In every team at least three core team members were interviewed by the same interviewer. Interviews that were carried out at the company's facilities lasted between 45 and 70 min. In total, 19 persons were interviewed within one month. The personal interviews were recorded, and two persons other than the interviewers later transcribed them. Both transcribers had to analyze every interview, producing two versions of each transcription. To master the large quantity of data, the transcriptions were categorized (Mayring, 2003). A short version of every interview was developed. Because two researchers were involved in this step two versions of the categorizations were produced. Both versions were compared for differences.

Drawing on the work by Hofstede (1980, 1983, Hall and Reed Hall (1990), and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) on national cultural differences, the research team developed a deductive system of categories accommodating all the categories of national cultures. Statements that could not be classified into the named dimensions were categorized inductively in a second step. For that purpose other cultural concepts (e.g., Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961) were used. Categories of teamwork were informed by the framework provided by Hoegel and Gemünden (2001). Given the lack of models dealing with this topic, other antecedences and consequences of cross-cultural teamwork were inductively categorized. The two

members of the research team also categorized whether the aspect of teamwork quality was valued as positive or rather as negative, and we counted the number of topics raised that related to national cultures, teamwork quality, and creativity. The two transcribers delivered and categorized the data. Both categorizations were then compared.

To evaluate whether there is a possible influence of cultural dimensions on teamwork quality and creativity, we analyzed how often cultural categories were articulated "near" statements concerning teamwork quality. That is, we counted statements in which cultural aspects and aspects of teamwork quality were both referred to within the same paragraph of the transcribed interview. The resulting categories were analyzed for their absolute topic frequency (ATF, i.e., the total number of times a topic is addressed by the interviewees) and their person frequency (PF, i.e., how many of the research subjects addressed a given topic). This type of analysis helps evaluate the topics raised during the interviews and gives a quantitative measure of how important the category is (Schilling, 2006).

Results of the Interview Analysis

Several cultural differences were perceived within the teams. Table 9.1 shows how often a topic was raised by one and by all interviewees. Also, interviewees perceived some cultural differences that did not correspond to the above-named cultural dimensions. Many of those statements were about how relaxed or work-oriented a certain culture was seen to be. In keeping with Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), those statements (ATF = 11) were categorized as a "doing/being orientation."

Aside from cultural differences, positive and negative consequences of cross-cultural teamwork were addressed. A positive consequence noted by interviewees was the wide range of knowledge in a cross-cultural team (ATF = 3, PF = 2). Most statements (ATF = 7, PF = 2) concerned personal benefits and insights, which lay

Table 9.1 Absolute Topic Frequencies (ATF)[a] and Person Frequencies (PF)[b] for cultural differences

Cultural dimension	ATF	PF
Power distance	17	8
Individualism	10	6
Collectivism	9	5
Affectivity/neutrality	8	5
Uncertainty avoidance	7	4
Polychronism/monochronism	4	2
Space	2	1
Universalism	1	1
Specificity	1	1

[a]The total number of times a topic was addressed by research subjects in semistructured one-on-one interviews conducted.

[b]The total number of research subjects who addressed a topic in semistructured one-on-one interviews.

Table 9.2 Absolute Topic Frequencies[a] and Person Frequencies[b] for teamwork quality

Component of teamwork quality	Number of positive statements		Number of negative statements	
	ATF	PF	ATF	PF
Communication	4	3	14	6
Cohesion	5	4	3	3
Effort	2	1	3	2
Balance	3	2	2	2
Mutual support	1	1	1	1
Coordination	4	4	5	4

[a]The total number of times a topic was addressed by research subjects in semistructured one-on-one interviews conducted.
[b]The total number of research subjects who addressed a topic in semistructured one-on-one interviews.

in enhanced composure and openness. Interviewees also perceived that cultural diversity increases their willingness to reflect on their own actions. A negative consequence mentioned by the interviewees in conjunction with cross-cultural teamwork was that certain cultural dimensions were causes of conflicts or dissatisfaction. There were five statements to the effect that differences in power distance caused difficulties (PF = 3). Differences in space, time, individualism, activity orientation, goal orientation (orientation to nature), and different cognitive styles were also found capable of eliciting difficulties. The qualitative analysis of teamwork quality in the team revealed that most problems occurred with communication (see Table 9.2).

Lastly, we analyzed aspects of differences in national cultural values and aspects of teamwork quality, again using ATF and PF. Overall, five statements (PF = 3) documented a relationship between activity orientation and effort. Team members can value differences in activity orientation negatively. Individuals, who were "being-oriented" were perceived as lazy by their "doing-oriented" colleagues. Conversely, strongly activity-oriented individuals were perceived as overly motivated.

In all statements concerning the category of context (ATF = 4, PF = 3), interviewees expressed preference for a direct use of language. There is also a statement that refers to both power distance and balance of team-member contributions. One statement was categorized as specificity and as cohesion. An interviewee with a diffuse cultural profile described how spontaneous activities involving all the team members after work hours positively influenced the team-building process. Coordination and relationship to nature (goal orientation) are linked in one of the statements.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has addressed cross-cultural effects on teamwork quality, creativity, and the innovation process. Overall, it indicates that cultural values have unequal effects on teamwork and the innovation process. The main effects on teamwork quality and

creativity are caused by power distance, context, and stimulation stemming from diversity.

The interviews and observations indicate that power distance has strong effects on teamwork quality and creativity. The recorded ATFs and PFs show that difference in power distance was the cultural dimension mentioned most often by the interviewees and was therefore strongest within cross-cultural teams. Power distance has additional effects on teamwork quality, especially communication, involvement, and, hence, the team's creativity and innovativeness. Differentials and a high preference for power distance were found to reduce the work quality and creativity of teams. One interviewee perceived differences in how strongly team members engage in a discussion. He attributed differences in behavior to a different hierarchical orientation. People with a strong sense of hierarchy do not participate as much in discussions as people with a low sense of hierarchy do. As pointed out by prior research suggesting that the sociocultural context influences leadership process and effectiveness (Elenkov & Manev, 2005), high preference for power distance is especially harmful when it occurs in team leaders. In any case, leadership behavior is a means of smoothing the harmful components of cultural differences. For example, different behaviors during discussions can be channeled by a sensitive team leader. Leaders whose behavior is based on the assumption of power distance will seldom respond in that way. Moreover, creativity is hampered when team members do not dare oppose the opinion of their supervisor. For achieving creativity, a project leader needs to integrate quiet or shy individuals in discussions and thereby create a balance of team-member contributions. I assume that leadership influences creativity in several ways: through (a) the internalization of values and ideas, (b) the motivation of subordinates, (c) the encouragement of diverse opinions, (d) the provision of protected work environments, (e) the expectation of compliance and, (f) establishment of a permanent frame of reference for the discontinuous and discrete generation of novel ideas that often permeate the whole team.

This assumption leads me to two propositions:

Proposition 1: Strong diversity in terms of power distance in teams has a negative effect on teamwork quality and creativity.

Proposition 2: Team leaders with a high preference for power distance decrease teamwork quality and creativity.

Power distance is a cultural value. Nevertheless, training can reduce the negative behavioral outcomes of power distance. Especially harmful to the teamwork quality and innovativeness is a team leader with a high preference for power distance. Training in leadership behavior therefore emerges as an important task.

The second main finding is related to communication, especially context. Because communication is one of the largest difficulties for cross-cultural teams, another important task of teams and their project leaders is managing information and assuring that team members have access to the information they need. In the interviews, a positive effect of low context was mentioned even by persons who use high-context language. (To interpret these statements correctly, recall that they were

made by people who attended a team meeting in which the interviewer observed great difficulties with communication.) Though one Latin American participant who belongs to a high-context language culture cautioned that other team members with the same national background could easily be offended through direct language, all interviewees saw a positive relationship between direct language and communication in groups. Clear and direct communication is found to be important for the success of a project. Another interviewee noticed that goal definition requiring intense communication and discussion is much easier in Europe than in South America. He, too, considered goal clarity an important precondition of team performance. On the other hand, one participant explained that team members with a high-context background feel offended by a low-context language.

These considerations lead to another proposition:

Proposition 3: Communication improves as low-context communication increases, enhancing creativity and innovativeness.

If the number of statements pertaining to the advantages of intercultural work is compared to the number of statements relating to its difficulties and disadvantages, one must conclude that members of culturally diverse teams are less aware of the strengths of their groups than of their weaknesses.

When it comes to creativity, the effect of cultural diversity is not distinct. In sum, the findings of this study are related more to the effects that cultural diversity has on teamwork quality than to that diversity's effects on creativity. One of the greatest advantages of working in a cross-cultural team lies in personal self-reflection. Participants report enjoying the diverse perspectives and playing with dissimilar ideas and concepts in the culturally diverse teams. One person mentioned that cultural heterogeneity fosters creativity. It is also known that different cognitive styles, which affect creativity positively (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Murray, 1989), can be influenced by cultural norms. Many interviewees noticed that a cross-cultural team has a broader knowledge base than a culturally homogeneous team. Hence, I come to my final proposition.

Proposition 4: The *creativity of culturally diverse teams emerges through inspirational differences and improved self-reflection*.

To deepen the exploration of this aspect of working in culturally diverse teams, future studies need to find out whether there are systematic differences between cognitive styles from one country to the next. In that research, culture could be regarded as a mediating variable, and the influence on team creativity could be tested.

The propositions developed in this chapter should be tested empirically in future research. The results of this study can be generalized only on the basis of quantitative support. As with all studies, this one has limitations. First, the sample size of the interviewees is not large. (Qualitative data analysis does not usually require as large a sample as quantitative analysis does.) Still, König and Vollmer's (1997) recommended sample of 20–30 interviews was nearly achieved, and the group of interviewees was very heterogeneous. Each interview brought out many different aspects, and the point of saturation, which usually signals when to stop

interviewing participants, is far from being reached. Furthermore, this study does not show how behaviors and cultural dimensions of cross-cultural teams change during the innovation process. It only hints at changes in the attitudes of persons. I am therefore seeking to expand the knowledge about how cultural profiles of cross-cultural teams change during the innovation process. Last but not least, implications that culture influences the concept of teamwork quality are not very strong—a crucial aspect of this study.

One avenue for future research could be the leadership of cross-cultural teams. To date, most leadership studies have been conducted in Western cultures, so it is not clear whether concepts such as transactional as opposed to transformational leadership or participatory as opposed to autocratic leadership apply to all cultures. Every leader exhibits behavior that can be characterized as transformational, transactional, and non transactional (Avolio & Bass, 1995). Most research on these topics focuses on how the different styles mediate or moderate leader effectiveness. But there are also individual and contextual antecedents of leadership behavior that need to be studied (Bass, 1997). For example, transformational leadership requires leaders to build trusting, warm relationships with subordinates through honest engagements and an agreeable personality. Keller (1992, 2006), stressing the positive outcomes that transformational leadership has on innovativeness, found that agreeableness is related to ratings of leader sensitivity. Not every leader from every country may have the personality antecedents to implement a specific leadership style. But a firm can either select leaders culturally highly sensitive and open to cross-cultural teams or, if it relies heavily on the specific technical competencies of leaders with low cultural sensitivity, it can invest in cross-cultural training programs. Both alternatives demand techniques and tools for choosing the right leaders for cross-cultural teams and for effectively training leaders in cross-cultural sensitivity. Although intercultural HR consultants offer relevant services in this area, the benefits and drawbacks of their instruments have not been empirically evaluated. Given the ever-growing pressures on leaders in the globalized marketplace, further study of precisely these issues would itself be a highly recommendable service.

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