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A Research Proposal: Analysis of Intercultural Groups Using Virtual Communication Tools

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Running head: ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL GROUPS USING VIRTUAL
COMMUNICATION TOOLS

A RESEARCH PROPOSAL: ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL GROUPS USING
VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Presented to

Dr. Martin W. Sivula

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By:

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Abstract

This is a research proposal for a further study on the effect that virtual tools have on communication within intercultural groups. The study is proposing using a sample (n=120) comprised of participants whom will be divided into five groups. Each group will be different from the rest. The study will be implemented using a triangulation method that will analyze various tools to produce qualitative research results. Findings from this study will be used to furthermore understand communication within intercultural groups and whether virtual tools hinder or increase communication. Results will also be used to produce strategies for the use of organizations for a maximization in effective work flow or to avoid any problems that may arise. Information from other studies has been used for the development of this study in order to understand different aspects that are involved when integrating virtual tools within intercultural groups. We aim to further understand communication development on a cultural context since business interactions are becoming more virtual.

Keywords: Intercultural Groups, Teamwork, Cultural Dimensions, Communication, Virtual Tools, Intercultural Business Interactions, Individualism, Collectivism.

Introduction

As time elapses and global trade becomes more predominant we find ourselves in a world where technology has increased in both quality and use. Countries have been able to develop and build up their infrastructures due to trade allowing access to various resources. Therefore, electricity has become available in remote areas. This later brings about the use of technology like computers and more modern phones. In the past few decades technology has shifted the way life develops on a daily basis. From general observations you can see that your own family

members are using computers, tablets, or phones to message others. You can read into a conversation and learn about what a person is doing halfway across the world because of their Facebook post, Twitter status, or other social platform.

To place everything into perspective according to the Pew Research Center 64% of the adults in America own a smartphone while 42% own a tablet. By just observing what my own smartphone does like providing a means to call my mother, it also allows me to store applications and information. I currently have 9 applications which allows me to communicate with friends, coworkers, family members and whoever I just met. I have applications like WeChat, which is a messaging application predominantly used by my Chinese friends. Another application like KakaoTalk used by my Korean friends. WhatsApp and Viber used to communicate with my Hispanic family.

Technology has been able to not only integrate itself into the daily life and communication but it has mixed itself into work environments. Organizations have now resorted to communicating information through messages, e-mails and webinars. As a current employee I find myself in my cubicle using my messaging tools to chat with my coworker in the cubicle next to mine. Although our relative distance is small I prefer to message them instead of spending an additional amount of seconds walking to them. My interaction has become virtual and it has increased significantly that I end up saying “good morning” to my coworkers at lunch time.

Another change that globalization has brought into account within the work environment is the interaction with different cultures. Now we find our own coworkers to be natives of different countries who hold a different language, religion and cultural norms. These coworkers can be

current individuals living within the same city or in another state/country. Therefore, there is a great phenomenon of intercultural groups and using virtual tools within business developments.

According to Leigh Anne Liu, Chei Hwee Chua, and Gunter K. Stahl:

Global virtual teams are created to address important strategic challenges and to enable companies to become globally competitive (2010).

However, this study is focused on the integration of virtual tools within intercultural groups and how this effects their communication within business tasks.

Purpose of the Study

This study is proposed with the sole purpose of providing a further analysis on the effects that virtual tools have towards communication found within intercultural groups in business. This will be done by examining the outcomes of each group as well as each individual's perspective throughout the study. We will observe actions and responses to tasks throughout the study to develop qualitative results. From these results we will then develop strategies to increase communication or to avoid problems that may occur. These problems are intercultural disconnect, misunderstandings and friction.

Literature Review

There are many virtual tools used for different purposes. Instant messaging can be used for simple conversations and instant responses. E-mails are a more thought out and reviewed virtual tools for longer and more professional communication. According to Valery L. Bartelt and Alan R. Dennis (2014) discussion forums are used for class discussions or knowledge base while instant messaging is more of a social tool. There are other virtual tools available which vary in social interactions too. Social structures (genre rules) that arise when using these different tools

have influenced performance and interaction (Bartelt & Dennis, 2014). Genre rules are induced automatically without much thought influencing communication, they also evolve and are continuously changing (Bartelt & Dennis, 2014). Therefore, each virtual tool used has a genre rule being evolved, and individuals with different social structures may develop the use of virtual tools differently. Bartelt and Dennis stated the following in their study:

Genre rules can have significant impacts on performance. Team behavior and performance were significantly different while using the same tool when different genre rules were evoked. Team performance was primarily influenced by the genre participants enacted, not which tool they used. Thus, when selecting a communication tool we need to consider both its innate capabilities (i.e., its nature) and the genre rules that have emerged for the tool (i.e., nurture) (2014).

Secondly, intercultural negotiations is a common and critical challenge when conducting international business (Liu et al., 2010). Furthermore, these groups must have good communication and be aware of each other's culture. Liu, Chua and Stahl (2010) found and state the following:

Gibson, Maznevski, and Kirkman (2009) have argued that the influence of culture on individuals' behavior is strongest in situations that do not provide specific guidance or explicit rules on how to deal with cultural differences, as well as those that require close collaboration among people... N. J. Adler and Graham (1989) pointed out that communication problems are more likely to occur in intercultural than in same-cultural negotiations because difference in language, nonverbal behaviors, cultural values, and thought patterns.

Therefore, communication can determine the performance of the task at hand within intercultural teams. Making it difficult for intercultural teams to work together as opposed to same cultural groups.

Additionally, being able to understand that clarity, responsiveness, and comfort are key dimensions of the quality communication experiences which can be used by negotiators to manage their team communication (Liu et al., 2010). Negotiators within business must be capable of understanding how these key dimensions work within different cultures if not more problems will occur. Liu, Chua and Stahl (2010) found:

In cross-cultural settings, in particular, negotiators must pay attention to potential asymmetries in the communication experience. This requires negotiators to recognize and to understand cultural differences in communication styles and preferences. For example, in the case of Sino-American negotiations, knowing that a direct style of communication may be perceived as abrasive or even offensive and may cause significant discomfort to the Chinese partner can help U.S. negotiators to adjust their communication style.

Communication styles vary by locations. Some involve more vague language while including non-verbal cues (indirect). The individuals are also concerned about losing face to their counterparts. Other communication styles have more clarity and direct confrontation and can be perceived as rude. Another characteristic is the original language that a person has learned which affects their communication style. There are various levels of politeness that is unable to carry forward in other languages. Therefore, individuals may be subject to interaction avoidance because comfort levels are not in place for such a blunt communication.

In the study conducted by Ignacio Ramos-Vidal in 2011 he mentions that people from indirect cultures tend to go around the situation rather than being open to confront it. Meanwhile as mentioned earlier individuals from more direct forms of communication are not afraid to openly dispute the situation at hand (Ramos-Vidal, 2011). So in a dispute between an American (direct) and someone from Asia (indirect) many misunderstandings can occur. If the Asiatic individual keeps going around the topic in dispute the American may interpret it as disinterest and may develop negative emotions against the other individual (Ramos-Vidal, 2011). Furthermore, the American may dispute openly and be perceived as aggressive which will reduce the possibility of a synchronized standing (Ramos-Vidal, 2011). The study also goes into the roles that genders take within cultures. For example how much are women involved in the social structure and whether they hold an equal standing/status within that country. This is also a big aspect in communication since some cultures prohibit women from speaking up. Another aspect discussed within the study include minorities and the cause within the general population. However, for this study we will not integrate gender status or minority influence.

Ramos-Vidal (2011) study was conducted by using the analysis of critical incidents (AIC) by Flanagan, so he analyzed 77 incidents. From these incidents he found that communication with different individuals was misunderstood within its own context. Therefore, causing a deterioration within the relationships of the individuals involved (Ramos-Vidal, 2011). Also that indirect forms of communication and non-verbal cues will not be understood by other direct communicators even if it is done over a period of time.

So in order for an intercultural team to be able to communicate effectively they must have an understanding of the other cultures. Business' train individuals to develop intercultural skills. These skills involve being able to understand non-verbal cues, face to face interactions and

procedures. Being able to know that “yes” may not mean yes or agreement. However, because virtual tools have increased in use throughout the years we now have virtual teams. This means that the distance between members is significant enough that forms of work involve only virtual aspects with little to no face to face interaction.

Based on the resources used by Stefan Krumm, Katrin Terwiel, and Guido Hertel (2013) virtual teams face challenges like using tools effectively, trust, commitment, motivation, and efficient work flows. In addition, work is done independently and managers have less available capabilities of monitoring. Their study was conducted using a survey composed of 171 participants of both traditional and virtual cross-cultural teams in order to understand what is required in knowledge, skills, and ability (KSA) within the teams. Krumm, Terwiel, and Hertel found:

No significant differences between virtual and traditional team members were observed on the factors openness in perspective taking, knowledge about other cultures, and coping with stress and ambiguity. Hence, our findings contrast the assumption that KSAs related to these factors are specific to cross-cultural virtual teams (Ryseen & Goddar, 2000)... One might speculate that different work-related challenges (e.g., picking up clues from posture and gestures vs. from written information) impose demands on the same KSAs (e.g., KSAs related to knowledge about other cultures) (2013).

However, this study was done using participants with western cultures, and the participants from traditional teams (n=105) were much higher than virtual teams (n=66).

Another aspect that comes into intercultural teams involve relationship and friendship building within the group. In the study by Joanna Crossman and Sarbari Bordia (2011) they look

into such relationships. The study was done using 27 university students n=19 being an 'international group' and n=8 being the 'local group'. The participants involved were from different countries like Korea, China, India, Netherlands, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore (Crossman & Bordia, 2011). They conducted both interviews and surveys and were able to find that the participants perceived creating a friendly atmosphere as a need to facilitate their learning. But that limited experience with intercultural communication caused some frustration and stereotypes. When stereotypes are involved one individual can be perceived as arrogant and further communication with them will decrease. Crossman and Bordia state the following:

Friendliness was nevertheless important and determined decision-making about how people would proceed in their social networks online. References to an individual being friendly or not, often preceded accounts and rationales for pursuing some relationships and withdrawing from others.

Therefore, behavior has an effect on communication too.

Throughout the development of teams there have been many studies conducted that focus on interaction within group individuals and how being from a collectivist or individualist culture has an effect. This study will also observe how this cultural background plays effect virtually. Schaubreck, Lam and Cha 2007 state that team collectivism shows the perception and extent that the team values cooperation and harmony, and that the group is more important than the individual (As cited in Lai, Lam, & Lam, 2013). Individualist cultures on the other hand focus more in the individual and the skillsets of that individual.

During my undergraduate studies I had to observe how being from these different cultures played an effect on teams and human resource development within the work environment. I

personally have been highly influenced by an individualistic culture so “I” is very important. However, during my course work in South Korea “I” was able to observe how older generations showed collectivism and how this influenced their business decisions and how “We” was a much predominate word. An individual did not represent themselves but their family, team, school, and the organization they worked for. Newer generations in South Korea show a mix of individualism and collectivism due to the influence of western culture these past few years.

Jennifer Y. M. Lai, Long W. Lam and Simon S. K. Lam conducted a study of organizational citizenship behavior in work groups and how this was influenced by individualistic and collectivist cultures. Their study was conducted by collecting a questionnaire from 403 customer service employees and 81 supervisors (78% responded) employed in Hong Kong within the financial services, personal banking and corporate banking sections. The questionnaire focused on asking participants to rate (Likert Scale) organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), the organizational citizenship behavior that targets organizations (OCBO), and organizational citizenship behavior that targets individuals (OCBI) and the correlation with performance rating. The questionnaire also asked participants to rate collective or individual items on the team’s orientation. Stating that their study supports:

The idea that team cultures, specifically the degree to which they are individualistic or collectivistic, influence the emphasis that supervisors place on OCBI and OCBO in evaluating employees. Teams with highly collectivistic cultures place more value on interpersonal relationships, work place harmony, and peer support. Thus the interpersonal nature of OCBI behavior is more likely to fit the norms of a highly collectivist team and to be considered as good citizenship behaviors... Engaging in OCBO, however, did not result in similar improvement in performance ratings, because OCBO was less likely to

be seen as directly supporting group norms. On the other hand, in highly individualistic teams, OCBO rather than OCBI is more likely to improve rated performance. Individualistic teams emphasize OCBO because such extra-role behavior is consistent with the norms of personal achievement, independence, and uniqueness (Lai et al., 2013).

Our study will not focus on OCB, however, this study is important because it explained the difference between collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

Our study will observe how these cultural backgrounds influence the groups with the virtual tasks that will be given. This will also include an observation on how the communication and relationship building within the teams through virtual tools gets influenced. For example as someone who is influenced by an individualistic culture I pay attention to my achievements. These include achievements that are visible in person or online. In person achievements can vary from owning a car to buying a million dollar home while online achievements can be the number of likes a Facebook post generates. Meanwhile, someone from a collective culture will view group achievements online and in person and how this helps the group. Therefore, this dynamic is one to look into within this study.

The Study

Statement of the Problem

This study will look into the effect that virtual tools have towards communication found within intercultural groups in business. As mentioned previously there are many problems that occur in communication within intercultural teams. This study is aimed at measuring the effect that different virtual tools have in this context. Either it makes communication simpler or harder within the team when completing a task.

Theoretical Framework & Research questions/Hypothesis

The framework used is a triangulation study where we analyze the events that occur during the experiment. What participant's state during their interview and survey at the end of the trial period, as well as an analysis on the diaries that participants are asked to keep. For this study we aim to research the following research questions:

- Does having a knowledge base about other participant's culture provide an effective communication and understanding to an individual within the group about others?
- Are there non-verbal cues that have developed within the group when using virtual tools? (i.e., not answering a message)
- How much is communication affected through the lack of face to face relationship development?
- Does cultural background (individualism or collectivism) have an effect on virtual communication?

Along with these questions the following hypothesis has been developed:

- **H1** There is significant difference in communication within intercultural groups when using different virtual tools.

Therefore, communication is the dependent variable and virtual tools the independent variable. Other independent variables (dynamics) include: cultural background, knowledge of other cultures, verbal and non-verbal cues, and relationship development.

Method

We will conduct experimental research with participants for a trial of four weeks. These participants will be placed in different groups conducting the same business simulation but they will all differ in preliminary experiment context, and participant background. We will analyze the outcomes of the business simulation along with individual's perspective to communication (at the end of the experiment). Other form of analysis will be the messages and diaries kept throughout the study. With the use of this analysis we will develop business recommendations and strategies for corporations to use to effectively improve virtual team efficiency.

Sampling

There will be five groups developed from the business population. The following structure is involved per group:

1. Composed of 28 participants from the same city with a business background. This group will not be an intercultural group and will be used as a controlled group. They will have to meet two times a week for the simulation at a specific location. However, they will not be able to interact with each other throughout the session (only virtual communication is allowed).
2. Composed of 28 participants from different countries with a business background. This group will be an intercultural group. Participants will have to develop a PowerPoint video with voice explaining their culture. These PowerPoints will be 10 minutes long and available for use prior to the first virtual meeting. Watching these videos will be mandatory. The videos will be available at least three weeks before the trial period
3. Composed of 27 participants from different countries living within different states in the United States of America. They will also be participants with a business background and

will have to develop the 10 minute PowerPoint on their country. However, watching these videos is optional.

4. Composed of 27 participants from different countries living within the Americas. These participants will also have a business background. There will be no PowerPoints involved.
5. Composed of 10 participants from different countries whom have recently moved within the New England area. They will meet 2 times during the 4 week period. Once after week 2 and once at the end. Lastly, these participants will also have a business background.

Each participant will be randomly selected and placed in the groups according to the guidelines. Participation is voluntary and based on the nature of this study it will all be conducted virtually. Participants will not have any contact with another participant in another group. Groups will meet two times a week on a virtual platform. The sample will be 120 participants (n=120).

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used will be the following:

- Diary were entries must be written after each session (see appendix 1)
- Survey at the end of the study asking about the experience of the participant (see appendix 2)
- Interview (see appendix 3)
- Virtual platforms: instant messaging, email, discussion forums, and the business simulation.
- PowerPoint video with voice.

- Social media, like Facebook pages are available for individuals who want to communicate outside of the session. Also they can develop their own page but will have to notify how many participants are involved (not who).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

We will monitor e-mail, discussion forums, the simulation and the Facebook pages (independent variables) throughout the four week period. As well as the views in the PowerPoints provided. We will focus on the decisions conducted, and the communication (dependent variable) developed throughout the study. Is the communication task focused or personal interaction based on the tool used? If it does, to what level? We will collect the diaries at the end of the trial period to analyze the development of the participant and their communication level as well as their view of the simulation and tool effectiveness. The survey conducted at the end will be composed like the Likert scale. Also the interview will be composed of open ended questions for qualitative analysis.

Analysis will be conducted by whether the virtual tools used facilitated communication. If participants were able to communicate more effectively using a specific virtual tool. Whether the nature of the tool provided for further interaction for the participant. This will be done by analyzing the different instruments. We will also analyze all the groups' outcomes and communication levels against each other. To measure why one group may have done better than the other, or why they preferred a specific tool while another group used another.

Protection of Human Rights

We will ask participants to keep all information private throughout the study as well as the results. We will not disclose any personal information to the public. Within the study participants

will not receive any information to other participants except the first name. Also the surveys, interviews and diaries will all be anonymous. However, if a participant has developed a connection to another participant and they decide to add each other on social media it is based on their own decision.

Discussion

As the use of electronic tools increase in everyday life it is very important to understand how virtual tools are used. However, this understanding is very important for business due to the increase in international negotiations. Good communication is very difficult to develop face to face due to language difference and verbal and nonverbal cues as well as other dynamics. Therefore, an increase in virtual tools for business tasks places communication on a different field of development. It is essential to know how different virtual tools affects communication as well as how different backgrounds has an effect. It is important to have an understanding of virtual communication so it can be improved in order to simulate face to face communication. Communication is very important for business in order to carry out organization assignments, negotiations and goals. Having better communication facilitates tasks and weak communication can develop many problems or economic loss. So understanding of its impact within intercultural groups due to virtual tools will facilitate future business.

Conclusion

Although there have been many studies conducted measuring communication in intercultural groups it is still essential to study it further. The increase in virtual tools within business does have an impact on communication and this study is focused on understanding it for future reference. This study also brings into account other dynamics of influence for virtual groups in

order to further the study of communication. This is due to the importance of communication, better communication provides better outcomes to completing tasks. So furthering the knowledge of all its dynamics and use of virtual tools is beneficial.

Appendix 1

Questions To Be Answered In Diary Entry

What Session is this?

Please answer as many questions as you can.

- How do you feel the simulation went?
- Which virtual tool did you use? Why?
- Were your teammates using this tool?
- How do you feel towards your teammates?
- How do you feel about your communication level in regards to them?
- In regards to the tool used, do you feel it effectively communicated your view?
- Is there improvement within the group communication?

Appendix 2

Survey

Please answer each question with a rating and your perspective.

RATING SCALE:

1= Don't agree, 2= Somewhat disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Somewhat agree, 5= I agree

1. Were your teammates able to communicate effectively? Rating_____ Why?

2. Was instant messaging easy to use? Rating_____ Why?

3. Was the simulation easy to use? Rating_____

- Was it easy to understand? Rating _____ Why?

4. Was the discussion board easy to use? Rating_____ Why?

5. Was the email easy to use? Rating _____Why?

6. Was the Facebook page easy to use? Rating _____

Did you use the Facebook page or create your own? Why?

7. Was your communication heard? Rating _____ Why?

8. Did you develop a good communication with your team? Rating _____ Why?

9. What virtual tool was more effective for you to use when communicating? Why?

If you have any other comments please provide them here:

If applicable:

1. Did you watch the PowerPoints provided? If no please state why, if yes please let us know what you thought.

2. Did you meet with another participant outside the session? Why?

Please staple this survey to your diary and submit it to the person who conducts your final interview.

Appendix 3

Interview Questions

1. Do you consider yourself to be from an individualistic or collective culture? (explain the differences if participant does not know the meaning)
2. Did you consider your group to be a collective group or individualistic group at the beginning of the four weeks? Why?
3. Do you consider your group to be a collective or individualistic group now? Why?
4. What virtual tool do you recommend for use in business tasks? Why?
5. How do you consider your experience in this study?
6. What did you dislike the most for this study? Why?
7. What did you like the most? Why?
8. Does having knowledge of the culture of your peers improve communication?
9. How do you consider your communication level throughout the study? Why?
10. Did your communication level improve? Why?
11. Did you develop outside communication with your peers? Why?
12. Did you experience any problems with communication do to a specific virtual tool? Why?
Which tool was it?

13. Was there anything that hindered your participation or communication? What was it?
Why?
14. Is it important for businesses to understand the effect of virtual tools on communication?
15. What recommendation do you have for the researcher?

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