

Culture and Anonymity in GSS Meetings

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INTRODUCTION

Managers spend a considerable part of their work time in meetings participating in group decision making. Group support systems (GSSs) are adopted in a variety of group settings—from within-organization team to multi-organization collaboration teams (Ackermann, Franco, Gallupe, & Parent, 2005)—to aid the decision-making process (Briggs, Nunamaker, & Sprague, 1998). A key characteristic of GSSs is anonymity, which improves various aspects of group performance, including improving group participation and communication, objectively evaluating ideas, and enhancing group productivity and the decision-making process (Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991; Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1997; Postmes & Lea, 2000). Anonymity, as a distinct aspect of GSSs, was expected to increase productivity by reducing the level of social or production blocking, increasing the number of interpersonal exchanges, and reducing the probability of any one member dominating the meeting (Newby, Soutar, & Watson, 2003). For example, Barreto and Ellemers (2002) manipulated two aspects of anonymity separately: visibility of respondents (i.e., participants could or could not see who the other group members were) and visibility of responses (participants could or could not see the responses given by other group members). Results show that when group identification is low, anonymity manipulations affect group members' effort. Similarly, in their experiment, Reinig and Mejias (2004) found that anonymous groups produced more critical comments than identified groups did at the group level of analysis.

Numerous empirical findings have suggested that the use of anonymity and process structure in electronic brainstorming (EBS) generally promotes a positive effect on the number of ideas generated (Jessup, Connolly, & Galegher, 1990; Gallupe, Bastianutti, & Cooper, 1991) and quality of ideas achieved in decision making (Zigurs & Buckland, 1998). However, the anonymity function inherent in multi-workstation GSSs has been found to heighten conflict as members tend to communicate more aggressively because they tend to be more critical (Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990; Jessup, Connolly, & Tansik, 1990; Valacich, Jessup, Dennis, & Nunamaker, 1992), to have no effects on inhibition (Valacich, Dennis, & Connolly, 1994; Valacich et al., 1992),

to increase group polarization (Sia, Tan, & Wei, 2002), and to have no effects on group performance (Valacich et al., 1994). Other studies show that, in terms of effectiveness, nominal brainstorming may be equal to (Gallupe et al., 1991; Cooper, Gallupe, Pollard, & Cadsby, 1998; Barki & Pinsonneault, 2001) or sometimes less than (Valacich et al., 1994; Dennis & Valacich, 1993) electronic brainstorming, indicating that at least as far as laboratory studies are concerned, empirical investigations have been inconclusive.

BACKGROUND

Ferraro (1998) provides a succinct definition of culture as follows: "Culture is everything that people have, think, and do as members of their society." Culture has been defined as the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another (Hofstede 1991; Tan, Watson, & Wei, 1995). Culture involves the beliefs, value system, and norms of a given organization or society, and can exist at national, regional, and corporate levels. In fact, even information systems theories and research are heavily influenced by the culture in which they were developed, and a theory grounded in one culture may not be applicable in other countries (Tan et al., 1995; Triandis, 1987). The theories explaining the effects of GSSs have come mainly from a North American perspective and may need adjustment for appropriate explanation of the same phenomenon in different contexts. Therefore, in order to incorporate a global dimension, theories and models that attempt to explain the effectiveness of technology will need to take into account the cultural background of the group being examined.

Hofstede (1991) identifies five dimensions of national culture based on his IBM study in 72 different countries:

- *Power distance* focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in a society. A high power distance ranking indicates that inequalities of power and wealth have been allowed to grow within that society. Similar societies—with high power distance—are more likely to follow a caste system that does not allow significant upward mobility of its citizens. A low power

distance ranking indicates that a society deemphasizes the differences between citizens' power and wealth. In these types of societies, equality and opportunity for everyone is stressed. Individuals in societies with low power distance cultures (e.g., the United States) may be more inclined to adopt technologies that reduce power distance (Reinig & Mejias, 2003). However, power distance effects can be helpful for some phases of group decision making but harmful for others (Tan, Watson, Wei, Raman, & Kerola, 1993).

- *Individualism* focuses on the degree in which a society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. This is opposed to *collectivism*, which implies a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives and clan to protect them in exchange for loyalty. A high individualism ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are paramount within the society. Individuals in these societies may tend to form a larger number of looser relationships. A low individualism ranking typifies societies of a more collectivist nature with close ties between individuals. These cultures reinforce extended families and collectives where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. The people of collectivistic-culture societies (e.g., Hong Kong) tend to sustain group harmony and agreement, which exhibits less critical comments than those of individualistic-culture societies (e.g., the United States) in using group support systems (Reinig & Mejias, 2004). Likewise, Chinese participants, whose culture leans strongly toward collectivism, are more prone to follow the view of the majority, while Americans, whose culture leans strongly toward individualism, is less prone to follow the view of the majority (Zhang, Lowry, & Fu, 2006).
- *Masculinity* focuses on the degree in which the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power. On the contrary, *femininity* implies a preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and quality of life. A high masculinity ranking indicates that the country experiences a high degree of gender differentiation. In these cultures, males dominate a significant portion of the society and power structure, with females being controlled by male domination. A low masculinity ranking indicates the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of the society.
- *Uncertainty avoidance* focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society, that is, unstructured situations. A high uncertainty avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low

tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty. A low uncertainty avoidance ranking indicates the country has less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty, and more tolerance for a variety of opinions. This is reflected in a society that is less rule oriented, more readily accepts change, and takes more and greater risks.

- *Long-term orientation* focuses on the degree the society embraces, or does not embrace, long-term devotion to traditional, forward-thinking values. High long-term orientation ranking indicates the country prescribes to the values of long-term commitments and respect for tradition. This is thought to support a strong work ethic where long-term rewards are expected as a result of today's hard work. However, business may take longer to develop in this society, particularly for an "outsider." A low long-term orientation ranking indicates the country does not reinforce the concept of long-term, traditional orientation. In this culture, change can occur more rapidly, as long-term traditions and commitments do not become impediments to change.

It is interesting to note that power distance and individualism are found to be inversely related (Hofstede, 1991; Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Triandis, 1995). Many Western countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia have been described as individualistic, low power distance cultures, while many Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and China have been described as collectivistic, high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 1991).

More recently, Srite and Karahanna (2006) examined the influence of national culture on individual behavior and extended the Technology Acceptance Model by incorporating espoused national cultural values (masculinity/femininity, individualism/collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance) into the model. With respect to the impact of individualism/collectivism value on behavior for example, and because of the growing "virtualness" of collaborative teams, these authors call for further research investigating the acceptance of technologies used by teams composed of individuals from different national cultures.

CULTURE AND ANONYMITY IN GSS STUDIES

Although a GSS is a socio-technical system that involves not only computer and communication technologies but also a group of participants, culture was not specifically considered as an important dimension in the early studies of GSSs.

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