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Common Ground? Explaining the Willingness to Share Knowledge in Organizational Teams

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Knowledge is a resource that is considered to be important for organizational success and survival (Hinds & Pfeffer, 2003). Nevertheless, processes of knowledge sharing in organizations are often far from optimal. This can be partially explained by the unwillingness of employees to share knowledge (Hall, 2001; Hinds & Pfeffer, 2003). The willingness to share knowledge is closely related to social relationships. The stronger these relationships are, the more employees are willing to exchange knowledge with their colleagues (Hinds & Pfeffer, 2003).

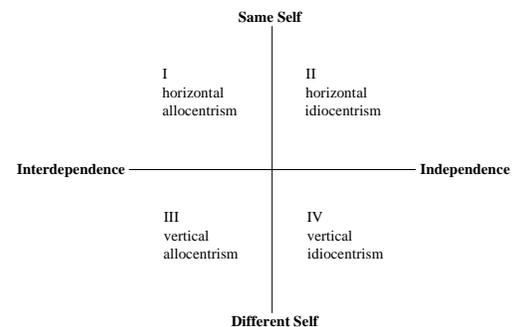
The aim of this paper is to explain how the relationship of team members with their team influences their willingness to give their knowledge to their colleagues and to collect knowledge from these colleagues. Here, the relationship between team members and their team is characterized by idiocentrism and allocentrism. These concepts correspond to individualism and collectivism respectively. On the basis of a literature review, expectations about the relationship between idiocentrism, allocentrism, and the willingness to share knowledge will be formulated. These expectations will be tested in an empirical study. The findings of the study will be presented and suggestions for future research will be formulated.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Individualism and collectivism play a significant role in explaining behavior in national cultures (e.g., Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 1998). These (cultural) concepts are the equivalent of idiocentrism and allocentrism at the personal level (e.g., Chen et al., 1998; Hulbert, Corrêa da Silva, & Adegboyega, 2001; Lam, Chen, & Schaubroeck, 2002). Despite the relatively clear distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures on the one hand and idiocentric and allocentric persons on the other, individualism and collectivism are often defined as personal features. Therefore, these publications are useful in defining idiocentrism and allocentrism. On the basis of an article of Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand (1995), the concepts can be distinguished on four main aspects. The first aspect is based on how persons see themselves. Allocentrics define themselves as part of a group, while idiocentrics define themselves independently from social structures. The second aspect is related to goals. Allocentrics give priority to accomplishing group goals, whereas idiocentrics prioritize personal goals over group goals. The third aspect is connected to the predictability of social behavior. The social behavior of allocentrics "is best predicted from norms and perceived duties and obligations" (1995, p. 244). The behavior of idiocentrics, on the other hand, is better predicted by attitudes than by norms. Finally, the fourth aspect concerns costs and benefits. Allocentrics tend to continue relationships where the costs outweigh the benefits, while idiocentrics do not.

The definition of idiocentrism and allocentrism can be further detailed by making a distinction between a horizontal and vertical dimension (Chen, Meindl, & Hunt, 1997; Probst, Carnevale, & Triandis, 1999; Singelis et al., 1995). This distinction clarifies how (in)equality between persons is perceived (figure 1). In the situation of horizontal idiocentrism, persons act autonomously but see themselves as equal to other persons. In the case of vertical idiocentrism, the emphasis is on hierarchy and

Figure 1. Dimensions of idiocentrism and allocentrism (based on Chen et al., 1997, p. 65)

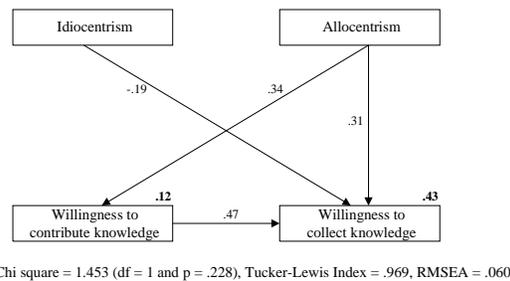


attaining status. The same applies to horizontal and vertical allocentrism. Horizontal allocentrics focus on social relationships and underline equality. Vertical allocentrics accept hierarchy and authority, and behave accordingly.

Previous research mainly focuses on explaining the relationship between idiocentrism, allocentrism, and cooperation. Cooperation is associated with allocentrism, while idiocentrism is related to competition (Chen et al., 1998). In the current study, the relationship between idiocentrism, allocentrism, and the willingness to share knowledge is examined. It seems obvious to consider knowledge sharing as cooperative behavior and to formulate similar expectations with regard to the causal relationship between the concepts. However, defining cooperation in terms of goal relationships (Hulbert et al., 2001) shows that knowledge sharing is a much broader concept. Persons can aim to minimize or maximize their personal goals, while simultaneously trying to minimize or maximize the goals of others. For example, persons who try to maximize both their own outcome as the outcome of other persons, cooperate. And persons who try to maximize their own outcome and minimize other person's outcome are in competition (Hulbert et al., 2001). Contrary to cooperation, processes of knowledge sharing can take place even if personal and group goals do not match. In the specific context of organizational teams, sharing knowledge is considered to be a necessity for the accomplishment of team goals. Given that allocentrics have a stronger relationship with their team and are more focused on realizing team goals than idiocentrics, allocentrics are expected to be more willing to contribute and collect knowledge than idiocentrics (hypothesis 1).

Studies about effects of horizontal and vertical idiocentrism/individualism and allocentrism/collectivism are divergent. For example, Probst et al. (1999) relate vertical collectivism to cooperation and vertical individualism to non-cooperation. Singelis et al. (1995) associate vertical individualism, contrary to horizontal individualism, with behavior in line with conforming to authority, and Chen et al. (1997) find

Figure 2. Results model hypothesis 1



that vertical collectivism is positively related to reform, whereas horizontal collectivism is not. According to knowledge sharing literature, status hierarchies negatively influence the willingness to share knowledge (e.g., Hall, 2001; Hinds & Pfeffer, 2003). Because the vertical dimension in idiocentrism and allocentrism indicates the existence of authority and hierarchy, vertical idiocentrics are expected to be less willing to share knowledge than horizontal idiocentrics (hypothesis 2a), and vertical allocentrics are expected to be less willing to share knowledge than horizontal allocentrics (hypothesis 2b).

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSES

The expectations were tested in the Dutch branch of an international publishing organization. A questionnaire was distributed among 285 employees. The response rate was 45%.

Idiocentrism and allocentrism were measured by two 8-item scales (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In both scales, the first four items were used to measure the horizontal dimension, whereas the last four items were used to measure the vertical dimension. Two new scales were developed for measuring the willingness to contribute and collect knowledge. Homogeneity of the scales was calculated using Cronbach's alpha: idiocentrism ($\alpha = .52$), allocentrism ($\alpha = .80$), horizontal idiocentrism ($\alpha = .45$), vertical idiocentrism ($\alpha = .62$), horizontal allocentrism ($\alpha = .78$), vertical allocentrism ($\alpha = .70$), willingness to contribute knowledge ($\alpha = .53$), and willingness to collect knowledge ($\alpha = .66$). The results of these reliability tests show relatively low reliability coefficients for the scales that measure idiocentrism, horizontal idiocentrism, and the willingness to contribute knowledge. However, these scales were used in further analyses because their reliabilities were satisfactory in other case studies and, in the case of (horizontal) idiocentrism, in published studies.

AMOS, a statistical program for structural equation modeling, was used for testing the hypotheses. The outcome of the analysis of hypothesis 1 is presented in Figure 2.

The model in Figure 2 has a satisfactory fit to the data: the Chi square value is not significant and the Tucker-Lewis Index value is close to 1. The RMSEA value of .06 is acceptable. The model explains 12% of the variance in the willingness to contribute knowledge, and 43% of the variance in the willingness to collect knowledge.

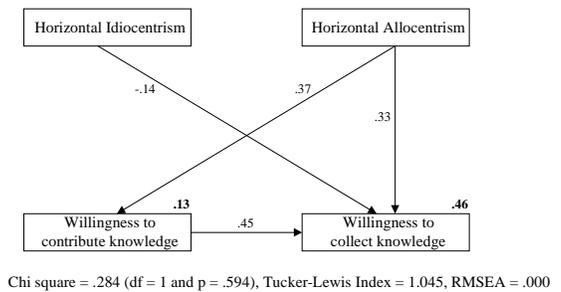
The results of the analysis of hypotheses 2a and 2b are presented in Figure 3.

This model has a sufficient fit to the data: the chi square value is not significant, the Tucker-Lewis Index value is close to 1, and the RMSEA value is below .06. The model explains 13% of the variance in the willingness to contribute knowledge, and 46% of the variance in the willingness to collect knowledge.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results show that both idiocentrism and allocentrism play a significant role in explaining the willingness to share knowledge (Figure 2). The concepts influence the willingness to contribute and collect knowledge differently. The more employees are idiocentric, the less these employees are willing to collect knowledge from their colleagues.

Figure 3. Results model hypothesis 2a and 2b



And the more employees are allocentric, the more they are willing to give their knowledge to their colleagues and to collect knowledge from these colleagues. These results support hypothesis 1.

When specifying to horizontal and vertical dimensions of idiocentrism and allocentrism, the results demonstrate that the horizontal dimensions are accountable for significant effects, whereas the vertical dimensions have no significant influence on the willingness to share knowledge at all (Figure 3). Contrary to the expectations, inequality between team members thus does not significantly motivate or discourage employees to share knowledge with their colleagues. Instead, in correspondence with hypothesis 2b, the findings show that employees who are focused on achieving team goals and perceive no inequality between team members (horizontal allocentrics) are motivated to share knowledge with their team members. The results do not support hypothesis 2a: no significant relationship between horizontal idiocentrism and the willingness to contribute knowledge is found. Also, the findings show that the more employees act independently and perceive themselves as equal to other team members (horizontal idiocentrics), the less they are willing to collect knowledge from their team members. A possible explanation may be found in the conclusion of Singelis et al. (1995) that in the situation of horizontal idiocentrism, because of the lack of authority, employees do not conform to the team. So perhaps also in this case employees do not conform to team interest and behavior, such as collecting knowledge from colleagues.

The results of this study imply that, for organizations that aim to stimulate the willingness of organizational team members to share knowledge, and for this organization in particular, focusing on equality between team members in combination with emphasizing a team purpose can be helpful.

The relationship between the willingness to contribute and collect knowledge that emerged from the analyses indicates that the more employees are willing to contribute knowledge, the more they are also willing to collect knowledge. It is desirable to investigate this relationship more thoroughly in future research. Also, because the current study explains a relatively low proportion of variance in the willingness to contribute knowledge, other potential influences on this variable should be included in future studies as well.

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