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We are diverse but belonging to the same team: an empirical study on the relationship between diversity and identification

Abstract

The present study aims to highlight the role of work group culture and gender diversity on work group functioning. Gender diversity is an aspect of organizational life and research on the effect of workgroup composition has yielded ambiguous results. The categorization elaboration model (van Knippenberg, De Dreu & Homan, 2004) addresses this issue and suggests examining factors influencing the relationship between work group diversity and work group functioning. The present study proposes that the group gender diversity affects group identification and that this effect is contingent on group norms. 18 work groups in an information technology enterprise were involved. Results confirmed the hypothesis. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: diversity, gender, identification, work group.

Introduction

The gender differences are present and pervasive, especially in contexts in which the interpersonal relationships are role.

In fact, the organizations are characterized by an increased presence of women and they will become more heterogeneous over time (Robbins & Judge, 2009) in labor and social needs. In the organizational context the term gender means a variety of issues such as inequality, the wage gap, stereotypes, discrimination in career perspective, the reconciliation of work. For example, the question of the wage gap is rather problematic in Italy. Let's consider the last edition (2010) of the World Economic Forum Gender Gap in Italy: on 114 countries surveyed, it belongs to the minority of 14% of countries has deteriorated in the last 4 years. According to the report, the Italian women earn on average 50% less than men, yet the number of women in leadership positions in Italy almost a third of the total (33%). These data show how important are the gender differences and equality in the Italian labour market and how organizational cultures are still not neutral with respect to differences, but are oriented to favour a style or ethnicity (Walenta & Hanappi-Egger, 2007).

Another relevant question for the organizations is how to deal with the work group diversity (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). It's a current challenge realizing the

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potential benefit of diverse groups either for scholars who study organizational behavior and who are responsible of the personnel management.

The focus on the group level analysis means the understanding if and why the heterogeneous groups perform or behave better than homogeneous groups.

Moreover, the interest of gender diversity is relatively recent in the research and is significant considering the growing presence of women in the labor market and the tendency to organize work in a team.

Over the last forty years of research¹, results regarding the effect of diversity in work groups have been produced into the scope of the two main perspectives: social categorization perspective which also reports of negative effects (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the perspective of information and decision making (Cox, Lobel & McLeod, 1991; Homan, 2006) which account for positive effect. The results of the two main perspectives showed that the differences within the work groups may have both positive and negative effects on performance, satisfaction and behaviour of the members.

In order to overcome the ambiguity of such results and to understand how to get the benefits from the presence of heterogeneous people together in work groups, van Knippenberg, De Dreu and Homan have proposed a theoretical model in 2004, the categorization Elaboration Model (CEM).

This model proposes a unified interpretative framework of the two perspectives, and offers new insights in urging consideration of moderating variables that show the conditions under which heterogeneous groups (for example, by gender) are more effective than homogeneous groups.

It has been suggested (van Knippenberg & Haslam, 2003) one of these conditions can be the diversity beliefs. Diversity beliefs refers to the value of diversity for the functioning of a work group. It is described that relationship between work group diversity and identification with the work group is dependent on diversity beliefs. Moreover, Homan and colleagues (2007) have shown that in heterogeneous groups by gender, beliefs stimulate the processing of information, which in turn improves performance. In line with this, a study by van Dick, van Knippenberg, Haegle, Guillaume and Brodebeck (2008) confirmed the moderating role of beliefs on identification in heterogeneous groups by nationality.

In addition, Hobman et al. (2004) verified the assumption that aspects of work group culture like team openness to diversity norms (defined as the perception that the team members about the availability of their group in to diversity) could play a role in the relationship between diversity and functioning of the work groups.

This research is part of this specific model development examining the effect of gender diversity on the group identification. It depends on the openness of work groups rules against gender diversity.

Group diversity: a look on the literature

The term diversity includes many meanings, some of them overlapping each other, such as dispersion, iniquity, intra-group variability, consensus, heterogeneity,

¹ For a review see: Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007.

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homogeneity, deviation, difference, distance, relational demography, sharing of attributes, and so on.

The most widely accepted meaning of the term “group diversity” is the one that refers to the amount of differences in a social unit (Harrison, 2004). A second meaning is more specific, and refers to the extent to which a group, unit, department share common demographic characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, education level, length of service (Robbins & Judge, 2009).

In this study, the diversity describes the degree to which there are objective or subjective differences between people who work in organizations (van Knippenberg & Schippers 2007, p. 519).

The perspective of social categorization refers primarily to demographic differences and makes use of the principles of the theory of social categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This perspective takes account of the negative effects of diversity seems to have on the performance and behavior of the work groups. The perspective of information decision making is mainly focused functional diversity (background experience, cultural diversity) and accounts for positive effects. According to this perspective in heterogeneous teams may be encountered higher levels of creativity, innovation and performance than homogeneous teams (Amabile, 1996; Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; West & Farr, 1990). Social categorization processes can promote the distinctions in subgroups (ingroup vs outgroup), within a diverse group. Such subgroup distinctions can in turn lead to the formation of intergroup bias, due to the processes of similarity attraction (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) that in turn lead us appreciate to encourage and give confidence to people belonging to the ingroup (Brewer, 1979; Brewer, 1995). This would lead to divisions within groups, attitudes preferably with negative effects on communication, information sharing and interpersonal trust (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007) of the members of the work group.

Several research demonstrated that heterogeneous groups, in comparison with homogenous groups, are characterized by less cohesion (O'Reilly, Caldwell & Barnett (1989) and lower performance (Homan, van Knippenberg, van Kleef & De Dreu, 2007) more turnover (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) and increased levels of conflict (Tluchowska Chattopadhyay & George, 2004). In line with this, a study by O'Reilly and colleagues (1989) showed how the teams homogeneous than heterogeneous, are characterized by better communication and higher levels of socialization. Moreover, it has been found that the presence of diversity in attitudes and values has a negative effect on interpersonal relationships in work groups (Harrison, Price & Bell, 1998; Harrison, Price, Gavin & Florey, 2002).

As van Knippenberg et al. (2004) pointed out, whether the differences in gender, age, nationality, status, values, the presence of differences within the working groups often seems to be a problem for the people involved and sometimes seems an advantage.

The Categorization Elaboration Model

According to Knippenberg De Dreu and Homan have proposed in 2004 Categorization Elaboration Model (CEM) the effect of diversity on group functioning can be understood in terms of two separate processes: the information processing (i.e. the exchange , sharing and communication of information relevant to the task), and the

social categorization process that leads to distinctions “us-them” and possible consequences in terms of intergroup bias (Mehra, Kilduff & Brass, 1998; Randel & Jaussi 2003).

Reaction to diversity: group culture and norms

Beliefs and attitudes toward diversity vary from person to person. Based on stereotypes, past experience and other factors, group members may have beliefs about how the composition (homogeneous vs. heterogeneous) affects the group functioning. The beliefs of the diversity (pro diversity or pro homogeneity) may cause members to respond positively or negatively to the others in your work group (van Knippenberg & Haslam, 2003). In line with this notion, research by Homan et al. (2007) shows that in heterogeneous groups (informational diversity like information granted to different experimental groups), pro-diversity beliefs influenced the relationship between diversity and performance. Conversely heterogeneous groups with pro homogeneity beliefs showed limited levels of information processing with reduced performance in problem solving.

In line with this notion, the concept of openness to diversity norms refers to the perception that each member has with respect to availability and openness toward diversity in the group. Hobman et al. (2004) have enhanced this construct showed that the openness to diversity norms may be an important moderator variable in the relationship between diversity and functioning of the team (Mor Barak, Cherin & Berkman, 1998).

The objective of this research is to demonstrate the role of openness to diversity norms as a moderator in relationship between gender diversity and group identification. Group identification is important dimension that can depend on the responses of group members to diversity (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Turner et al., 1987). In line with this a study by van Dick et al. (2008) clearly confirmed the moderating role of beliefs on identification in nationality diverse groups.

Objective and Hypothesis

The general objective of the current study is to investigate whether openness to diversity can help organizations to make better use of their team and to make such team more identified with their own organizations. The specific objective of the current research is to verify if openness to diversity norms moderate the relationship between gender work group diversity and group identification.

Method

Sample

The study sample consisted of 18 work groups of an information technology enterprise took part in the research ($N = 127$, 41 males) working in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the Northern-Eastern Italy.

The sample is aged between 20 and 66 years ($M = 36.5$, $SD = 10.2$). Organizational tenure ranges from a minimum of a few months, to a maximum of 39 years ($M = 7.8$ years; $DS = 9.12$) and team tenure ranges from a minimum of a few months to a

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maximum of 25 years ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 5.83$). Participants were 81% from of Italy (of which 82% come from northern Italy, 6% from Centrum and 18% from the Southern or Islands). 44% are employed, 15% of executives, executives 4.7%, and 4% indicated “other”.

Measures

The study was conducted by a self-report questionnaire All the questions were measured on a five point Likert scale (1 = completely disagreement 5 = completely agreement). However, demographic variables needed to be answered by indicating which option applied to the respondent. The within group agreement measure was measured according the Rwg(j) index (Bliese, 2000; James, et al., 1984). The following measurements were included in the questionnaire

- Work group diversity was measured by using Blau index (Blau, 1977; Harrison et al. 2002).
- *Openness to diversity have been* measured using a scale developed by Hobman et al., (2004). It measures how group members group is willing to support and encourage cooperation with people who differ from each other in this case in relation to gender. Cronbach’s alpha for openness to diversity 0.73.
- *Group identification has been measured using the six-item scale* developed by Ashforth and Mael (1989). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.74.
- *Control variable.* Gender was used as a control variable according Tsui, Egan and O’Reil (1992). Also group size was used as a control variable cause it may have an effect on group identification (van Dick et al., 2008).

Results

Data were analysed at the group level. Table 1 provides mean values, standard deviations, Pearson correlations index among variables, alpha index and the Rwg(j).

According to the hypothesis the openness to diversity norms moderates the relationship between gender diversity and group identification was tested was analysed using hierarchical regression. The regression analysis was conducted in three steps (see Table 2). In the first step the control variables were entered. Nor gender neither group size showed a significant effect on dependent variable group identification. In the next step independent variable (level of gender diversity) and moderator variable (openness to diversity norms) were entered: no main effect was found ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, F change (2,13) = .09, p ns). In the last model the interaction between level of gender diversity and moderator variable was entered ($\Delta R^2 = .35$ F change (1,12) = 9.13 $p < .05$). As show in Table 2, the results of regression analysis provide support for the hypothesis ($r = .34$ $p < .05$). The significant interaction is reported in Figure 1. Furthermore a *simple slope* (Aiken & West, 1991) was conducted. Results show a significant and positive relationship between level of gender and group identification ($b = 1.77$, $\beta = .67$; $p < .05$) for those group with high level of openness to diversity norms. For group with low level of openness to diversity norms no significant relationship was found ($b = -.13$, $\beta = -.52$; p ns).

Discussion and Practical Implications

The objective of the current study was to investigate whether openness to diversity can help organizations to make better use of their team and to make such team more identified with their own organizations. The results supported the proposed hypothesis: openness to diversity norms moderate the relationship between level of gender diversity and group identification. The results of this study are in line with the basis of the Categorization Elaboration Model and with the Homan et al. (2007) findings. They showed that when teams see value in diversity they are able to perform better. Allowing to CEM model, the consequences of intergroup bias may vary according to what people about diversity (van Knippenberg et al., 2004) and may be positive if people in group are open to diversity. Such results are also in line with the notion that organizational climate (Paulus, Nakui, Parthasarty & Baruah, 2004) and the attitudes toward work diversity may represent a critical dimension for understanding how people behave towards diversity itself. Our results show that openness to diversity has a positive influence on group identification. This mean that it is likely that group identification is positively influenced with higher openness to diversity norms of the people who belong to the group.

Future research may look to the antecedents of such openness to diversity norms (personal experiences, individual differences, age, culture).

The current research has several limitations. First, the numbers of teams that could be included in the research is relatively small. Convincing the employees to hand the questionnaire was not easy. The relatively small number of teams means that the results should be interpreted with caution. Second, the current research looked at the gender composition as an index of diversity. It would have been interesting to have also a *self-report* measure of perception of diversity and a measure of subjective cognitive salience of gender diversity (Randel & Jaussi 2003). In fact, the identification may depend on the subjective perception of diversity as well as by the real composition. Consequently, the subjective perception of differences could be an important indicator of how people are categorized within the group, and therefore could have an impact on the sense of belonging.

The current research has several implications for practice. At managerial level the results suggest that there are organizational dynamics reflecting mind systems that hinder the effectiveness and functioning of the work groups in which there is coexistence of men and women. Our results show that it is likely that group identification is higher with openness to diversity norms of the group. Therefore, better group identification is probably realised when open mind people are placed in diverse team.

Moreover, such results suggest that make sense for managers to study such beliefs and attitudes toward diversity and to take such attitudes into account and try to elaborate them with the followers.

Thanks to these studies, it is possible to have tools able to perform analysis in specific contexts and to plan diversity training in order to overcoming the “normative” and “inclusion” such as “equal opportunities” (equal employment opportunity - EEO) and “affirmative action” that if not anchored in belief systems suitable ineffective. Such

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strategies, coming from federal and state regulations and measures aimed at correcting an imbalance in population, have adopted an orientation exhortation, which sought to persuade people to behave in a more tolerant, more ethical, or more simply, politically correct. If diversity can be approached from a cultural point of view, it allows us to understand what characteristics or skills could be generative relations of coexistence and organizational effectiveness work adapted to the new organizational contexts and more generally social.

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