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The effect of team empowerment on team performance

A cross-cultural perspective on the mediating roles of knowledge sharing and intra-group conflict

Xueting Jiang and Hector R. Flores
Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA
Ronrapee Leelawong
SCG Chemicals Co. Ltd., Bangkok, Thailand, and
Charles C. Manz
Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Based on extant literature on empowerment and team management, this paper aims to examine the effect of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between empowerment and team performance through the mechanisms of knowledge sharing and intra-group conflict.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper conceptualizes a model depicting the relationship between team empowerment and team performance across cultures.

Findings – The authors argue that team empowerment can increase both knowledge sharing and intra-group conflict in working teams. Knowledge sharing facilitates team performance, while intra-group conflict impairs team performance in the long run. Team empowerment yields different team performance across cultures due to the respective moderating effects of power distance and collectivism.

Originality/value – This paper explicates the moderating roles of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between empowerment, knowledge sharing, intra-group conflict and team performance. The authors suggest that the effectiveness of team empowerment is contingent on the cultural context that the team operates in.

Keywords Knowledge sharing, Collectivism, Power distance, Team performance, Intra-group conflict, Team empowerment

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Empowerment has been of great interest in the field of organization studies for decades (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997). In general, it has been studied from two aspects: structural and psychological (Spreitzer, 1996). Structural empowerment emphasizes the social structural context of empowerment and looks at how subordinates are granted opportunities to share formal authority or control over organizational resources (Biron and Bamberger, 2010; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 2007). On the other hand,

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psychological empowerment emphasizes an individual's perception and experience of being empowered (Lee and Koh, 2001) and looks at how subordinates are intrinsically motivated to perform their responsibilities to affect their organization (Chen *et al.*, 2007; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Mathieu *et al.*, 2006). At the individual level, empowerment refers to an integration of both the "behavior of a supervisor" and the "psychological state of a subordinate" (Lee and Koh, 2001, p. 685). At the team level, team empowerment represents team members' perceptions on four dimensions:

(1) their potency to perform tasks effectively;

(2) their sense of meaningfulness in their work;

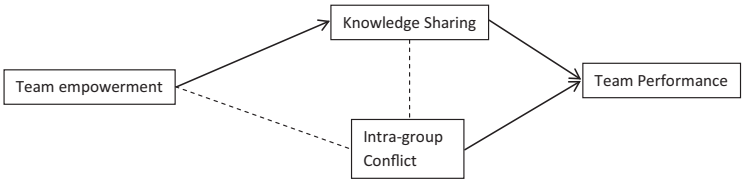
(3) their autonomy to make task-related decisions; and

(4) their impact upon task outcomes.

In a highly empowered team, its members receive administrative autonomy to share leadership responsibilities, allocate resources, initiate decisions and regulate work processes (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Manz and Sims, 1987).

The managerial practices of empowered teams were prevalent when the notion of empowerment emerged in the organizational literature in the late 1970s (Appelbaum *et al.*, 1999; Anderson, 1997; Lawler *et al.*, 2001; Kanter, 1977; Manz and Sims, 1987; Singh, 1998; Spreitzer, 2007). A work team is known for the interdependence and social interactions among its members to achieve common goals (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003; Mathieu *et al.*, 2008). Considerable empirical work has suggested that empowerment is positively related to team performance (Harter *et al.*, 2002; Laschinger *et al.*, 2004; Seibert *et al.*, 2004; Spreitzer, 1996; Srivastava *et al.*, 2006). It has been argued that empowerment can have a positive effect on team performance because a highly empowered team offers a platform for members to make collective decisions through their participation in negotiated decision-making (Yukl, 2009). The proliferation of team empowerment provides team members with more opportunities to share ideas and knowledge (Locke *et al.*, 1997). Early studies on team empowerment and team performance tend to reflect a positive view of the mediating effect of knowledge-sharing on the relationship between empowerment and team performance (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999, 1997; Srivastava *et al.*, 2006). However, the downsides of empowered teams have not been sufficiently explored by extant research. For instance, a highly empowered team might be more susceptible to intra-group conflict, which has a detrimental effect on team performance (Bergman *et al.*, 2012; Langfred, 2007; Kotlyar and Karakowsky, 2006). Given a situation that calls for team empowerment, the effectiveness and success of an empowered team depend on the extent that team members can adapt to team structural changes and maximize the benefits of power and knowledge sharing and minimize intra-group conflict (Kirkman and Shapiro, 1997; Langfred, 2007; Stewart *et al.*, 2011) (Figure 1).

Cross-cultural management scholarship has revealed that individuals' behaviors are embedded in their specific cultural contexts, which may differ across nations (Bochner and Hesketh, 1994; Hofstede, 1993, 1980). For instance, national cultures influence individual actions by constructing a collection of strategies in which certain patterns of actions are supported, while others are rejected (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1989). We argue that team empowerment is not an exception, although the effect of cultural dimensions has not been sufficiently explored (Alves *et al.*, 2006; Neck and Houghton,

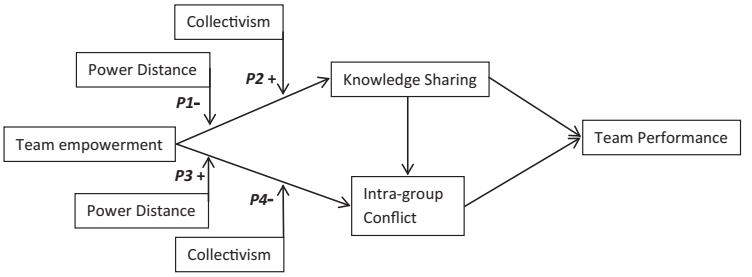


Notes: Extant research does not explore the effect of the cultural context on the relationship between team empowerment and knowledge sharing, and the relationship between team empowerment and intra-group conflict is underexplored

Source: Kirkman and Rosen (1999), Srivastava *et al.* (2006)

Figure 1.
Traditional model

2006; Pearce and Conger, 2003). In addition, perceptions of team performance might vary across cultures and make different teams to focus their efforts on different outcomes. For example, cultural differences in a highly individualist society can lead a group to focus more on task-related outcomes, whereas its counterpart in a highly collectivistic society can focus more on the social aspects of team performance (Stewart and Barrick, 2000). Our focus in this paper is to discuss how team empowerment influences team performance in different cultural contexts (Figure 2). Previous researchers have suggested that national cultures may influence individuals' behavior of conflict management and knowledge sharing (Doucet *et al.*, 2009; Michailova and Hutchings, 2006; Tjosvold *et al.*, 1998). This paper examines the effect of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between empowerment and team performance through the mechanisms of knowledge sharing and intra-group conflict for teams that in their composition reflect the specific cultural preferences of the culture in which they are embedded (for an exception see Boros *et al.*, 2010). Although other cultural dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance and masculinity–femininity may also affect conflict management and knowledge sharing (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006; van



Notes: The effects of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between team empowerment and knowledge sharing are explicated; an argument is made for the relationship between team empowerment and intra-group conflict, and the effects of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between team empowerment and intra-group conflict are proposed

Figure 2.
Proposed model

Oudenhoven *et al.*, 1998), we only include power distance and collectivism in our analysis. There are several reasons that motivate us to focus on these two dimensions only. First, the dimensions of power distance and individualism-collectivism, from Hofstede's (1980) framework of cultural dimensions, have been widely used to understand differences in management practices across cultures (Chow *et al.*, 2000; Tjosvold and Sun, 2010). Second, the power distance dimension, which focuses on people's expectation and acceptance of power inequality in a society, is essential to structural and psychological empowerment in teams. Third, how team members evaluate group and individual benefits and how they work interdependently is subject to individuals' mindsets of social roles and responsibilities in a team. Team members' cognitive and behavioral tendencies can be captured by Hofstede's (1980, 2001) individualism-collectivism dimension to understand the consequent team outcomes. Last, the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity are still controversial in terms of content and replicability and have not been convincingly replicated in both Eastern and Western countries (Minkov and Hofstede, 2014). The dimension of long-term versus short-term orientation is strongly connected to Chinese Confucius values and national economic growth, which might be less reliable to predict individual behaviors in teams (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

This research serves as a conceptual cross-cultural analysis of team empowerment and team performance. We focused our systematic literature review on the literatures on knowledge sharing, conflict management and culture studies at team levels over the past 20 years. Most studies included in our analysis are publications in high-tier academic journals. We strived to include the most relevant and most important articles. When there was a need to choose a citation over another, we chose seminal pieces instead of subsequent articles, unless the subsequent articles added significantly to our understanding.

Overall, building on extant literature in empowerment and cross-cultural studies, we delineate a framework depicting the relationship between team empowerment and team performance across cultures. Figure 2 portrays how our focal constructs are interconnected. Specifically, team empowerment is positively related to both knowledge sharing and intra-group conflict. Knowledge sharing leads to increased team performance, while intra-group conflict impairs team performance. In addition, team empowerment yields different team performance outcomes across cultures because of the respective moderating effects of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between team empowerment and knowledge sharing as well as on the relationship between team empowerment and intra-group conflict. Power distance inhibits knowledge sharing and fosters intra-group conflict. In contrast, collectivism inhibits intra-group conflict and facilitates knowledge sharing.

Theoretical foundations and propositions

In the following sections, we review the empowerment, knowledge sharing and team performance relationship to show that team empowerment is positively related to team performance through the mechanism of knowledge sharing. Then, we argue for the moderating roles of power distance and knowledge sharing on this relationship. Subsequently, we review the empowerment, intra-group conflict and team performance relationship to show that team empowerment is negatively related to team performance

through the mechanism of intra-group conflict. Then, we argue for the moderating roles of power distance and knowledge sharing on this relationship.

Empowerment, knowledge sharing and team performance

Previous literature suggests that empowering leadership and empowerment in various organizational settings can promote team performance (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Srivastava *et al.*, 2006). Many scholars have addressed the team empowerment-performance relationship by looking at the mediating effect of knowledge sharing (Manz and Sims, 1995; Rosen *et al.*, 2007; Srivastava *et al.*, 2006). Knowledge acquisition (i.e. problem understanding and communication) is an important predictor of both financial and non-financial team performance (Politis, 2003). Increased knowledge sharing facilitates a more comprehensive consideration of alternatives and a better utilization of a team's existing knowledge (Stasser and Titus, 1985). Wegner (1986) stated that knowledge sharing fosters the creation of shared mental models and the development of transactive memory (i.e. the knowledge of "who knows what" in a team). Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch's (2009) meta-analysis also suggested the importance of information sharing to team performance. Thus, knowledge sharing among team members can positively influence team performance.

Srivastava *et al.* (2006) found that empowering leadership could enhance team knowledge sharing through the guidance and coaching of empowering leaders. The increased opportunities for idea sharing are inherent in participative decision-making. Zárraga and Bonache (2005) found that a high care atmosphere among team members engenders both the creation and the transfer of knowledge. They argued that a "high care" atmosphere is enhanced when the team is empowered. Rosen *et al.* (2007, p. 267) identified six common barriers to knowledge sharing in virtual teams and presented six "best practices" to overcome the knowledge-sharing barriers. They addressed the importance of "a psychologically safe team culture" and advocated that the leaders should shape the culture of the team so that every team member can raise their voice and participate in decision-making when the task is progressing.

In addition, an atmosphere of trust in an empowered team is known to facilitate knowledge sharing (Renzl, 2008; Rosen *et al.*, 2007). The full engagement of team members can enhance trust within a group, which in turn enhances knowledge sharing. Recent research on leadership, team empowerment and knowledge sharing suggests that interpersonal-trust in empowered teams is positively related to knowledge acquisition (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Gagné, 2009; Politis, 2003, 2001; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). Foss *et al.* (2009) found that feedback in the form of formal evaluations and recognition schemes was positively related to the motivation to share knowledge. Nurturing efficient feedback contributes to developing trust among team members. Abrams *et al.* (2003) offered a set of ten team-member behaviors that promote trust among the team. Many of their proposed behaviors mirror the consequences of team empowerment. For instance, the authors proposed that a team should establish and ensure a shared vision and goals to promote benevolence and competence (Abrams *et al.*, 2003). This proposition is consistent with two of Kirkman and Rosen's (1999) key dimensions of team empowerment, i.e. sharing a sense of the meaningfulness of their task and group potency (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). According to these conceptual arguments, we posit that team empowerment can enhance knowledge sharing because the mutual feedback is highly encouraging and a high care atmosphere engenders trust

among team members. The preceding analysis can be summarized as follows: team empowerment leads to high team performance through the beneficial effect of knowledge sharing.

Team empowerment, power distance and knowledge sharing

Power has been described as the potential ability of a person to influence others (Anderson and Brion, 2014). Thus, a major power holder has more potential influence on others than a minor power holder. Structurally, empowerment can be viewed as pushing power from the top-down throughout the hierarchy to subordinates in an organization (Hollander and Offermann, 1990). The structural attempts to empower team members, such as equalizing social status or hierarchical positions within a team, generally aim to increase team members' psychological perception of being empowered. However, these structural empowering practices may or may not succeed in psychologically empowering team members completely in all cultural or organizational settings (Alves *et al.*, 2006; Randolph and Sashkin, 2002; Sagie and Aycan, 2003).

Power distance is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede and Bond, 1984, p. 419). In different national cultures, the distribution of power within society can range from relatively equal (i.e. in a low power distance culture) to extremely unequal (i.e. in a high power distance culture) (Hofstede, 2001, 1980). In a high power distance society, the less powerful individuals are more likely to accept autocratic or paternalistic power relations. They tend to acknowledge and accept that power is based on social status or hierarchical positions. House *et al.* (2004) found that power distance is negatively related to participative leadership. Pearce and Conger's (2003) review of shared leadership also argued that power distance might limit the effective function of shared leadership across cultures.

It has been noted that team empowerment and individual psychological empowerment are highly correlated (Bandura, 1997; Chen *et al.*, 2007). However, there may be differences in individual psychological empowerment among group members (Wu *et al.*, 2010). These differences in individual psychological empowerment can be exaggerated in a high power distance society as a result of people's acceptance of inequality. Although in a high power distance culture, team members may be structurally treated as equal, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for all team members to perceive an equal level of individual psychological empowerment. This diversity of perceived empowerment may occur in a team composed of members from different hierarchical levels within the organization, or with different tenures, or from different socioeconomic statuses. We argue that these social-structural differences might result in implicit power inequalities among team members. For example, in a high power distance society like China, people readily accept a large degree of power inequality, and can easily turn a relationship between equal partners in a team into a junior-senior structural relationship if there are cues to a status difference in other areas of life (King and Bond, 1985). This implicit inequity may generate intra-group cliques and lead to mistrust and divergence within the group and hinder knowledge sharing.

There are generally three reasons that prevent team members from sharing knowledge in a high power distance society. First, the existence of power inequality in a team can undermine the atmosphere of information exchange among team members (Follett, 1924). The less powerful team members tend to restrain their proactive

arguments with major power holders when the less powerful individuals are mindful of their behaviors that might imply threats to the powerful (Eylon and Au, 1999; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007). Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) found that the concern about loss of one's face is prevalent in high power distance cultures. Face refers to "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). The concept of face is universally salient and applicable in both Western and Asian cultures (Kirkbride *et al.*, 1991). Face is determined by a person's socio-structural status (Oetzel *et al.*, 2003). It is a widely accepted social norm to respect powerful individuals in high power distance societies. Challenging a relatively powerful individual in public can be interpreted as a violation of social norms, leading to embarrassment and shame for that person (Kim and Nam, 1998). The powerful individual may retaliate against the challenger for face loss. As the less powerful individuals can foresee the potential negative consequences of arguing with powerful individuals, the less powerful individuals tend to avoid in-depth knowledge sharing with the major power holders to prevent such situations from occurring.

Second, people in a high power distance societies are accustomed to autocratic leadership and centralization of authority (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Traditionally, in high power distance societies, the major power holder is expected to have a strong voice in decision-making. Therefore, the less powerful individuals are de-motivated to contribute their ideas when they assume that their suggestions account for little in the final decision. The less powerful individuals spare what they see as futile efforts to communicate with the major power holders and are anxious not to offend their powerful counterparts during the interactions.

Third, in high power distance cultures, less powerful team members do not expect to obtain complete information (Randolph and Sashkin, 2002). The major power holders often surpass the less powerful members in terms of extensive social networks and privileged information sources. This expected information asymmetry between the powerful and the less powerful discourages information sharing within the team, as the less powerful members surmise that the powerful members already know what is needed to be known and consequently do not bother to share information even if they think it is novel. On the other hand, major power holders can obtain information from exclusive sources and tend not to share it with the less powerful members (Randolph and Sashkin, 2002). Thus, a high power differential limits information sharing among team members in a high power distance society and can cripple knowledge sharing even within an empowered team. The preceding discussion can be summarized in the following proposition:

P1. The relationship between team empowerment and knowledge sharing among team members is moderated by power distance in such a way that the positive influence of team empowerment on knowledge sharing is diminished in high power distance cultures.

Team empowerment, collectivism and knowledge sharing

Individualism and collectivism are cultural constructs both in origin and in nature (Hui and Triandis, 1986). Individualism is the degree to which people in a country prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of groups. In collectivistic cultures, people define themselves through social roles and hierarchical structures of their group (Clarke and Micken, 2002). Their personal goals and behaviors correspond to the social norms,

duties and obligations of the group (Chen *et al.*, 1997; Miller, 1994). In collectivistic cultures, individuals derive satisfaction from group accomplishment (Earley, 1989) and have less need to ascribe self-identity to personal characteristics (Clarke and Micken, 2002).

Randolph and Sashkin (2002) suggested that people in highly collectivistic cultures are more likely to exchange and share information that focuses on team efforts rather than on individual efforts. In other words, team members in highly collectivistic cultures tend to focus more on group performance than individual performance (Gabrenya *et al.*, 1985). In highly collectivistic cultures, team members are more willing to share team-based knowledge and information because they feel responsible for the group's well-being. Also, people are unlikely to address and acknowledge individual-based information in highly collectivistic cultures because an overemphasis on individual benefits can induce feelings of being separated from the group (Randolph and Sashkin, 2002). Highlighting individualism in highly collectivistic cultures is seen as alienation from the group and a potential threat to the solidarity and integration of group members. The fear of being marginalized in collectivistic cultures affects people's behaviors in groups. Group awareness in collectivistic cultures may reduce team members' actions counter to collective goals such as distorting information or manipulating knowledge for individual gains. Based on the above discussion, we propose:

P2. The relationship between team empowerment and knowledge sharing among team members is moderated by collectivism in such a way that the positive influence of team empowerment on knowledge sharing is increased in collectivistic cultures.

Team empowerment and intra-group conflict

Conflict can be broadly defined as a perceived incompatibility of interests or goals between or among parties (Jehn, 1995; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2008; Wall and Callister, 1995). Two dimensions of conflict are predominantly studied in the organizational literature: conflict rooted in the substance of the task and conflict derived from the emotional, affective aspects of the group's interpersonal relations (Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954). These conflict dimensions have been studied under different taxonomies, such as "substantive and affective conflict" (Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954), "task and relationship conflict" (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley and Northcraft, 1994) and "cognitive and affective conflict" (Amason, 1996). According to Jehn's (1997, 1995) studies on intra-group conflict, task or cognitive conflict refers to disagreements among team members regarding viewpoints, opinions and ideas, whereas relationship or affective conflict refers to disagreements among team members on personal or emotional issues.

Kotlyar and Karakowsky (2006) proposed that in empowered teams, both cognitive and affective conflict can rise to high levels if there is insufficient coaching or lack of invasive interventions by external leaders' in-group activities. Absent from ongoing support and guidance of an external leader, team members have to deal with high uncertainty in their procedural directions and thus tend to generate more conflict in their day-to-day interactions. Langfred (2000) found that individual autonomy can clash with group autonomy in an empowered team and reduce the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the team. His follow-up study (Langfred, 2007) suggests that empowered teams are particularly vulnerable to the detrimental effects of conflict because team members highly depend on intra-group trust when organizing their work and interacting with

each other. As high intra-group trust depends on the majority of team members being effectively engaged in leadership of the team (Bergman *et al.*, 2012), there is a possibility that individual team members differ in their perception of empowerment (Chen and Kanfer, 2006), and some members might fight to control power, which is detrimental to intra-group trust (Bergman *et al.*, 2012). Some members may also choose to restrict individual autonomy and interdependence as a response to conflict, thereby undermining intra-group trust. As intra-group trust declines, empowered teams are more vulnerable to the negative effects of conflict (Langfred, 2007).

As decision control is transferred from external sources to internal interactions in a highly empowered team (Manz *et al.*, 1987), supervisors and subordinates are subject to a challenging adjustment when they have to re-identify and re-differentiate their roles and responsibilities within and outside of the group (Appelbaum *et al.*, 1999; Stewart *et al.*, 2011). Solansky (2008) noted that the leadership process and the team process are closely linked. If more "heads" and "hands" attend to team's developmental and functioning needs, leadership functions can be shared by several members, allocated to individual members or rotated by different members in different times (Yukl, 1999). As leadership in a empowered team is a shared process involving mutual influence among members to perform tasks and take responsibilities (Ensley *et al.*, 2003; Katzenbach, 1997; Pearce *et al.*, 2014; Yukl, 1989), the absence or the reduced level of external leadership may create the need for a new regulatory system that can control and direct team members' behaviors toward task completion. This dynamic of supplanting vertical and hierarchical control may lead to an emergence of "concertive control" through horizontal and collaborative interactions among empowered team members (Barker, 1993). The concertive control system is a collective agreement formalized and implemented by team members to discipline their actions to enhance the quality of individual and group outputs. Concertive control can be even stronger and more rigid than bureaucratic control in constraining and rationalizing team members. To achieve concertive control, team members must reach a "negotiated consensus on how to shape their behavior according to a set of core values" (Barker, 1993, p. 411). Therefore, concertive control emerges from a process that integrates individual values and creates a new formal rationality. In a highly empowered team, team members must take collective responsibility to synthesize individual idiosyncrasies rather than depend on instructions and guidance from an external leader. This process tends to be a source of conflict due to emerging interpersonal incompatibilities in goals setting, job assignments, expectations and evaluations. Moreover, insufficient communication and misinterpretation of personal behaviors may also drive animosity and tension in highly empowered teams (Appelbaum *et al.*, 1999). The above discussion can be summarized as follows: team empowerment will foster increases in intra-group conflict.

Knowledge sharing and intra-group conflict

As discussed earlier, studies on intra-group conflict, task or cognitive conflict refer to disagreements among team members regarding viewpoints, opinions and ideas, whereas relationship or affective conflict refers to disagreements among team members on personal or emotional issues (Jehn, 1997, 1995). As work team members interact and begin to express their task-related ideas, they become aware of differences in their mental models (Johnson-Laird, 1983). Work team members then engage in a process of discovery eventually challenging each other's points of view. The process of challenging

each other's points of view involves arguments and counterarguments through which more knowledge is increasingly shared (Eisenhardt *et al.*, 1997; Forbes and Milliken, 1999; Janis, 1972; Mitchell *et al.*, 2011, Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 2005). As discussed previously, for decades, scholars have grappled with the consequences of conflict inside work teams, and findings are still inconclusive as to the performance consequences of intra-group conflict (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; de Wit *et al.*, 2012). However, regardless of the performance consequences of intra-group conflict, one aspect that comes across in the literature is that heterogeneous teams experience more conflict than homogeneous teams (Forbes and Milliken, 1999; Janis, 1972).

In a study of 98 teams, Mitchell *et al.* (2011) found evidence that interaction among group members with dissimilar preferences, diverse interpretations and different values was sufficient to trigger behaviors to challenge each other's opinions and justify alternative approaches. Forbes and Milliken (1999) found that management boards composed of members with diverse backgrounds engaged in more debate regarding goals, decisions, procedures and choices than homogeneous boards because diverse board members framed the issues differently and arrived at different conclusions about appropriate courses of action. In contrast, Janis (1972) found that lack of conflict was a major characteristic of homogeneous groups and a behavior he labeled "groupthink". The more knowledge team members have to share as a result of their different values, diverse experiences, different interpretations and dissimilar approaches, the more likely that cognitive conflict will arise. In an in-depth study of 12 management teams, Eisenhardt *et al.* (1997) found that the four top management teams that experienced the most conflict were also the most diverse in terms of their experiences, skills and beliefs. Finally, cognitive conflict also has been found to occur frequently in work groups with high diversity of functional backgrounds (Pelled *et al.*, 1999). The preceding empirical findings suggest that as diverse team members share their individual knowledge, different values, new ideas, diverse experiences, different interpretations and dissimilar approaches, cognitive conflict increases, and the more knowledge there is to share, the more likely that cognitive conflict will arise.

Previous researchers have suggested that cognitive and affective conflict can connect and integrate (Choi and Cho, 2011; De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Simons and Peterson, 2000). According to Galtung's (1996) triadic theory of conflict transformation, conflict is an emotionally created and driven process (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). A causal link between cognitive conflict and affective conflict involves the emotional animosity brought about by intense task-related disagreements. When individuals confront strong counter-arguments that challenge their values and attitudes (West, 1975), they tend to assume that the disagreement is a rejection of their competence (Tjosvold, 1992). Such challenges, if they occur repetitively, can create dissatisfaction or even hatred among the team members. Yang and Mossholder (2004) proposed that emotionality influences how individuals perceive and process cognitive conflict. Strong negative emotions can cause cognitive conflict to transform into affective conflict. According to affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), individuals' behaviors and attitudes in the workplace are influenced by their emotional reactions to work events (Yang and Mossholder, 2004). Jameson *et al.* (2010) suggested that the likelihood of lasting, satisfactory resolutions of conflict depends inversely on the intensity of the emotions experienced by the disputants. When cognitive conflict is misinterpreted as personal attack (Simons and Peterson, 2000), team members rely on their subjective emotional

experience and on their individual likes and dislikes rather than on fair and objective cognitive judgment when evaluating each other's arguments. Team members tend be more vulnerable to self-serving bias and other attribution errors (Greer *et al.*, 2008) and are unable to distinguish cognitive conflict from emotional conflict. The above discussion can be summarized as follows: knowledge sharing will foster intra-group conflict in work teams.

Intra-group conflict and team performance

Previous research has led to some controversy surrounding the effects of group conflict on team performance. In particular, evidence suggests partially constructive and overall destructive effects. In the early conflict literature, scholars found that low to moderate levels of cognitive conflict may lead to positive group outcomes because of its facilitating role in encouraging group members to see and think differently (Amason, 1996; De Dreu *et al.*, 1998; Jehn, 1995; Simons and Peterson, 2000). Affective conflict, on the other hand, has been generally viewed as being detrimental to team performance because group members are affected by interpersonal suspicion, mistrust and hostility that result in low group cohesiveness (Amason, 1996; Amason and Schweiger, 1994; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Rahim and Bonoma (1979) found that the effects of cognitive conflict on decision performance follow an inverted-U shape (the amount of cognitive conflict above and below a certain optimal level will decrease performance). They suggested that a moderate amount of conflict could be conducive to team performance. For example, newly formed teams are likely to undergo a period of conflict to establish structure, roles and purpose, and this conflict is likely to have a positive effect on team performance as long as the team works through this conflict and the conflict does not extend beyond the initial phases of team development (Tuckman, 1965). However, when conflict accumulates to a certain degree, it becomes eventually detrimental to team performance. The inverted-U shape may be the result of the relationship between the two types of conflict because cognitive conflict can transform into affective conflict over time (Amason, 1996; Appelbaum *et al.*, 1999; Mooney *et al.*, 2007; Simons and Peterson, 2000; Tidd *et al.*, 2004). Thus, its high association with affective conflict hinders the potential benefits of cognitive conflict. That is, an increase in cognitive conflict tends to escalate the level of affective conflict that in turn impairs team performance (Greer *et al.*, 2008; Rahim, 2002).

Most importantly, De Dreu and Weingart's (2003) meta-analysis on conflict and team performance reported that both cognitive and affective conflict negatively influence team performance. They argued that a small amount of conflict can stimulate information processing, but increased conflict will impede information processing and interfere with team performance. De Wit *et al.* (2012) found that intra-group conflict is negatively related to group performance. Jehn *et al.* (2008) examined the effects of cognitive and affective conflict on group outcomes and found that both are negatively associated with trust, respect and cohesion in teams and both decrease desired group outcomes. In a qualitative study of 57 autonomous teams, Behfar *et al.* (2008) suggested that highly autonomous teams can exhibit productivity decline and coordination problems because of ineffective resolution to cognitive and affective conflict. Shaw *et al.*'s (2010) cross-national study on conflict and team effectiveness suggests that affective conflict moderates the relationship between cognitive conflict and team effectiveness. Their analysis revealed an inverted-U-shaped curvilinear relationship

between cognitive conflict and team performance when affective conflict is low and a negative linear relationship when affective conflict is high. That is, the positive consequences of cognitive conflict on team performance are completely overcome when affective conflict is high. Their findings further indicated that high affective conflict not only cancels out the beneficial effect of cognitive conflict but also accelerates destructive conflict spirals that result in lower team performance. The preceding discussion leads to the following summary: intra-group conflict is negatively associated with team performance.

Team empowerment, power distance and intra-group conflict

As discussed before, a public violation of social norms and a person's self-image can cause loss of face. Kim and Nam (1998) suggested that losing one's face leads to one's experience of embarrassment or shame, resulting in negative consequences. Conflict in teams tends to arise as a negative consequence of emotional anti-social behaviors such as taking revenge, strong criticism and trying to find scapegoats. More succinctly, conflict is caused by loss of face or strong external attribution of failure (Kim and Nam, 1998). Extant literature indicates that face loss in high power distance cultures causes more frequent occurrence of negative behaviors and stronger external attribution of failure than in low power distance cultures (Oetzel *et al.*, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). We posit that the effects of these emotional anti-social behaviors on conflict can be magnified in high power distance cultures. In other words, conflict in high power distance societies is more strongly related to the negative emotional consequences of face loss than in lower power distance societies because people place a higher value on face preservation. Kim and Nam (1998) found that people's sensitivity about face-saving or concern about face increases as their social hierarchical status rises. Face loss may lead to high frequency and severity of negative consequences in a high power distance culture, as people possess large differences in social hierarchical status. Furthermore, respect for face is a way to secure social bonds. Conversely, face loss or disrespect for face is a reflection of broken social bonds (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). As in high power distance cultures, people place greater importance on face preservation than in low power distance cultures, broken social bonds are more likely to result in antisocial behaviors and arouse more intense affective conflict (Kim and Nam, 1998).

In addition, we argue that in high power distance societies, the absence of a formal leader leaves a greater power vacuum than in low power distance societies and that team members with higher organizational ranking or longer tenure would feel compelled to fill the vacuum and to resume the centralization of authority (Pearce and Conger, 2003). However, if lower-status members have bought into the idea of empowerment, they would resist, at least initially, the higher-status members' attempts to centralize authority. In these types of societies, the powerful team members would tend to use identity and relational shaming styles to prompt compliance from the less powerful members (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). This enforcement of compliance can cause personal embarrassment and result in mistrust and affective conflict within the group. The powerful team members may try to exert "control of the agenda" behavior to exclude opponents from the decision-making process (Walsh *et al.*, 1981). This intentional exclusion may appear to avert open conflict by silencing the opponents, but the dominance exerted over the opposing members can create resentment. Gehani and

Gehani (2007) suggested that the domination of one party over another breeds subsequent resentful reactions from the suppressed party and drives the escalation of intra-group conflict. Therefore, based on the preceding analysis we offer the following proposition:

P3. The relationship between team empowerment and the occurrence and severity of intra-group conflict is moderated by power distance in such a way that the positive influence of team empowerment on intra-group conflict is reinforced in high power distance cultures.

Team empowerment, collectivism and intra-group conflict

As discussed in the preceding section, early research on cross-cultural psychology and sociology addressed the importance of face in social interactions in highly collectivistic cultures (Gabrielidis *et al.*, 1997; Kim and Nam, 1998; Oetzel, 1998; Oetzel *et al.*, 2001). Kim and Nam (1998) proposed that collectivism is positively correlated with the concern for face. Earley (1997, p. 120) in his general model of organizational behavior across cultures suggested that face is the central concern of social interactions. He argued that face is exchanged and maintained through a regulatory process of harmony related to "people's expectations of others and reactions to various social interactions within an organization".

In highly collectivistic cultures, people value social relationships and emphasize interpersonal harmony (Gabrenya and Hwang, 1996). An individual's behavior that violates group harmony will result in his or her exclusion from the group. Such exclusion is an indicator of social rejection and induces an explicit loss of face to both the individual and the group (Leung and Bond, 2004). According to face-negotiation theory and subsequent research (Oetzel *et al.*, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998), individualistic and collectivistic cultural patterns influence the behavioral strategies that individuals select to protect their own face and to challenge or support the face of others. In highly collectivistic cultures, individuals have more concern for the face of others than in highly individualistic cultures and tend to favor the use of indirect and smooth face-preserving strategies in their communication with others. The use of other-oriented, face-preserving strategies in situations of potential conflict leads to avoiding, compromising and integrating behaviors as a means of maintaining interpersonal harmony (Kirkbride *et al.*, 1991; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). Thus, cultural values shape individual perceptions of the relative importance between the "I" (i.e. the self) and the "we" (i.e. the group).

Morris *et al.* (1998) found that collectivism accounts for differences in managers' conflict-management styles. Individuals in highly collectivistic cultures are highly interdependent and relationally connected. This interdependency is positively associated with high concern for the face of others. Open affective conflict, in highly collectivistic cultures, can result in mutual threat to the social images of both parties. Therefore, both parties tend to hide their negative feelings and choose to suspend interaction as a functional strategy to "cool down" when further interpersonal exchanges could intensify their conflict (Rispens *et al.*, 2007).

The wisdom of conflict avoidance, compromise and endurance is embedded in highly collectivistic cultures such as China and Japan (Leung *et al.*, 2002; Randolph and Sashkin, 2002), and it is consistent with recent research on conflict management. De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) argued that proactive interactions (i.e. collaborating and

contending) could escalate affective conflict. According to their work, conflict avoidance is the most effective response to resolve affective conflict. Conversely, open argument can stir up anger and hostility among team members (Jehn *et al.*, 2008).

For example, Tjosvold *et al.* (1998) found that Chinese managers tend to avoid conflict due to the relatively high value they place on conformity and tradition. In contrast, American managers tend to use competition to resolve conflict. Friedman *et al.* (2006) examined Chinese-American differences in conflict avoidance by looking at how people's expectations of others' responses motivate their conflict management approaches. Their findings show that Chinese are more vulnerable to the negative effects of direct competition as a way to resolve conflict on interpersonal relationships. Teams can also be subject to internal pressures to avoid overt and active conflict that can lead to a high level of perceived threat within a group and result in significant decreases in problem-solving effectiveness (Rempel and Fisher, 1997). For example, the phenomena of groupthink and the Abilene Paradox show how members of homogeneous teams, and of teams with a desire to preserve harmony or a desire to "make each other happy", can auto-coerce to avoid conflict and/or to avoid challenging agreement, and these pressures can lead to poor decision quality (Bernthal and Insko, 1993; Harvey, 1988; Janis, 1972; Mullen *et al.*, 1994; Rempel and Fisher, 1997). The Chinese tendency toward conflict avoidance can be explained by their greater concern for maintaining relationships with other parties. This tendency can be even stronger when Chinese confront other parties with higher social status.

Face-preserving styles of conflict management are also reported in studies of Western collectivistic cultures. For example, Gabrielidis *et al.* (1997) found that Mexican students have a higher concern for interdependency and interpersonal harmony than American students. Their findings indicate that Mexican students prefer to use accommodation and collaboration strategies to resolve conflict with the least animosity possible. The above discussion leads us to the following proposition:

P4. The relationship between team empowerment and the occurrence and severity of intra-group conflict is moderated by collectivism in such a way that the positive influence of team empowerment on intra-group conflict is diminished in collectivistic cultures.

Conclusion

The main contribution of this paper to the empowerment and conflict literature is in explicating the moderating roles of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between empowerment, knowledge sharing, intra-group conflict and team performance. Moreover, our paper proposes avenues for further research through empirical testing of the propositions offered herein.

Past studies have found that team empowerment enhances team performance through an increase in intra-group knowledge sharing. Team empowerment tends to promote an atmosphere of mutual support that encourages team members to exchange information and share knowledge with each other. However, team empowerment can also trigger intra-group conflict, which most extant research has found to be detrimental to team performance. In this paper, we argued that knowledge sharing within an empowered team in a high power distance society occurs less frequently than knowledge sharing within an empowered team in a low power distance society. In

addition, we argued that in high power distance cultures, teams tend to have more frequent and more severe intra-group conflict than teams in low power distance cultures. These two phenomena stem from an emphasis on face-concern, familiarity with power-inequity and a corresponding inclination to resume autocracy in high power distance cultures. Therefore, empowered teams in high power distance cultures are less likely to have higher team performance than empowered teams in low power distance cultures.

Further, we discussed how collectivism can promote knowledge sharing and inhibit intra-group conflict in empowered teams. In collectivistic cultures, there is a tendency to emphasize group interests over individual benefits. This tendency can foster extensive sharing of team-based knowledge; and due to face-concern and attention to group harmony, people in collectivistic cultures are inclined to avoid intra-group conflict. The combination of extensive knowledge sharing and conflict avoidance can enable empowered teams in highly collectivistic cultures to perform more effectively than empowered teams in low collectivistic cultures. It is worth noting that we do not imply that collectivistic national cultures are superior to individualistic cultures. In fact, collectivistic contexts that enforce significant conformity may actually interfere with performance. Rather, we suggest that organizations located in collectivistic or individualistic nations can encourage the development of constructive collectivistic values among team members. At the organizational level, these collectivistic values can be shaped and reinforced through learning mechanisms such as shared symbols, heroes and rituals (Hofstede and Hofstede, 1991). This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of conditions that can limit the influence of empowerment on team performance across cultures. As such, it sheds light on the implications for managers working in international settings. Notably, practitioners should be aware that team empowerment can lead to differences in team performance depending on the cultural context, i.e. similar empowering practices can lead to very different outcomes. The extent to which efforts to empower a team can promote group performance depends on how team members can maximize constructive factors and minimize destructive factors within their cultural contexts. In Table I, we offer a tentative conceptual framework representing extreme conditions that organizations can use as guidance to the most appropriate conditions that enhance the effect of empowerment on team performance.

Table I shows that the most favorable combination is low power distance and high collectivism. This combination encourages knowledge sharing while minimizing conflict because every member's power is relatively equal and every

Table I.
Typology of possible interactions of power distance and collectivism based on their effect on knowledge sharing (KS) and intra-group conflict (IGC) in work teams

	Power distance	
Collectivism	High	Low
High	Middle of the road: Medium KS Medium IGC	Productive discussions: High KS Low IGC
Low	Aimless arguments: Low KS High IGC	Middle of the road: Medium KS Medium IGC

member has high commitment to group outcomes. The least favorable combination is high power distance and low collectivism. In this combination, power is unevenly distributed and team members have low commitment to group outcomes. Everyone is looking for number one with the most powerful members outwardly dominating the least powerful members, and the least powerful members surreptitiously undermining the ambitions of the most powerful ones. This combination is likely to be characterized by arguments that do not lead to any productive outcomes either for the group's task or for the psychological well-being of the members. In the other two combinations, the negative effect of one cultural dimension would tend to neutralize the positive effect of the other cultural dimension, leading to mediocre results of empowerment. For researchers, the proposed framework offers opportunities to empirically test hypotheses that can be derived from Table I. For the practitioner, Table I offers suggestions that can help enhance the effect of team empowerment on team performance by promoting the development of a low power distance/high collectivism culture within the work team.

Limitations

Although this paper provides several contributions to the team and conflict literature, it has several limitations. First, this paper addresses some well-established variables and their relationships and explains how they may be affected by specific cultural values. However, the conceptual framework proposed in this paper needs empirical investigation. Future research could explicate the direction of causality and the specific mechanisms involved. Second, we did not include many studies on team training, which may limit our understanding of various factors related to knowledge sharing and conflict. For example, early research suggests that training in communication and conflict management skills is important for overcoming destructive conflict in teams (Edmondson and Nembhard, 2009; Jassawalla *et al.*, 2004). Cabrera and Cabrera (2002) argued that training programs could enhance intra-team knowledge sharing. Future research could shed light on the effect of training on the relationship between knowledge sharing and conflict management and resolution in different cultures. Third, the stage of team development might account for differences in conflict intensity. Tuckman (1965) proposed a forming-storming-norming-performing team development model that suggests that team members in the storming stage tend to be more susceptible to conflict than in the other stages. Finally, team diversity is known to affect team members' willingness to share knowledge and their treatment of intra-group conflict (Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007; Mannix and Neale, 2005; Nemeth, 1992). Our discussion does not address individual traits, such as age, gender, race, education and personal values and characteristics, which could be addressed in future studies. Another limitation is that group diversity of national culture values may also affect conflict resolution style and knowledge sharing (Boros *et al.*, 2010; Ford and Chan, 2003), which was not considered in this paper. A potential extension of the present research is to conduct a multilevel analysis of diversity of cultural values in groups or organizations (Harrison and Klein, 2007; Kozlowski and Klein, 2000). Altogether, these limitations suggest avenues for further theory development and research on the effects of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between team empowerment, knowledge sharing, intra-group conflict and team performance. Finally, a more comprehensive model might shed light on which cultural values have a greater impact on the links empowerment-

knowledge sharing-team performance and empowerment-conflict-team performance. Such an expanded model could help researchers understand the importance of studying the empowerment-team performance link in terms of cultural values.

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Further reading

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About the authors

Xueting Jiang is a doctoral candidate in the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His research interests include empowerment, leadership, teamwork and conflict management. He has presented his research at the Academy of Management. He has taught administrative theories, organizational behavior and international management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Xueting Jiang is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: xjiang@som.umass.edu

Hector R. Flores is an assistant professor in the Department of Management and Human Resources at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. His research interests relate to socio-political-cultural aspects of the strategy process. Dr Flores obtained his PhD in Strategic Management from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Ronrapee Leelawong, PhD, is a focused improvement specialist at the Siam Cement Group PCL (SCG), since 2011. His responsibilities include both at the holistic level, such as system developments (e.g. the development of SCG-own management platform), and the hands-on level, such as projects' improvements (e.g. cost and defects reduction). He received a doctoral degree in operations management from the Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA.

Charles C. Manz, PhD, is a speaker, consultant and bestselling author of over 200 articles and scholarly papers and more than 20 books. His work has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal, Fortune, US News & World Report, Success, Psychology Today, Fast Company* and several other prominent news publications. He is the Nirenberg Chaired Professor of Leadership in the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Formerly a Marvin Bower Fellow at the Harvard Business School, his clients have included 3M, Ford, Xerox, General Motors, P&G, American Express, the Mayo Clinic, Banc One, the US and Canadian Governments and many others.