Cultural Factors Affecting International Teamwork Dynamics

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Abstract: The globalization of markets and demographic changes in many countries has created a situation that some see as a problem, and others see as an opportunity: multinational teams working together to manage projects, create ideas, solve problems, make decisions, and more. This study explores cultural factors affecting international team dynamics and effectiveness. In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 individuals who held management or supervisory positions, worked on multinational teams, and spent time working abroad. Their companies represent a broad range of industries such as energy, telecommunications/technology, engineering, architecture, mass media, venture capital, food import/purchasing, and museum exhibition. Collectively, these individuals worked on teams in several dozen countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, North and South America, as well as Australia and New Zealand. The results explore a variety of cultural paradoxes and dialectics, complexities and differences which affect many aspects of collaborative work. The importance of relationship building, personal validations of "self" (identity), and ways power is manifested (including use of food) are discussed. Unfortunately, despite decades of learning about and experience with cultural diversity, international work groups continue to be plagued by ethnocentrism, prejudices, and stereotypes. Recommendations for improving international team culture dynamics are therefore offered.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Multinational Business Teams, Teamwork Dynamics

Purpose

The globalization of markets and demographic changes in many countries have created a situation that some see as a problem, and others see as an opportunity: multinational teams working together to manage projects, create ideas, solve problems, make decisions, and more. During the last 30 to 40 years of the 20th century, and continuing to the present, we have seen an explosion in the use of multinational teams, and the trend will continue as globalization increases. Changes in communications technology and the speed at which people can now be transported around the world allow people from diverse cultures to work together in ways never before possible. This situation has led many to treat multinational teams as a taken-for-granted aspect of modern society (Harris and Moran 1996). For example, "to ask if transnational teams exist is unnecessary; to understand their operating processes and structural conditions is of the utmost importance" (Earley and Mosakowski 2000, 46). The purpose of this study is to explore cultural factors affecting international team dynamics and effectiveness.

Review of Literature

Culture

Varner and Beamer (2005, 5) define culture as "the coherent, learned, shared view of a group of people about life's concerns that ranks what is important, furnishes attitudes about what things are appropriate, and dictates behavior." Stahl, Maznevski, Voight, and Jonsen (2010) frame culture as commonly held beliefs and value systems that define acceptable behaviors, guide meanings people attach to their experiences (Early 2006), and provide a source of identity. "The term *cultural identity* refers to an individual's sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life" (Jameson 2007, 207). Cultural identity is not always conscious. Sussman (2000) suggests that people become more aware of their own cultural identity during transitions into environments of divergent behaviors and thinking. On the other hand, "It is still more

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difficult to recognize the impact of culture on one's own values, attitudes, and behavior than it is to recognize it in others" (Jameson 2007, 200).

Sensemaking refers to placing stimuli into conceptual frameworks that enable people to "comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict" (Starbuck and Milliken 1988, 51). Gannon's (1994) research suggests that national culture explains between 25% and 50% of variation in attitudes. "When outsiders look at another culture, they inevitably interpret its institutions and customs using their own lenses and schemas; cultural myopia and lack of experience prevent them from seeing all the nuances of another culture" (Osland, Bird, Delano, and Jacob 2000, 67). Importantly, theorists reject the view of culture as primarily an external context. Rather, they "view culture as an internal state of mind that underlies and influences the process of communication" (Jameson 2007, 202).

Cultural Diversity in Organizations

> Corporate culture conveys institutional norms of behaviors with which employees, whatever their nationality, are supposed to comply…Corporate culture may contribute to cross-cultural effectiveness since its rituals provide a sense of security which substitutes to the stress stemming from the encounter with unknown 'others.' It also provides a shared frame for international work including appropriate behaviors in various situations. These behavioral norms are supposed to replace national habits and to allow pragmatic adjustment…[however] Hofstede's research…shows that national cultures do not dissolve even in a strong organizational culture (Chevrier 2003, 147).

Organizational diversity can be considered as a mixture of people with different group identities working in the same social system (Fleury 1999). Discriminating factors between groups include race, geographic origin, ethnicity, gender, age, functional or educational background, physical and cognitive capability, language, lifestyles, beliefs, cultural background, economic category, and tenure with the organization (Seyman 2006). These differences affect people's sense of self-identity, ways of perceiving each other, management styles, attitudes, manners, and communication styles. Some consider cultural diversity as an advantage and source of power; others evaluate it as a problem and a difficult issue to manage (Higgs 1996). Numerous studies report conflicting diversity results: some find beneficial results such as increased creativity, productivity and quality, with other studies finding detrimental outcomes such as process losses, increased conflict, decreased social integration, and barriers to decision-making and change processes. Thus diversity has been referred to as a "double-edged sword" (Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks 2008, 118).

Previous research on the role and effects of cultural diversity in teams is equivocal, being mediated by specific team processes and moderated by numerous contextual variables (Stahl, Maznevski, Voight, and Jonsen 2010). In a meta-analysis of 108 empirical studies on processes and performance of multicultural teams, Stahl et al concluded that more diverse teams suffered from increased conflict, but gained increased creativity. Contrary to hypotheses, team diversity did not result in less effective communication, and diverse teams had higher levels of satisfaction than homogeneous groups. However, they also noted the importance of moderating variables such as team size, team dispersion, team tenure, and task complexity. "Based on the results of a series of meta-analyses, we conclude that cultural diversity in teams can be both an asset and a liability…Future research endeavors should focus on the mechanisms through which cultural diversity affects team dynamics and performance, and on the conditions that help or hinder effective team performance" (Stahl, Maznevski, Voight, and Jonsen 2010, 705).

Some variables that may be critical in determining whether cultural synergy will emerge are: planning, consideration of other problem-solving viewpoints, how the work should be organized, accountability, timing and sequencing of teamwork, degree of formality or informality of the group, management of responsibilities, motivation and reward systems, power differences,

prestige and status, risk-taking, tolerance of uncertainty, existence and methods of evaluation, and role clarification. Different cultures vary widely on these variables (Harris and Moran 1996; Smith 1999). For example, Boroş, Meslec, Curşeu, and Emons (2010) found that conflict management styles differed among groups with different cultural values such as individualism versus collectivism. Smith (1999) reports that cultural groups have different perceptions of the purpose of meetings, conflict management styles, perceptions of time, and reliance on authority.
Seyman's (2006) literary review of cultural diversity states that while cultural differences have become central to cross-national management research, no consensus has been reached on how to manage cultural diversity. In addition to cultural misunderstandings, we must take into account the intentions of individuals and groups in the social organization of relationships. An ethnography of Danish expatriates in a Saudi subsidiary found that "Intercultural dialogues and knowledge sharing were perceived as slowing down decision making, as the understanding of cultural differences was perceived as unnecessarily complicating the path to action" (Lauring 2011, 247). Three main themes emerged as barriers to intercultural organizational communication. First, *intergroup differences* created communication problems and differences in perceptions of positions and responsibilities. For example, Danish managers saw members of other nationalities as needing a firm management style due to inherent norms and values within their cultures. Second, managers created an *organization* (structure) that fostered segregation and discrimination resulting in "communicative enclaves" enforced by the social organization. This was enacted through the third theme, *power relations,* by use of one-way communication which created an unfriendly atmosphere: workers acting in quiet opposition fostering more contempt and distrust among managers, resulting in withholding of information by speaking only Danish, and ultimately direct video surveillance of the production areas and workers' home quarters. Such behavior is clearly related to the concept of ethnocentrism which can "lead groups and individuals to make false assumptions about cultural difference and misjudge other people" (Lauring 2011, 248). Ethnocentrism is characterized by a tendency to judge people from other cultures by standards from our own cultural background, including a bias that causes people to negatively evaluate behaviors divergent from their own culture's norms (Brislin 1990; Gudykunst 1991). Highly ethnocentric individuals see their own cultural groups as "virtuous and superior," and its ingroup values as universal, therefore applying to everyone (Thomas 1996, 218).

Massey and Levitt (2000) found little evidence of international team synergy and no clear examples of increased team effectiveness by sharing perceptions, insights, and knowledge as suggested by Harris and Moran (1996). Rather than using the diversity and talents of each team member, there was more evidence that members of each country adapted tactical practices that would enable them to work around and through the cultural differences to achieve *their own* objectives, or at least a compromise.

Despite irritations with others' behaviors which do not conform to their expectations (e.g. being unprepared for meetings, arriving late) members control themselves to avoid conflicts. "Cross-cultural teams could not be effective without special personal qualities of their members, namely "*openness," "patience," "self-control"* (Chevrier 2003, 146). In some cases frequent intercultural interactions reinforce negative stereotypes and polarization. Members will then often do their best to struggle against prejudices, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism. This involves "making sense of contradictory behavior – understanding why certain values are more important in certain contexts" (Osland, Bird, Delano, and Jacob 2000, 73). Intercultural effectiveness therefore requires a structural examination and deep understanding of contexts of meaning from team members.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What cultural factors affect international team dynamics and effectiveness?
A. What are some important issues or factors that are most frustrating or most hindering to group processes and successful outcomes?
B. What are some important issues or factors that are most successful or helpful group processes and successful outcomes?
Research Question 2: What other factors might mediate or contribute to effectiveness of international teams?

Methods

While previous studies have identified some cultural factors affecting international and multicultural team performance, such information will be used only to help interpret the final results. According to Ting-Toomey (2010), ethnographic/interpretive researchers (i.e. those working from grounded theory perspective) prefer to operate with a clean slate – meaning no a priori assumptions are made. This is in contrast to a more social scientific use of existing frameworks for testing hypotheses.

Subjects

In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 individuals (19 males, 8 females) representing a broad range of industries, including energy, telecommunications/technology, software development, plastics, general contracting, environmental engineering, architecture, mass media, environmental solutions, venture capital, global food sourcing and import, global branding, and museum exhibition. Collectively, these individuals worked on teams in several dozen countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, North and South America, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Subjects were recruited using a "snowball" sampling (referral) method. In order to qualify, individuals met three criteria: 1) they held management or supervisory positions; 2) they worked on teams with members from different countries; and 3) they spent part of their work time abroad. One exception was made for a staff member who knew intimate details of projects due to processing of all contracts and continual close contact with engineers in the firm who work abroad, as well as extensive phone and email contact with foreign partner organizations.
An interview guide (see appendix) contained general questions about team characteristics, followed by questions about important issues or factors that subjects found most frustrating or most hindering to their group processes and successful outcomes, as well as factors they found most successful or helpful. Interviews were conducted face to face, by telephone, and by Skype desktop video conference. Interviews were tape recorded when possible and transcribed. Otherwise, extensive notes approximating near verbatim responses were taken during the interviews.

Analysis of Data

The interviews resulted in more than 120 pages of transcripts and notes. A grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was used which calls for a continual cycle between data collection and analysis. The data analysis was done in an iterative fashion: initially manually open-coding the transcripts and notes into major themes and categories, subsequently returning to the literature and then data repeatedly to refine the categories and help with interpretation. Three criteria were used to identify initial themes: 1) recurrence between participants, 2) repetition by the same participant, and 3) forcefulness or emphasis (Keyton 2011).

Results

Disclaimer: Examples from specific countries and cultures are presented and reflect the verbatim narratives and opinions of the respondents. No claim is made that these examples are representative of all members of those countries/cultures, nor that such representations are culturally accurate – only that they illustrate cultural factors that are present in and affect these international teamwork dynamics.

Many of the findings centered on a tension between building and managing relationships within the context of individuals' need for validation of self-identity, including face-saving behaviors. "Identity negotiation theory" involves "a transactional interaction whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images" (Ting-Toomey 2005, 217).

Relationship: "So, did we wake up together?"

According to one respondent, "This implies 'hey, slow down, we have not gotten to know each other yet.' If you are obviously American, they [Latin Americans] assume you'll be wanting to jump right into business." Another respondent suggested that "business relationships are the *result* of personal relationships" – spending a couple of hours over lunch "not talking about it" and also getting to know people's family members' names and inquiring about their well-being. A third respondent agreed, suggesting "In Asia and Latin America it takes several months of meeting family and developing trust, *then* we got to the deal. You must be patient." Yet another respondent said "We admire some of the ways that you guys in the States do business. But all this stuff that's related to relationship? You guys just blow by it and therefore you are lewd, you're aggressive, you're assertive, you're insistent on your own way." Finally, "The biggest trap there [China] is relationship building. A contract is no more than a document reflecting a relationship between two parties. It allows them to move ahead with the understanding that all things change, and that allows those two parties to address those changes. Nothing is fixed. A fixed contract is not a contract." The keys to developing relationships are *patience, perseverance, and focus on people*.

Validations of "Self" Identity: "They're very, very proud."

Personal Identity

Much of personal relationship development depends on validating people's individual and cultural identity. *Affirming* another's cultural identity enhances motivation for intergroup-interpersonal relationships to develop and flourish. An example of a U.S. team member's perception using his own cultural schema serves to illustrate how ethnocentrism can reduce validation of others' self-identities:

> In Libya, it was very important for the Libyans to show us what was going on. Take the road from Tripoli to Misrata, and there's one road in and out. And it's kind of a beach road…it's beautiful water with palm trees like the Italian Mediterranean. The same blue. You've got sand, you've got palm trees. And we said 'wow, you've got to put up some hotels, and a casino, you know, somewhat similar to what Bahrain has done. You guys could really revitalize this area with tourism and putting up certain kinds of businesses, you know, all Libyan owned businesses. It would be very good for everybody, right?' And his problem was 'no, we don't want to do that. We like people to come to Libya and see how we live as Libyans. You guys should experience *our* culture. The point is not for you guys to come and experience what you experience at home. The point is for you guys to come and experience us.'

Other instances where lack of validations of cultural identity were apparent included one respondent's opinion that Canadians seem to hold some "animosity toward being a 'little America.' Canadians are frustrated with having to adopt daylight savings time to stay in sync with us. They give 'zings' to 'big brother America' such as referring to a 'North American Express Card." In another example from a different respondent, "Spain is a very diverse country – different languages and cultural groups who feel 'independent.' I had friends in the Basque country who don't like to be identified as Spanish. They prefer to be labeled as from the Basque country. It was the same with Northwest Galicia where they speak Gallego."

"Home" and "Satellite" office tensions were also apparent in some narratives. "The harder part is the 'soft' part of management." One respondent related that "It has become harder over time to make global teams work…[remote locations] see the U.S. as trying to control and govern." She says there is a need for "much more time-consuming and costly site visits to develop relationships. There is a need for more one-on-one conversations rather than group meetings." On the other hand, another respondent said "strong organizational cultures and values can help bridge the gap between cultures and languages" to facilitate team integration. A third said "The international office does not feel like they're part of the U.S. office – a satellite office nobody cares about [*self-validation*]. Make sure they're included. Maybe spend more money to fly in or have some come to the U.S. for a year to acculturate. Communicate to them that *integration* with the parent U.S. office is an important part of the future, and here's why it's more than the revenue they generate." In another organization a foreign office location has consistently scored below the U.S. locations on an employee engagement measure, but has accepted the difference because "there is already some country competition and I don't want to make an issue out of it." The narratives suggest that investment in *inclusion and integration* seems to be the key to successfully managing remote office locations.

Saving face: "You know, why can't you just be honest?"

Many frustrations and misunderstandings result from the high-context use of language where a very indirect language style is used with individuals from more low-context, direct language style cultures. People from many cultures, including examples in narratives regarding Mexico, Latin and South America, and Asia, will avoid conflict and/or communicating what they feel may insult another by saying "no." According to one respondent:

> Let's say you're in a manufacturing plant and you say "this needs to be fixed. You've got to fix this." Say a valve's installed incorrectly. And you say "my job is to do this. Please go fix it." And then they say "yes, yes, yes, of course." They're going to say "yes, of course" regardless of whether they understand what we told them to do. When they tell you that they're not wanting to tell you no. Or they're not wanting to tell you 'I don't understand.' Because that would be somewhat rude in their opinion to tell them because at that point you didn't communicate clearly... And so you can go away and get very angry because you come back a week later and it's still not done.

Other example narratives illustrate perspective – how these cultural groups are viewed by members of another culture. "Australians are direct, 'whine in your face.' In Kuala Lampur [Malaysia] they won't tell you to your face. Thus it is difficult to identify issues/problems." "Mexicans don't like to say no. They are very non-confrontational. There are exceptions with people who have a lot of experience with the U.S." "They [Mexicans] avoid confrontation at all costs. And they will never tell you no. That's not in their vocabulary. They will do anything and everything they can to try to agree with you. Whether they do or not they'll tell you that "Yeah, yeah, great. I agree. That sounds good. We'll work on it. And they have absolutely no intention of doing it." Another example: "[In China] they will promise more than they can deliver. To say you can't do something is a sign of weakness."

Finally, one respondent talked of the importance of saving face in Korea. "If they make a proposal and we want to change it, you have to help them put a spin on it before they go back to a superior for approval to ensure it does not look like someone made a mistake. For example, we needed to change a volume order, so we adjusted the price downward a bit to give him 'good news' to take back to his supervisor, an incentive to go back to the supervisor. You need to appreciate what he has to go through with his boss. This builds mutual respect and relationship for the future."

These face saving behaviors are similar to what Massey and Levitt (2000) found. Mexicans responded to the perceived arrogance of the U.S. members and occasions of perceived condescending attitudes by not responding or cooperating until such time as a decision was acknowledged as a Mexican idea, helping to save face and maintain national pride. Moreover, U.S. team members would "plant ideas with executives of the Mexican team during social situations in order to have them 'pushed back down' with approval for subordinates to agree with during meetings and as a way for it to be perceived as a Mexican initiative" (Massey and Levitt 2000, 20).

Individualism-collectivism: "How do people value you?"

The narratives also revealed instances where people's self-validation was grounded more in valuing the *group* one belonged to rather than themselves as individuals, consistent with Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension of collectivism. It was important for managers to understand this difference while reviewing potential employees during hiring and recognizing them during performance evaluations. For example, "you have to be careful. In Malaysia, Thailand, [and] Hong Kong they don't like public or individual recognition. They consider themselves more part of the team." Another respondent explained

> How do people value you? In China it's much more important to have the goal of the family or the goal of the company, the goal of the community higher than here where it's the goal of the individual. And so I remember when I was reading resumes you could see the same cultural manifestations. How do you talk about what you do? Do you go and tell your boss **I** did this, **I** did this, **I** did this. In China that might sound very selfish, where here it sounds like, 'well, you did a good job.' In China you might see a different manifestation where 'we did this, and the team did this, and we were able to come up with this solution.' It's just a different way of discussing it.

Power Distance: "He gets more honest answers, I think."

"A person's professional field may confer power and privilege…Even affiliation within an employing organization may confer power and privilege" (Jameson 2007, 221). Numerous narratives refer to how hierarchy and formal titles confer status, impact self-validation, and management behaviors. One respondent believes "Asia is big on titles and hierarchies." For example, another respondent related that

> In China, regardless of who you are, if you've got 'Chief Operating Officer' on your card you get X amount more clout. More respect…. for one guy, we printed out fake business cards. So he goes over there, and [he does not use] his actual title. He has different business cards he hands out when he's abroad. Titles to us are relatively meaningless, at least in this organization. So if he has 'Vice President' instead of 'Technician' then 'Oh, ok. We'll take care of your needs since you are a vice president. You're so far above me on your hierarchy I should do what you want me to do.' And so because of that he gets more honest answers, I think.

Several other respondents related their experiences with business hierarchies. One said "Germany has regimental hierarchies, centralized like Russia, Asia. They won't make decisions on their own. They would also wait for the U.S. higher-ups before acting. In Mexico, Argentina, and Australia they would make decisions and ask forgiveness later." A second respondent related that "For an Indian manager to ask for a subordinate's opinion is seen as weakness. Thus there is not much interaction between levels." Similarly, another manager suggested "India requires more outward show of respect for elders. They talk first. You speak more when spoken to. The U.S. is a very horizontal workspace. People are treated more equally, they are more proactive, ask more questions of the boss, initiate more conversations, and are expected and encouraged to participate in meetings even when you are young. In Asia you listen more." A final respondent said "Hierarchy in France is very intense. Who you know is very important. You can see who the boss is just by how they walk around…you see it, you feel it."

Food as High Context Symbolic Communication

It is well known that actions often speak louder than words. As noted above, failure to say no as a face-saving behavior is an indirect, high-context form of communication where subtle vocal and non-verbal cues are needed to correctly interpret meaning. This is opposed to a more direct, low context communication style more typical of U.S. and other Western cultures. Interestingly, the use of food as symbolic communication was prominent in numerous narratives. For example, one respondent did not realize a deal she was trying to finalize in China had "gone sour" until she was served raw sea urchin, raw crab, and dog meat at a banquet. "In Asia they tell you verbally what you want to hear: 'yes, yes, yes, etc. But *where they take you and what they feed you says more*…If Chinese people serve you dog, you know they're not happy! They take you out of your comfort zone when things are not going well…no rookie food." The behavior was apparently a result of perceived arrogance of the U.S. team. She said the Chinese were "overwhelmingly trying to put them in their place." In another example, a respondent felt he was being put through an exhausting three day test of the team's will to work with the Chinese as they kept postponing business discussions while serving them dog, cat, and insects for lunches. Another respondent was served "drunken shrimp" which were still alive.

On the other hand, several respondents suggested that they knew the relationship was going well when the natives from the country took them to their favorite local places instead of the typical tourist locations. "If you find they've taken you to a place where they often take customers, you're not special." Another said "Bringing [you] to their house is the ultimate honor." In one case after a long day of production plant tours in the Himalayan region of India, the very wealthy owner of the Indian company invited a U.S. team to his home instead of taking them out to dinner at an expensive restaurant to "wine and dine" them as is typical. His wife served them egg salad sandwiches from her fresh eggs and homemade bread. This "sense of pride communicated he was happy, and business was going great." Otherwise he would have taken them to a restaurant. "You must pay attention to what this means."

Ethnocentrism: "A lot has changed, but nothing has changed."

Unfortunately, despite decades of learning about and experience with cultural diversity, international work groups continue to be plagued by ethnocentrism, prejudices, and stereotypes. Many previously related narratives, such as use of food to communicate displeasure, illustrate attempts to validate self-identity and assert autonomy or power in order to counter such ethnocentric behaviors. Other narratives were more direct in terms of prejudice. For example, one respondent characterized U.S. generational differences as "Warm" versus "Cold" cultures. In his experience, older managers tend to take the "World War II business manager approach. The American way is best. Like it or quit."

Other examples suggest that "[Unlike Mexicans] South Americans have a sense of European background superiority." Another respondent agreed about this "European" elitism when discussing differences between Mexicans and South Americans. He recounted a meeting in Buenos Aires with Mexicans, Latin Americans, [and] South Americans. "[The company] did not realize the innate tensions and discord between countries such as the Mexicans and Argentineans. The Argentineans consider themselves more 'European.'" So they had to have separate meetings for the Argentinians instead of throwing them in a "South American bucket" in order to honor them and their way of doing things. Finally, a French-Canadian businessman insisted there was a strong prejudice against "French" people – seeing them as "less rigorous" and "more lazy" than English-speaking Canadians. According to him, this "form of racism" was not overtly discussed, but for example, people from Toronto will "look down" on French Canadians from Montreal.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In considering important issues or factors that are most frustrating or most hindering to group processes and successful outcomes, this study found that 1) failing to account for the need to develop personal relationships, and 2) failing to validate others' self-identities were key factors hindering effective teamwork. In addition, more subtle, high-context, indirect styles of communication used by people from various cultures created frustrations for individuals from the U.S. who use more low-context, direct styles of communication. Other factors affecting teamwork effectiveness included face saving behaviors, differences in individualist and collectivist values, and differences in tolerance of power equality/inequality. Unfortunately, these interview narratives seem to indicate that cultural differences created more frustrations and barriers to effective teamwork than benefits. Ethnocentrism seems to continually plague intercultural relationships and creates barriers to effective international teamwork satisfaction.
Therefore, "one should prepare for intercultural relationships by first evaluating one's own culture and learning and analyzing it…in doing this, privilege would be revealed and previous accounts of ethnocentrism would be uncovered" (Thomas 1996, 225). As stated earlier, affirming another's cultural identity enhances motivation for intergroup-interpersonal relationships to develop and flourish (Ting-Toomey 2005). For example, one respondent said "You can't come in with the attitude 'I'm from America and I'm here to help.' That never works." Another said "Don't do anything that even challenges their sovereignty as a nation because they will inflame in a heartbeat if they perceive that you're condescending to them." A third respondent said "We have to adapt to them. Nobody will bend over backwards for us. We get more out of them if we're culturally sensitive." According to another respondent, we should "do less talking, be yourself. Don't try too hard. It is a sign of weakness. People can tell when you're using the Harvard Business School script." She continued with "what's called multitasking today is what was not paying attention in the 1970's. A little less of us in each thing we do. We need to focus on one thing at a time. Americans are poor listeners because we're so distracted."

Chevrier (2003) presents a "structured examination of cultural contexts of interpretation" where team members or a cultural mediator invites participants to think of problematic situations they have encountered. An inventory of critical incidents is turned into a category scheme: a classification of similar problems. Each member is invited to give interpretation of the situation. For example, why did they act that way? What was the meaning of the move, what factors were involved in feeling it was right? From these answers one may deduce the interpretation systems in use (values, etc.). Then members can discuss possible collective practices deemed acceptable, even if for different reasons.

As an example of such reflective analysis from the interview narratives, a U.S. manager was discussing a performance evaluation with an employee in New Zealand whose performance needed improvement. Midway through as he was indicating further action would be taken if the employee's performance did not improve, the employee suddenly said "Oh, it's 4:30, time to

go." He proceeded to get up and quickly leave the building. Being new to the culture, the manager was affronted by what he considered rude and insubordinate behavior. His first inclination was to go to Human Resources and take the next [punitive] step to get the employee's attention. Instead, he said to himself "Something weird just happened and I need to not react but do some fact checking first." The manager subsequently learned that people from New Zealand have a very strong life/work balance, much stronger than in the U.S. Therefore it is not expected that employees will remain at work once their "shift" is over. The Human Relations Director was not surprised at the employee's hasty departure, explaining that he takes the bus to work and leaves at 4:30 to catch his ride. This understanding of work-life balance value helped he U.S. manager more appropriately interpret the meaning of the hasty departure within the cultural context.

Another example from the interview narratives also relates to reflective examination of one's own cultural perspectives. A respondent stated "Nobody works as hard as Americans. Maybe we're just stupid." Yet this is a very myopic interpretation of a contextually-bound perception. For instance, another respondent recounted how his team did not take a day off for two months, working 12 hours a day on a joint U.S.-Libyan project. As a result, the U.S. team was far ahead of their Libyan counterparts who worked 8:00 – 3:00 every day and took Fridays off. "So there was a certain amount of frustration, at least from us, that people [Libyans] were being lazy. And whether or not they were being lazy or we were just *going after two different goals*; [ours] being the project goal and getting home. And the Libyan guys, you know, 'we just want to make sure this happens generally speaking on time.'"

Thus, people in international teamwork contexts must be able to "hold two polarized value systems and be at ease with the *dynamic tensions* that exist" (Ting-Toomey 2005, 230, emphasis added). For example, some German members of an international team said they would "not put up with other Germans coming to meetings unprepared but they accepted it from their French colleagues. Despite their irritation, they control themselves to avoid conflicts" (Chevrier 2003, 145-146).

In summary, those working in international contexts must be sensitive to their own ethnocentric tendencies by examining their own cultural values and their impacts on self-identity, in order to better appreciate and affirm *others'* cultural identities. Attending to patient relationship building with more emphasis on the *people as keys to the business goals* seems to enhance affirming others' self-identity. A focus on relationship can also lead to a more purposeful and thoughtful examination of cultural contexts important for effective interpretation and mutual understanding of behavioral meaning which occur as *high-context* symbolic interactions. Finally, international teamwork will always demand accepting polarized value systems and thus dynamic *dialectic* tensions that exist between members with diverse cultural values and practices. Dialectics represent simultaneous contradictory truths (both/and) which are contrasted with dichotomous (either/or) thinking (Baxter 2004; Alberts, Nakayama, and Martin 2007). Such dialectics appear contradictory yet can be compatible if managed and balanced constructively by affirming self-identities of others.

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Appendix: Interview Script

1. Please describe the characteristics of your team in terms of:
    a. Number of members
    b. Cultural diversity
    c. Length of time working together
    d. Dispersion → where are team members located?
    e. Goals and objectives → what are the group's expected or desired outcomes?
    f. Typical communication methods (e.g. face to face, electronic, etc.)
    g. Tasks → please describe some typical tasks the members engage in to achieve outcomes
    h. Any other characteristics or background information you think it might be important for me to know in order to understand your team's dynamics

2. Please describe some important issues or factors that you find most frustrating or most hindering to your group processes and successful outcomes.
    a. Possible probing questions:
        i. How are group decisions made?
        ii. How equitable or participatory are group members' inputs? In other words, do all team members participate equally in group discussions? If not, please explain.
        iii. What kinds of conflicts are experienced, and how are they managed?

3. Please describe some important issues or factors you find most successful or helpful in your team's processes.
    a. What have you personally found most rewarding about working with this team?

4. What methods does your company use to measure employee engagement and/or satisfaction?

5. In your opinion, what changes to your group or organization could be made to improve processes and outcomes?

6. Is there anything else I should know to understand the *cultural* dynamics of your team that help or hinder its performance?

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