

USING PSYCHOLOGICAL ADVANCES IN SELF CONSTRUAL TO TAP INTO BUSINESS STUDENTS' GROUP LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Jun R. Myers, College of Business Administration, California State Polytechnic University, 3801 W. Temple Ave., Pomona, CA 91678, 909-869-2384, jrmyers@csupomona.edu

ABSTRACT

In order to better understand business students' group work experience, this study employed recent development in psychology on self construal in tapping into students' attitudes and experiences with group projects. This study involved 155 undergraduate marketing students at a large Western university the United States. Both qualitative questions and quantitative questions were used to examine the factors that affect students' attitudes toward working with their peers on group projects. ANOVA and multiple regression analyses were used in analyzing the data. Results showed that students' gender, self construal, and past group experiences were better predictors than traditional demographic factors in determining students' attitudes and preferences toward group based learning tasks.

INTRODUCTION

The use of group projects or team based learning tasks has been encouraged in most business programs in American universities (Ashraf, 2004). Based on cooperative learning principles, these group or team based projects require students to work together in small groups on one or more structured learning tasks, such as developing a business plan, or solving a case based problem for an organization. One of the important goals of these learning tasks is to develop students' ability to work in groups to solve problems or complete tasks, as these skills are often required at the workplace after students graduate from college. More recently business educators argue that group work is more than a teaching method, it is also a skill to be taught (Kelly, 2009). However, as increasingly diverse backgrounds and characteristics are brought into classrooms, group based tasks are not always positively received by students. A variety of attitudes (both positive and negative) toward these group based projects exist among business students. Thus how to effectively allocate groups and enhance students' group learning experiences becomes a pedagogical challenge for instructors.

The management education literature has demonstrated that a number of factors, such as gender, age, and family background, ethnicity, nationality, can greatly influence the productivity and learning experience of group members. In this study, the author focused on exploring several of key influencing factors and their impact on students' preference to work in groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the antecedents of students' general attitudes toward group based learning tasks. In particular, the author borrowed recent advances in social psychology and applied the construct and the measurement of self construal (i.e. independent and interdependent self views) (Singelis, 1994) in order to understand the influences of individual's chronic self-construals, along with students' past personal experiences with group projects, and students' gender and ethnic and cultural affiliations, on their preferences to engage in group work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Group based projects have been widely used in various disciplines in American business schools. These business disciplines include marketing, management, human resource, information management, etc. Group project based learning experience has also been widely studied in the business education

literature. Among these studies, students' gender and cultural background seemed to be considered the dominant influencing factors on students' attitudes toward group work and their experiences in the group based learning tasks. However, a review of the literature suggests that the influences of gender can be both positive and negative on individual student's learning experiences. Nonetheless, there is not much empirical evidence in the literature to clearly predict gender's roles on students' general preference to working in groups. Regarding cultural background, even though it is widely acknowledged that culture matters, and affects students communication and other behaviors when working with their peers in a group, there is not much empirically driven evidence that the variations on students' nationality and ethnic background significantly affect students' preference to work in groups. In the following sections, we review some important studies in those areas in the current business education literature, and propose research questions for further exploration.

Gender

Gender role tendencies seem to serve as a double edged sword for women. Even though females have been conceptualized as more focusing on others and group harmony, they might not have positive group experience out of stereotypical communication patterns in groups that dominated their male peers. In order to further clarify the gender role issue in the context of group project, we propose to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference between male and female in students' preferences to work in groups?

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between male and female students' past group experiences and their preferences to work in groups?

Cultural Background

Traditional cultural indicators such as nationality, or race and ethnicity, seem to be short in serving as reliable indicators of individual students' personal attitudes and preferences towards working in groups. For example, Hofstede's five-dimensional model of culture has been widely acknowledged as a useful applied framework of national characteristics (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). For example, individualism and collectivism is one of the five dimensions and probably the most widely used dimension in this framework. Individualists give priority to personal goals over the goals of collectivists; collectivists either make no distinctions between personal and collective goals, or if they do make such distinctions, they subordinate their personal goals to the collective goals (Triandis et al., 1988).

Even though Hofstede's framework and the specific scores for countries have been applied across business disciplines, many scholars have criticized the inappropriate use of this framework for individual-level analysis. With the advances of social psychology, a personality-based approach to individual development of their fundamental views of self and others – self-construal offers a distinct advantage of mapping the self orientations of individuals with different cultural background and acculturation experiences (Mooradian and Swan, 2006).

RQ3: Is there a significant statistical relationship between students' ethnicity and their preference to work in groups?

RQ4: Is there a significant relationship between students' nationality, and self reported cultural identification and their preference to work in groups?

Self-Construal as an Individual Based Psychological Construct

In order to tap into the cultural variations at the individual level, recent advances in social psychology have provided an individual based construct – self-construal, which was conceptualized as people’s self views in their perception of the self and the group the self belong to. According to the current social psychology literature on self-construal, this construct consists of a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one’s relationship to others, and the self as distinct from others. It is a person’s view of self and structure of self-schema (Cross, Morris, and Gore 2002; Singelis, 1994; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Even though this construct has not been applied in business education topics, it may provide an individual level instrument to assess students’ individual views of self and others in a group work setting.

Singelis’ (1994) 24 item questionnaire to measure chronic self-construal has become popular in recent years in consumer and marketing research (e.g., Jain, 2007, Agrawal, Nidhi and Maheswaran, 2005). In management education, this scale has not been widely used in accessing and predicting students’ preference and attitude toward working in groups. To use this individual based psychological construct in examining the influences of students’ cultural background on their attitudes and perceptions of group projects, we propose to investigate the following research question:

RQ5: Is there a significant relationship between students’ interdependent and independent self construals and their preferences to work in groups?

METHODOLOGY

Sample Characteristics

A total of one hundred and fifty five undergraduate business students participated in this study. Among them, 49.7% were males, and 50.3% were females. Participating students’ median age was 22 (Min= 19, Max = 33, SD= 2.44). Participants on average had stayed in college for 4 years (SD=1.25), the minimum college experience was 2 years, and the maximum was 10 years. Among the participants, 70.9% were American students, 29.1% held other nationalities. Participants’ median time spent in the US was 21 years (Min.=2, Max = 29, SD=6.58). Students’ median GPA was 3.0 (Min=2, Max=3.90, SD=.41).

We probed further on students’ race and ethnicity, and found that the biggest sub-group in the sample was “Asian” (44.9%), followed by “Hispanic Latino White” (16.5%) and “Non Hispanic/Latino White” (15.8%), and then “non-White Hispanic/Latino” (6.3%), and “Black or African American” (2.5%), and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” (1.9%), and “ others” (8.9%). The composition of students in this study was considered diverse.

Variables and Measurement

Positive group experience. Students’ past positive group experience was measured by two items: “I enjoy organizing and getting people together to work on group projects”, “I learn a lot from other people in groups”. Pearson correlation of these two items was significant ($r=.50, p<.01$).

Negative group experience. Students' past negative group experience was measured by two items: "I have been taken advantage of by group members," "I have been pressured by group members who have been slack to turn in favorable evaluations for them". Pearson correlation of these two items was significant ($r=.34$, $p<.01$).

Interdependent self construal. Students' interdependent self construal was measured by the 12 items interdependent self construal subscale (Singelis, 1994). Some sample items in this scale were: "it is important for me to maintain harmony within my group", "I will sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of the group I am in", "I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I'm not happy with the group." (Table 1) Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .74. The distribution of students' interdependent self construal scores appeared to be normal (Figure 1).

Independent self construal. Students' independent self construal was measured by the 12-item independent self construal subscale (Singelis, 1994). Some sample items in this scale were: "I'd rather say 'no' directly, than risk being misunderstood", "I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards", "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects". (Table 1) Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .70. The distribution of students' independent self construal scores appeared to be normal (Figure 2).

Group preference index. Students general group work preference was measured by three items: "I enjoyed working with others in group projects," "I perform better in group projects than in individual projects," "I prefer doing individual projects by myself over working with a group (reverse coded). Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .82.

Results

One way ANOVA analysis on students' group preference, positive and negative past group experiences, showed a marginal difference between males and females ($F=3.46$, $p=.06$,) on their general preference to work in groups. Female students had a lower preference to work in groups for class projects than their male counterparts ($M_{\text{male}}=3.27$ vs. $M_{\text{female}} = 2.96$). Data also revealed a marginal difference between male and female students on negative past group experiences ($F=3.75$, $p=.05$). Female students were shown to have a slightly higher negative group experience in the past than male students ($M_{\text{female}} = 2.54$, $M_{\text{male}} = 2.26$). There is no observable difference on the past positive group experience for male and female students ($p>.05$).

Multiple regression analysis using positive and negative group experiences, interdependent self construal and independent self construal, gender, age, and gpa, and years in college and in the US as independent variables showed that positive past group experience, interdependent self construal, and gender ($\beta=-.16$, $p <.05$), were significant predictors of students' general group preference (Figure 3).

Data suggested that students' past positive group experience was positively correlated with their preferences to work in groups ($\beta=.57$, $p <.01$). Students with a higher positive group experience in the past appeared to have a higher preference to work in group projects.

Students' development on their interdependent self construal was shown to have a positive correlation with their preferences to work in group projects ($\beta=.18$, $p <.05$). Students with higher interdependent self construal seemed to have a higher preference to work in groups.

Students' years spent in college were shown to have a marginal effect ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .05$) in predicting students' group preference. However, the direction of such relationship was negative, i.e. students who spent more years in college seemed to have a lower preference to work in groups. Given the median time spent in college is high in this sample (median = 4 years), it might suggest a general decline of interest in group project when students have stayed in college for a few years.

Other factors included in the regression analysis, independent self construal, age and students' GPA and years spent in the US did not appear to affect students' group preference ($p > .05$).

To further tap into the cultural indicators, we ran ANOVA analyses to test students' self reported nationality, race and ethnicity, and cultural identification, on their preference to work in groups. Results showed no significant differences on students preference to work in these groups ($p > .05$). These indicators seemed to provide little information in predicting students' group preference.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated that students' gender and cultural background can affect students' attitudes and preferences of group based learning projects in business classes. Results seemed to call for more rigorous studies and pedagogical experiments in tapping into female students learning experiences in group based projects. In addition, this study contributes to the current business education literature by introducing a psychological construct – self construal, in assessing the cultural influences on students preference in working with peers in group projects. It demonstrated the usefulness of self construal in gauging the differences students might have in their group work preferences due to their cultural background and affiliations, which were not easily accessible through commonly used demographic variables (such as nationality, race and ethnic groups). Even though the current study has not provided empirical data regarding how the group allocation and management processes can benefit from using such knowledge of students group preferences, it serves as a springboard for business educators and pedagogical researchers to further experiment with this psychological construct in business pedagogical practices, to further enhance the effectiveness of group based learning exercises for a diverse student body in various business disciplines.

[Figures and tables will be provided upon request]

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