

Dynamic Capabilities in Multicultural Project Teams: Conceptual Review, Framework Analysis and Practical Implications

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Abstract:

Contemporary projects often involve teams whose members are drawn from diverse cultures and geographical areas. Whilst researchers have investigated the role of culture in project success, they have mostly looked at it from a single lens [of a single culture]. There are significant knowledge and practice gaps in how multiculturalism shape team's effectiveness and project outcomes. This research investigates the value of cultural diversity in teams, including the integration of the strategic dynamic capabilities (DCs) framework that allows project executives and leaders to deploy the benefits of team's multiculturalism as an asset in support of projects and organisational performance. It examines organisational cultures, systems and leadership that make the benefits of team's multiculturalism work for all stakeholders. Initial results of the first phase of the study (an analysis of semi-structured interviews) constitute the key discussion points for this paper. In the end, the study elicits key variables that drive the effectiveness of multicultural teams [MTs] and help in developing an appropriate framework for supporting team-productivity. The additionality of the findings of the study is in its contributions to ongoing debates on the challenges and benefits of multiculturalism, triggering further studies on how to harness the strengths of MTs in all forms of construction projects and management practices.

Keywords: Dynamic capabilities, multicultural teams, organisational culture, project management, management practice.

1 Introduction

Numerous factors contribute to delivering value in projects including effective management of scope, schedule, cost, risk, quality, and safety (Project Management Institute, 2017). Ultimately, project success is driven by people and how well they work together. Drucker (1997, p. 8) is apt: "The organization is, above all, social. It is people". Multicultural teams [MTs] are increasingly the norms for businesses and projects. Many studies agree that cultural diversity influences how well teams work together and ultimately, their productivity (Demirkesen & Ozorhon, 2017; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Henrie & Sousa-Poza, 2005). Thus, practitioners and researchers have continued to explore the relationship between such diversity, team effectiveness and outcomes.

This study contributes to such growing body of work by investigating the value of cultural diversity in project teams. It explores the integration of dynamic capabilities (DCs) frameworks that allows project executives and leaders to deploy the benefits of team's multiculturalism as a strategic asset in support of projects and organisational. The study examines cultures, systems, and leadership

behaviours within organisations that support the harnessing of value in culturally diverse teams. Its ultimate objective is to elicit measurable variables that drive the effectiveness of multicultural teams and helps in developing appropriate frameworks for supporting productivity of project teams.

2 Review on Multicultural Teams and Project Success

Normative literature contains extensive evidence on the roles of culture in project success. A review on roles of culture here, in particular, the relationships between project management teams and value, the influence of cultural diversity, and the way DCs framework can enable organisations and leaders to further harness the benefits of cultural diversity in teams in relation to project success is presented.

2.1 Project Management Teams and Value

Project owners and leaders are constantly exploring ways to maximise the values of project investments. Evidence by Merrow (2011) suggests many projects often fail to perform. Hence, research has multiplied on project performance and value, dimensions to project success and failure, and how they [i.e. performance, success or failure and outturn values] should be measured (Flyvbjerg *et al.*, 2018; Love and Ahiaga-Dagbui, 2018; Olaniran *et al.*, 2015; Olatunji, 2018). Whilst researchers have reported success on these, evidence is largely insufficient on the potentials for project teams; particularly, elements of cultural diversity in teams as key agents to maximising value.

Projects are procured to deliver future benefits. However, they are often measured by their present values. Traditional project components of scope, schedule, cost, quality, contracting and risks would add to value only if managed appropriately. How people work together on projects is a key part of this benefits realisation process. Researchers have explored the links between teamwork, team effectiveness and performance (Backhaus & Heiner, 2014; Fong & Lung, 2007; Spencer, 2013). Others have studied human resource systems, organisational support, and team leadership (Randeree & Ninan, 2011; Wang & Tian, 2012). Not much has been reported on harnessing the value of cultural diversity in teams despite the popularity of the latter. Moreover, most research efforts on the subject are more localised in the United States than in other places, including Australia where one in three residents is born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

2.2 Multicultural Teams

MTs perform tasks and activities in delivering project outcomes and values, as expected of teams. Why does the narrative on culture stir diverse reactions from stakeholders? Some alignment on the basics may be helpful. Culture is described as a mental software, a collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes one person, people, and teams, from another (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). It has also been portrayed as the shared way that groups understand and interpret the world as well as platforms that hold conditions for their bonding and meaningful communications (Gharajedaghi, 2011; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2002). Giorgi *et al.* (2015, p. 4) state that culture is a broad system anchored by values within which actors can manifest ideas, beliefs, stratifications, stories, and commitments.

The importance of culture has gained increased attention within the project management profession. For example, the Project Management Institute (PMI) commissioned a study on culture, in which 770 scholarly articles and 93 books were analysed. Findings from the study reinforced the need for cultural awareness and research (Henrie & Sousa-Poza, 2005). Recent editions of PMI's body of knowledge have maintained the significance of culture in successful project management processes and outcomes (Project Management Institute, 2017). Despite this, there is less research regarding cultural diversity in teams. Whilst the dynamism in the diversity in multicultural teams is, believe as the norm in business and projects, there is no equivalent increase in supporting theoretical knowledge and empirical frameworks.

Diversity can be approach from multiple viewpoints; including gender, race and ethnicity. Ely & Thomas (2001) did associate cultural diversity with differences in visible manifestations like skin colour or less visible aspects of values. Ethnicities and nationalities are the most relevant for this study. Thus, like Adler & Aycan (2018) expressed diversity in terms of the number of cultures represented in a team. For this study, MTs consist of members from multiple cultures.

2.2.1 Benefits of Multicultural Teams

Miller (1995) evinces the point that valuing diversity is more than making a positive impression with key stakeholders; rather, relying on the capabilities for competitive advantage. Miller (1995) reports a survey of 312 companies in the United States and reveals that only less than 10% of participants linked diversity to productivity. This suggests a latent preference to maintain the status quo of acquiring and preserving diversity as a positive image. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that valuing diversity can increase competition for markets, solve demand issues for labour and facilitate new beneficial ways of responding to changing market conditions.

Creativity is often cited as a benefit of cultural diversity due to wider range of perspectives, more and better ideas, and less inclination to groupthink (Glaveanu & Taillard, 2018; Stahl & Tung, 2015). Valued and supported MTs can help organisations to prepare for the future where work is anticipated to become increasingly diverse and global in nature (Un, 2016). Finally, MTs can provide the advantage of increased capacity for market penetration into diverse customers especially in this era of globalisation (Matveev & Milter, 2004).

2.2.2 Challenges of Multicultural Teams

Adler & Aycan (2018) and Wu *et al.* (2019) claim cultural diversity causes difficulties in teams, resulting in mistrust, miscommunication, decreased team cohesion, tension and stress, and unproductive time and efforts in dealing with these issues. Matveev & Milter (2004) also cited conflicts, decreased ability to validate ideas, arrive at consensus and execute actions promptly, complexities, and team inertia. Expectedly, stakeholders turn to organisational leaders with hope and solutions for harnessing the benefits whilst mitigating the challenges.

2.2.3 Making it Work: Organisational Culture, Leadership, and Dynamic Capabilities

Organisations deliver value by amplifying people's strengths whilst mitigating their weaknesses. How appropriate are the considered intentions of business leaders in maximising the value in MTs, at the same time mitigate the challenges? A profile described by Ladkin (2008) and Adler (2013) as *leading beautifully* suggests such leaders courageously value and envision great possibilities with culturally diverse teams, whether others share the same belief or not.

Thomas (2004) reports the IBM case where senior executives led the growth in its multicultural and women-owned businesses from \$10 million to more than \$300 million in just 3 years. The leadership achieved this success by promoting and building the capacity for harnessing the benefits of diversity in the organisation and teams. They led *beautifully*. Dynamic capabilities framework has the potential to enhance the solutions.

DCs are processes that enable organisations to purposefully create, deploy, and protect valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) assets (Teece, 2007; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Helfat & Martin, 2014). VRIN's attributes and resource-based view (RBV) of firms have been develop in normative scholarship by Barney *et al.* (2011) – and others. These researchers have shown that DCs support superior business performance in the end. Studies by Adam & Lindahl (2017), Davies & Brady (2016), and Zerjav *et al.* (2018) have extended the same concepts [VRIN and RBV] to project management. However, limited attention have been given to DCs in harnessing the strategic value-additions of MTs, which arguably qualify as VRIN assets; thus, the potential to deploy the capabilities in support of long-term performances in businesses and projects. This is the core objective of this current study.

3 Research Methodology: Framework Development

3.1 Method Design and Approach

This study was design to answer three questions based on literature review and the need to further close identified gaps for harnessing the value in MTs. They are:

- (1) *What are the values in MTs, and the pros and cons?*
- (2) *What organisational culture and leadership are required to harness the benefits of MTs?*
- (3) *How can the key variables be articulated along with DCs in modelling a framework for valuing and managing MTs for long-term benefits?*

The research aligns with the pragmatic philosophy and approach to theory development in that, a robust research will provide answers with multiple viewpoints and interpretations rather than a single point of view. It is aim at reconciling objectivism and subjectivism, facts and values, accurate and rigorous knowledge as well as different contextualised experiences as outlined by Saunders (2016). It involves collecting data to identify themes and explain patterns that help generate a new set of theories or modify existing ones. The latter will be tested iteratively through additional data collection until an overall theory is develop fully.

Findings reported in this study are a part of a broader study spanning three phases: Phase 1, a qualitative study (semi-structured interviews) – reported here; Phase 2, a quantitative study (questionnaire survey); and Phase 3, another qualitative study (case study) in which the study validates its key findings. They are being executed in succession in the order as stated. Other researchers have used this approach as well. For example, Gibson *et al.* (2020) used interviews and surveys in their study on revealing the attributes of global workers that lessen intrapersonal identity conflict and show that doing so is critical for thriving in global work contexts. Lammers *et al.* (2013) used a similar method in examining the relationships between group, organisational and professional identities. This current study has taken it to the next level of robustness by adding a third layer of case study in recognition of the value of depth and generalisability.

This paper is on the Phase 1 interview study, which has been designed to provide valuable insight into the context of MTs prior to commencing the quantitative phase (Liamputtong, 2013; Creswell, 2018). Considerations were given for access to targeted participants and theoretical saturation (see Saunders, 2016), and adequate representation of disciplines, experience levels, industry types, and diversity. The peer-reviewed and pilot-tested instrument comprises of open-ended questions to elicit the viewpoints of participants in line with the research objectives. Initially, interviews were planned to be face-to-face. However, adjustments were made to use Zoom due to the infection COVID-19 pandemic may cause.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Twenty-five (25) individuals (15 males and 10 females) participated in the interviews. Their work experience ranged from 13 to 38 years, and their industries comprised of oil and gas, utilities, construction, Government, and professional services. Disciplines represented included project management, quantity surveyors, architecture, and human resource management. Whilst they have all worked in Australia at different periods, their cultural diversity spreads across 13 different nationalities by birth (see Figure 1 below).

A detailed thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interview data to make more meaning of the datasets and in the context of the research questions and objectives. It involved the development of central themes, as well as drawing out the importance of words or texts. Content analysis software, NVivo 12 was used for data analysis and including providing the required automation and bulk data processing. *Intentionality*, *value*, *challenges*, and *making it work* are the key themes established from the interviews and analysis (see Table 1 below). They form the main nodes for further analysis. The need for intentionality in harnessing the benefits of MTs constitute a significant early contribution from this study. Valuing cultural diversity, exploring VRIN, and leveraging off the gender diversity gains are sub-themes that were unearthed from the *value* node. It is the same with leadership, organisational culture and system, recruitment, and training coming up as sub-themes of the *making it work* node.

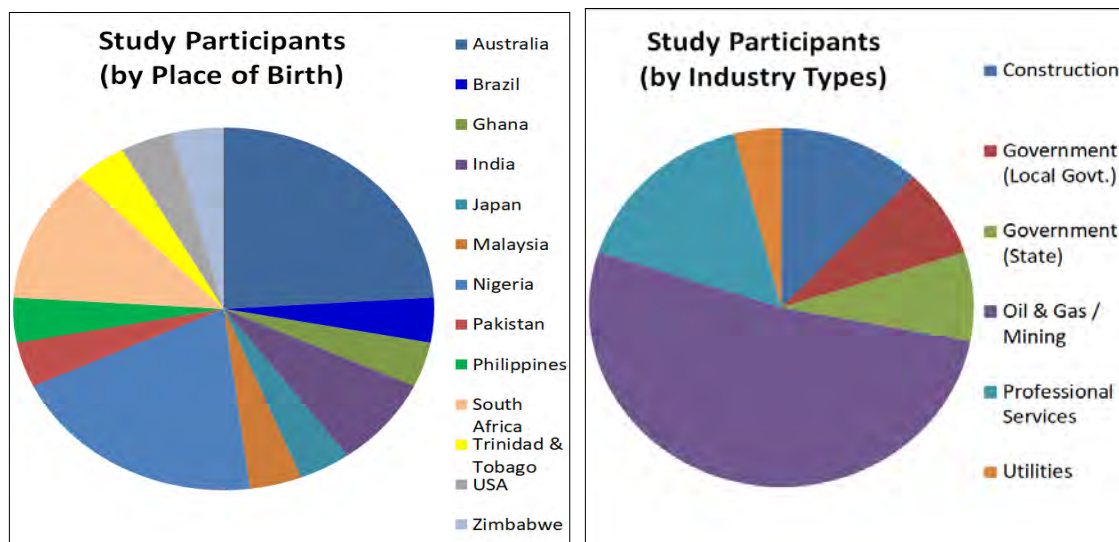


Figure 1. Demographics of Study Participants

Table 1. A Snapshot of High-Level Findings from Phase 1 Interview Study

Nodes			
	Name	Files	References
+	1 - Introduction	0	0
+	2 - Intentionality	0	0
	2.1 - Intentional	13	19
	2.2 - Non-Intentional	13	15
+	3 - Value	0	0
	3.1 - Sees value in culturally diverse teams	25	46
	3.2 - Rare - Non-imitable - Non-substitutable	9	12
	3.3 - Leverage Gender diversity gains (the Multiplier effect)	9	11
	3.4 - Does not see value in culturally diverse teams	1	2
	4 - Challenges	18	31
+	5 - Making it work	0	0
	5.2 - Leadership	20	46
	5.3 - Organisational Culture and System	20	52
	5.4 - Recruitment	6	11
	5.5 - Training	16	24

3.2.1 Intentionality

This theme became evident during this study in 2 forms: (i) are leaders intentional with forming, valuing, and developing culturally diverse teams. (ii) How critical is the intentionality factor in harnessing the value in MTs? The results of the analysis show an even level of intentionality (see Table 1 above): almost an equal number of project leaders were intentional about having culturally diverse teams just as the reverse. Below are some of the excerpts from the participants:

No, we did not go out intentionally to recruit a culturally diverse team. It just morphed.

I hired members of my team based on the required skills first. However, I was also intentional in my target for diversity because of my role in servicing a culturally diverse consumer base.

This is intentional for us. It does not necessarily have to be in the form of direct employment, but it could be by spend like contracting, suppliers, consultants, think-tanks participation. This way diversity via the thought process could be facilitated.

3.2.2 Values and Challenges

Participants agreed to the value of MTs, and the challenges as well, to a lesser degree:

A diverse team is a stronger team. A culture or work environment where there is mutual respect, it is developed over time. This makes people to be appreciated and happy and they give you 100%. Increased productivity will be evident.

In terms of rarity: yes, you do not find it easily. Like the team next to us, which is less diverse, and they perform their job, but it is different to ours. Moreover, it takes time and efforts to develop to such high performing, culturally diverse team.

It is harder to form, manage and lead a culturally diverse team. Managers are under pressure to deliver results at any cost especially during boom. Thus, it is easier to manage than to lead. Therefore, they lead as an easier way since there are less variables unlike a culturally diverse team. The latter requires leadership (not management), etc.

3.2.3 Making It Work

The results also indicate a strong alignment on the need for *making it work* - enhancing the values and managing the challenges. Here are some findings towards this objective.

The success of push for harnessing value out of cultural diversity and making it work will ultimately depend on leadership and aligned organizational culture / system.

There's need to educate leaders around having the foresight for alternative perspectives. They need to think about the value of diversity and inclusion. Remove the barriers against openness including training for reducing or removing conscious and unconscious biases, using recruitment systems without identifiers, and establishing supply chain for talents and diversity.

Our differences are deep. Mind-sets will be challenged. The concept of harnessing the value in cultural diversity is almost against the natural leanings. We really have to step back and holistically promote a system that supports value for differences in thinking, etc. This is not going to work, without a strong leadership spine.

4 Practical Implications

Phase 1 of this study has further acknowledged the benefits of valuing cultural diversity in teams, and this aligns with other scholars (Miller, 1995; Adler & Aycan, 2018; Stahl & Tung, 2015; Un, 2016; Glaveanu & Taillard, 2018). The results also show similar alignment on requirements for harnessing these benefits including the right organisational culture (Mühlbacher & Böbel, 2018), organisational systems (Orlando & Johnson, 2001), and leadership (Thomas, 2004; Adler, 2013). It went further by opening an aspect that has had little or no attention in the literature – intentionality. The intentionality in harnessing the benefits in MTs is tied to leadership. Ladkin (2008) and Adler (2013) described as *leading beautifully*. Valuing cultural diversity in teams and making it work will require *leading beautifully*.

Our mixed-method approach has provided the real-life contextual understandings, multi-level perspectives, and reasonable generalisation that this topic deserves. The potential for triangulation across evidence and instances gives extra validity to the outcomes. The research framework is delivering the deeper elaboration of the aspects and issues relating to the value and management of cultural diversity in teams that neither qualitative nor quantitative method can provide alone. *Intentionality, value, challenges and making it work* are core themes to take into the next phase of this study. They have already opened some subthemes including diversity of ideas, optionality, and intentional leadership. All these, singly or in combination, are potentially part of the dynamic capabilities in multicultural teams to explore further.

5 Conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing debates on the value of cultural diversity in teams including the benefits and the challenges. The findings have provided additional indication for the competitive advantages in MTs as valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) assets. They provide dynamic capabilities for creativity, optionality, and learning. Intentional and courageous leadership is required to drive the organisational culture and systems that will harness these benefits of team's multiculturalism and make it work for all stakeholders in construction projects and management practices. The results of this Phase 1 qualitative study (semi-structured interviews) are not generalisable due to the relatively small sample size. Moreover, however, we have a solid foundation for Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the research consisting of a quantitative study (questionnaires) and a case study, respectively. It is hoped that further findings will provide triangulation and validation along with building a deployable framework.

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