Multilevel Assessment of the Effects of Age Diversity

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Introduction: Not only owing to the changing demographic structures in industrialized countries (Anderson & Hussey, 2000) but also due to the wide variety of attitudes, beliefs and traits among employees, work group diversity has become a central theme in organizational studies focusing on all levels of analysis, i.e. the individual, team and organizational outcome level. Diversity refers to all kinds of characteristics, whether easily detectable surface level features like age, sex or ethnicity or underlying deep level attributes such as knowledge, attitudes, tenure or religious affiliation (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). However, although in recent years there has been much advancement in theory development (e.g. Harrison & Klein, 2007) and abundant research on the effects of diversity characteristics has been conducted (e.g. Ries et al., 2013), conclusive evidence regarding the mechanisms and outcomes of diversity remains elusive (Roberson, 2012). The present paper therefore attempts to address the effects of one specific diversity variable on outcomes across several levels of analysis.

Method: Three studies at the individual, team and organizational level respectively, have been conducted in order to assess the effects of age diversity on performance measures at each of the targeted levels. At the organizational level, a total of 515 managers of research and development teams providing technical engineering services participated in a survey. Variables of interest included salience of age diversity (i.e. behavioral and cognitive salience) and the effects of age diversity on organizational level whereas the dependent measure was project success. On the team-level, an experimental study with 21 teams was employed in which the teams had to complete two tasks akin to tasks faced by research and development teams in organizational settings. The outcome variables, an approximation of team innovativeness, were measured by means of qualitative (e.g. expert ratings) and quantitative (e.g. number of unique ideas) figures. The participants were either assigned to an age homogeneous team (n = 11) or to an age heterogeneous team (n = 10). Finally, on the individual level, an online study revealed the effects of team composition on individual work motivation. Participants (n = 72) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a group where their coworkers were either homogenously old, homogenously young or a group where age was evenly distributed between younger and older members. The average amount of hours that the participants were willing to work within their respective team served as the dependent variable.

Results: Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to statistically evaluate the effects of age diversity on the organizational level. At the group level, an independent samples t-test was employed to evaluate whether the performance between homogeneous and heterogeneous teams differed systematically whereas an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to reveal significant differences between the conditions at the individual level. The level of statistical significance was defined as α = 0.05. The results of the analysis yielded significant effects at all levels.

Discussion: The results reveal positive effects of age diversity within the context of innovation generation across all levels of analysis. Increased age diversity can enhance individual work motivation and leads to better team performance in idea implementation as compared to age homogeneous groups. Further, as long as there is high salience of age diversity, a heterogeneous distribution of age within work groups has a positive effect on project outcomes. In terms of theory the results of the presented research support for the notion of value in diversity (van Knippenberg, Haslam & Platow, 2007). While the results do not support predictions based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), they are in line with argumentations which emphasize the importance of diversity for information elaboration (e.g. van Knippenberg, de Dreu & Horman, 2004). Thus the results demonstrate a positive effect of age diversity across all levels of analysis which underlines both, the importance and the positive consequences of diversity management within organizational settings.

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Anderson & Hussey, 2000
Harrison & Klein, 2007
Ries et al., 2013
Roberson, 2012
Tajfel & Turner, 1986
van Knippenberg, Haslam & Platow, 2007
van Knippenberg, de Dreu & Horman, 2004
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References:


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