

Effects of Member Heterogeneity on Synergy of Teams of Foreign Language Teachers in Chinese Universities: A Cross-Level Role Mediated by Synergy

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Abstract: In the field of team research, heterogeneity is regarded as an important variable affecting team performance. However, little is known about the mechanism of impacts of member heterogeneity on team performance. In the current study, the synergy is introduced as an intermediary variable to establish a conceptual model of the relationship between heterogeneity, synergy and team performance. The study made an empirical analysis of 540 foreign language teachers from 15 universities in China by applying the cross-level analysis technique to explore the mechanism of the effects of member heterogeneity on the performance of foreign language teachers in universities. Results showed that (a) the external heterogeneity had a significantly positive impact on team performance, while the internal heterogeneity negatively impacted on it; (b) the synergy had a significantly positive effect on team performance; (c) the synergy played a partial mediating role in the relationship between external heterogeneity and team performance, and a complete mediating role in the relationship between internal heterogeneity and team performance.

1. Introduction

With the widespread application of team to various organizations, researches on teams have drawn the extensive concern of scholars. Since the 1990s, the Organizational Psychology has replaced the Social Psychology as the theme of team researches, and the research focus has shifted from impacts of groups on individuals to concerns on team performance and its contributory factors^[1]. Some previous studies have probed into the key factors affecting team performance, such as organizational environment, team process and individual characteristics of members, from different perspectives. As the research continues, it has been observed that member heterogeneity, an essential factor of individual characteristics of team members, is an important variable affecting team performance^[2]. Therefore, there are more and more studies on member heterogeneity. Most of these studies, however, focus on the antecedents of team heterogeneity, and few studies on the mechanism of the relationship between member heterogeneity and team performance have been conducted.

In the new social environment, as a group system, teams of foreign language teachers in Chinese universities are increasingly facing the risk of uncertainty in the internal and external environment

of the team. Its performance is reflected in the coordination of the teaching and research interaction process of an individual member and the whole team, which is based on the collaborative interaction behaviors, such as goal consensus, frank cooperation and close communication among members. Therefore, the current study suggests that the impacts of member heterogeneity on team performance will be affected by members' recognition of team goals, compliance with norms and cognitive consistency of team tasks, that is, it will be affected by synergy. In this light, based on some factors related to member heterogeneity and mediated by synergy, the current study takes teams of foreign language teachers in Chinese universities as the subject of study to examine its mechanism of impacts on team synergy.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Member Heterogeneity and Team Effectiveness

Member heterogeneity is to make an individual perceive various differences between himself and others^[3]. Previous studies focus on the trait variables of members from different perspectives, and differentiated member heterogeneity from various dimensions.

In accordance with the correlation between heterogeneity and task, Pelled divided member heterogeneity into lowly job-related diversity and highly job-related diversity^[4]. The former refers to the individual attributes, such as age and gender, lowly related to the tasks which will be completed by the team. It is more closely related to the social relationship of the team rather than the objective target tasks, and its remarkable feature is that it is hard to make the man-made changes. The latter means the characteristics covering educational level, length of employment and professional background, etc., directly related to the tasks which will be completed, which much more reflects the differences of experiences and viewpoints related to the task. Jehn et al. held that team heterogeneity consisted of social category diversity, informational diversity and value diversity^[5]. Member heterogeneity in the social category variables, such as age, gender, religion and nationality will lead to the interpersonal conflicts, lack of identity and trust, and failure to cooperation; differences of members between educational level, professional background, work experience and cognition provide team operation with the effective information and methods, which often improves the decision-making level of teams; differences in values belong to member heterogeneity of the individual essence, which affects the different value orientations of members for team goals, tasks, cooperation methods, etc. Jackson et al. grouped team heterogeneity into surface heterogeneity and deep heterogeneity^[6]. The former refers to the differences in demographic variables, involving easily observed factors such as age, gender, level of education and professional background, while the latter is defined as some traits that team members can recognize only after a certain time with the unobserved characteristics related to thinking mode, value orientation, working style behavior style, etc. Obviously, member heterogeneity is one of the important attributes of team structure, which may have a certain impact on the innovative effectiveness of team. Scholars at home and abroad believe that heterogeneity is a double-edged sword, which can produce high-quality solutions, and yet reduce cohesion simultaneously. In addition, there is no unified answer to the question that how member heterogeneity affects team effectiveness. However, most researchers believe that the deep differences among members often induce the changes of conflict, communication and cooperation. Most of the previous studies tend to focus on impacts on the process, that is, “member differences → team process → team effective”, but how specific differences affect team effectiveness remains controversial.

2.2. Synergy and Team Effectiveness

In recent years, researchers tend to pay more attention to the impact of members' psychological factors on team effectiveness, and it is widely recognized that the impacts of member heterogeneity on team effectiveness is mediated by some variables. Accordingly, as the research continues, the focus turns to the exploration of intermediary variables between member heterogeneity and team performance, such as social integration, conflict, communication, and working atmosphere, etc.

Studies based on Organizational Behavior Theory have sought to show that team synergy derive from the willingness and behavior of individuals to cooperate with each other, and there is a significantly positive correlation between knowledge commons and work performance. Building high-performance organizations often stimulates learning and communication between teams and individuals, and motivates the creative cooperation to enhance cooperation and share information^[7]. All members are required to consciously abide by the tangible or intangible norms shaped in the process of collaboration, and then integrate them into team collaboration practice so as to make the team obtain higher performance^[8].

The team utilized the incentive context of mutual communication to create an atmosphere of knowledge interaction for knowledge sharers and knowledge seekers, resulting in much more outstanding performances of the team^[9], which is based on the mutual trust and commitment among members, promote the continuous generation and formation of new ideas, and stimulate the innovative thinking. From the perspective of social network, Fang & Evans pointed out that the centripetality of members' social network was the condition and way for the team to achieve higher performance^[10]. In like manner, Vandeverer held that the synergy among members directly led to the improvement of team performances^[11]. As a sequence, the synergy can make the team better realize the optimal allocation of resources in the internal management, minimize the cost of knowledge transfer and diffusion, and obtain higher performances. Undoubtedly, the process of pursuing higher performances by team is also that of pursuing higher synergy.

2.3. The Conceptual Model

As a form of collective organization, the team performance of college foreign language teachers is embodied in whether the interaction and communication between individual member and the whole team are coordinated. The organizational structure and regulations of college foreign language teachers are often not perfect enough, therefore, only when the synergy of team works well can members put aside their differences, share resources and improve team performance^[12]. Without doubt, the synergy and psychological acquiescence among members are the key to improving team performances. Dechurch indicated that the internal synergy of members was highly correlated with the terminal outcome variable, i.e. team performance^[13]. Mohammed pointed out that the synergy and positive sharing atmosphere created by the team could make members more actively share resources, transmit information and cooperate together, thus forming a positive circle^[14]. Member heterogeneity of college foreign language teachers' team is a static description of team structure, while the synergy can make the team obtain the potential benefits brought by heterogeneity and reduce the negative impacts of heterogeneity, that is, the synergy can mediate the relationship between member heterogeneity and team performance. Therefore, the current study brought the synergy of team into the analytical model to deeply explore the relationship between member heterogeneity and team performance of college foreign language teachers, and discuss the value and significance of the synergy of team.

As discussed earlier, the author proposed the conceptual model of the study (see Figure 1), that is, the member heterogeneity of college foreign language teachers' team would affect team performance, while the synergy of team played an intermediary role.

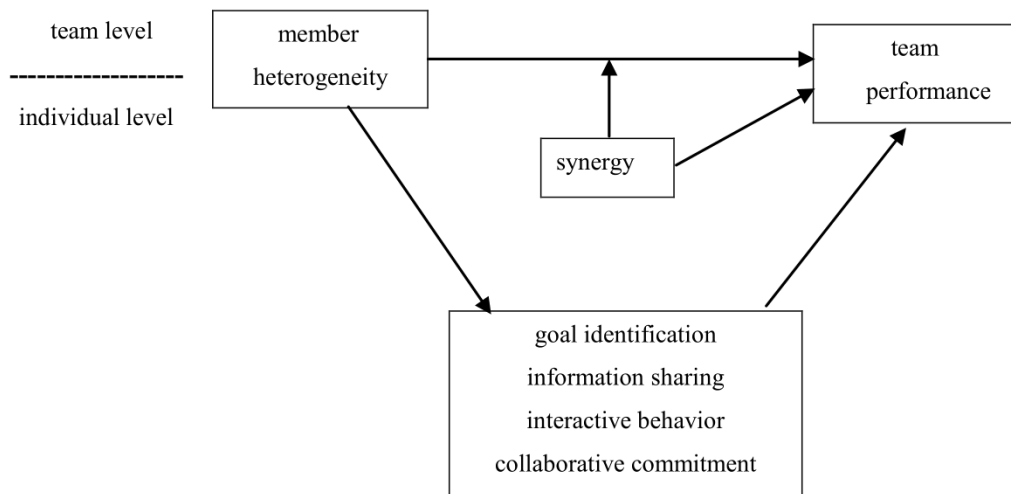


Figure 1: The conceptual model

2.4. Research Hypotheses

The external heterogeneity among members of college foreign language teachers' team will have an important impact on team effectiveness. Due to the heterogeneity of educational level, specialty, professional background and experience, the members of college foreign language teachers' team can improve the diversity of team thinking modes, which helps to determine the team vision and promote innovation within the team, and finally promote the work effectiveness of the team. Undoubtedly, the team of college foreign language teachers still has the internal heterogeneity. Members of the team are different in value orientation, thinking mode and behavior style, which often has an adverse impact on team effectiveness. With the establishment of team goals and the changes of members, team members' self-awareness and team identity affect the mutual cooperation to varying degrees. The mutual communication can strengthen the mutual understanding and build up the harmonious working and research atmosphere, that is, team efficiency can be improved to varying degrees, which are adequately embodied on the abilities in integrating the team and allocating resources.

To summarize, relatively few studies have tested the effect of member heterogeneity on the synergy of college foreign language teachers' team, and even fewer studies have investigated the impact of member heterogeneity mediated by synergy. Therefore, the main hypotheses put forward in the current as follows:

(a) The external heterogeneity (education, major and experience) positively affects team effectiveness, while the internal heterogeneity (teaching belief, self-identity, self-efficacy, value orientation, thinking mode and behavioral style) negatively affects team effectiveness;

(b) The interaction between member heterogeneity and synergy plays a positive impact on team effectiveness;

(c) The positive synergy such as members' goal identification, information sharing, interactive behavior and interactive behavior play a mediating role in the relationship between member heterogeneity and team effectiveness.

3. Method

Based on the small sample prediction, a formal questionnaire for the current study was designed,

and two soft-wares (SPSS 21.0 and LISREL 8.80) were employed for data management and statistical analysis. Firstly, the characteristics of each variable were obtained by the descriptive statistics; Secondly, the confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire; Thirdly, the correlation analysis of each variable was carried out to provide the premise for the establishment of intermediary model; Finally, the multiple hierarchical regression method was employed to test the hypotheses and explore the cause-effect relationship between variables.

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

The sample was drawn from 15 teams (540 teachers in all) of foreign language teachers in Chinese universities, including state key universities, characteristic undergraduate colleges, general undergraduate institutions and higher vocational colleges. The survey involved the sample members' gender, age, degree, academic rank, role, major, school category and team type, and described the basic characteristics of the members (see Table 1). To sum up, the sample selected was in line with the characteristics of college foreign language teachers' team, being highly representative. In order to avoid common method deviation, each questionnaire was numbered prior to survey to ensure the effectiveness of questionnaire pairing. In the light of team size, 30-40 questionnaires were released to each team, and 492 questionnaires were finally collected. And then, questionnaires collected were re-matched and some with incomplete information or careless answer were deleted. Finally, 459 valid questionnaires were obtained with an effective rate of 85%.

Table 1: Description of the basic characteristics of sample (n=540)

Variables	Factors	n	%	Variables	Factors	n	%
gender	male	159	29.5	team	teaching team	372	68.8
	female	381	70.5		research team	168	31.1
age	≥50	86	15.9	major	Linguistics	199	36.8
	41-50	112	20.8		Literature	170	31.4
	31-40	253	46.9		Interpretation	102	18.8
	≤30	86	16.4		Pedagogic	69	12.7
position	directors	78	14.4	academic title	professor	58	10.7
	key teachers	146	27.0		associate pro.	8	21.8
	regular teachers	316	58.6		lecturer	364	67.4
degree	Doctors	49	9.0	Institution type	state key universities	113	20.9
	Masters	327	60.5		characteristic colleges	143	26.4
	Bachelors	164	30.5		general institutions	203	37.5
					vocational colleges	85	15.7

3.2. Measurement

In the current study, the mature scales widely used in the literature at home and abroad were employed as the measurements. Combined with the questions and samples of the study, the items of scales were appropriately modified by means of “translation—re-translation” procedure. A formal questionnaire was finally formed with Likert-5 scale from "1=very dissatisfied" to "5=very satisfied".

3.2.1. Member Heterogeneity

The member heterogeneity of team consists of external and internal variables. The former

included age, degree, major, experience, etc. measured by Allison's standard deviation coefficient ^[15], the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean of a sample, which was better than the standard deviation and variance when the continuous data were measured., while the latter involved teaching belief, self-efficacy, value orientation, thinking mode and behavioral style, measured by Blau's index between 0 and -1 ^[3], suggesting that the closer it was to 1, the higher the degree of heterogeneity was.

3.2.2. Team Effectiveness

At present, the researches on team effectiveness at home and abroad mostly based on the definition by Eric & Kennech have mainly been carried out from the dynamic process of close coordination of various elements inside and outside the ecosystem, considering that team effectiveness mainly focuses on performance ^[16]. However, with regard to team members' cognition and self-perception, few studies have been conducted on coordination, mutual trust and coupling among members, especially mediated by synergy.

As stated above, based on literature analyses, expert consultation and field visits, the current study defines team effectiveness as the actual results of team members to achieve team goals, collaborate with each other and complete tasks together. Specifically, it mainly focused on two dimensions: task effectiveness and contextual performance. The former refers to the performance output of the team, which was measured by teaching tasks and research gains; the latter means the indirect effectiveness of promoting the teams to complete the objectives and tasks, including maintaining cooperative relations, assisting others, continuing cooperation, etc., which was measured by team members' trust, academic atmosphere, cooperation satisfaction and future cooperation willingness.

3.2.3. Control Variables

The current study mainly investigated the impact of team member heterogeneity on team innovation efficiency, while the existing relevant studies rarely controlled team size. As a result, team size was treated as the control variable in the study.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and Validity Test

In order to further improve the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0 was employed to make factor analysis and reliability analysis on the final data. Specifically, the external heterogeneity scale included age, degree, major and experience, and the internal heterogeneity scale covered teaching belief, self-efficacy, value orientation, thinking mode and behavioral style. Team effectiveness consisted of task effectiveness and contextual effectiveness. In addition, the Cronbach's α co-efficient of each scale were 0.874, 0.907 and 0.946 respectively, which was larger than 0.80, indicating that the questionnaire had good reliability.

The scales adopted in the study were all based on the mature scales at home and abroad to ensure the validity of the scales. For the construct validity, the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) values of external heterogeneity, internal heterogeneity and team effectiveness were 0.783, 0.811 and 0.895 respectively, which was larger than 0.70, indicating that the construct validity of the scale was fine.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

The correlations between the main variables are presented in Table 2. The external heterogeneity of college foreign language teachers' teams was positively correlated with team effectiveness ($r=0.780$, $p<0.01$), while the internal heterogeneity of those was negatively correlated with team effectiveness ($r=-0.341$, $p<0.01$). In addition, there was a positive correlation between team synergy and team effectiveness ($r=0.772$, $p<0.01$). These results were in line with the basic assumptions of the current study, which provided support for verifying the research hypotheses.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient between variables (n=540)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. team size	1.182*	1	1				
2. external heterogeneity	1.163**	0.227**	0.173	1			
3. internal heterogeneity	1.413**	0.374**	0.266	0.289**	1		
4. synergy	1.501**	0.333**	0.384	0.485**	0.402**	1	
5. team effectiveness	1.298*	0.549*	0.198	0.780**	-0.341**	0.772**	1

(** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$)

4.3. Hypothesis Test

The multiple hierarchical regression method was adopted to test hypotheses in the current study, as demonstrated in Table 3. Model 1 was a regression model of control variables (team size) on team effectiveness; Model 2 was a regression model of external heterogeneity, internal heterogeneity and synergy on team effectiveness; Model 3 was a total effect model with regulating items. In Table 3, Model 2 shows that the external heterogeneity had a significant positive impact on College Foreign Language Teachers' team effectiveness ($\beta=0.486$, $p<0.01$), while the internal heterogeneity negatively affected team effectiveness ($\beta=-0.114$, $p<0.01$), so Hypothesis 1 was well verified. In the interactive effect of model 3, the interactive items of external heterogeneity and synergy played a positive impact on team effectiveness ($\beta=1.083$, $p<0.01$). The internal heterogeneity and synergy also played a significant positive impact on team effectiveness ($\beta=0.294$, $p<0.01$), so Hypothesis 2 was finally verified. Team members' recognition of team goals, information communication between members, commitment to mutual collaboration and interactive behavior played a partial mediating role in the relationship between external heterogeneity and team effectiveness (mediation effect: 0.21; effect size: 47.89%), while they played a full mediating role in the relationship between internal heterogeneity and team effectiveness, so Hypothesis 3 was finally verified.

Table 3: Multilevel linear regression model

Variables	Factors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
		standardized co-efficient	standardized co-efficient	standardized co-efficient
control variable	team size	0.001	0.009	0.009
independent variables	external heterogeneity internal heterogeneity		0.486** -0.114**	1.083** 0.294**
moderator	synergy		0.328**	0.374**
Model statistical parameters	Adjusted ΔR^2	-0.010	0.567	0.539
	ΔR^2	0.000	0.569	0.501
	F	0.000	69.108**	48.216**

(** $p<0.01$)

5. Conclusion

Researchers have been paying more attention to the impact of member heterogeneity on team effectiveness, but some problems are still to be further explored. As is known, the relationship between heterogeneity and team effectiveness as *black box* indicates that it is difficult to ensure the intervening variables, so the mechanism of positive or negative effects caused by heterogeneity is still unclear. Based on a regulated mediating effect model, the current study analyzed the impact of member heterogeneity on team effectiveness and investigated the cross-level mediating effect of synergy at the team level, which overcame the dilemma caused by *black box* to a certain extent and helped to explore the internal mechanism of the impact of member heterogeneity on team effectiveness.

Literature analyses show that researchers at home and abroad generally believe that member heterogeneity plays an important impact on team effectiveness, which is verified one more time in the current study. Analyses of inter-variable effects manifests that the external heterogeneity has the greatest impact on team effectiveness among the collaboration-related factors affecting team effectiveness. The differences in professional background and work experience make each member own cognitive differences, which provides necessary intellectual support for the improvement of team effectiveness although they have different understanding of problem solving, team members' work enthusiasm and innovation potential can also be fully stimulated by active discussion and mutual learning. However, age differences have a negative impact on team effectiveness, which is mainly based on *generation gap* in cognitive concepts and behavior styles caused by age differences in the Chinese traditional culture, inhibiting the effective communication and collaboration among team members. Some previous studies show that the educational background play a significant impact on team effectiveness, which, however, is not obvious in the current study. Probably it's because the participants are foreign language teachers' teams in Colleges and universities, the members have the high education level, which implies that members are less sensitive to degree differences, weakening the impact of degrees.

In addition, the internal heterogeneity negatively affects team effectiveness. Members of college foreign language teachers' teams are greatly different in value orientation, thinking mode, self-identity, self-efficacy and behavioral style, so team members are prone to bias, lack of trust and conflict with others, weakening teams' cohesion and collaboration, which greatly affects the energy of team members, interferes with the development of the teams, restrict the realization of team goals and ultimately plays a negative effect on team effectiveness. A further analysis of task effectiveness and contextual effectiveness shows that the impact of member Heterogeneity on task effectiveness is often greater than that on contextual effectiveness, which arises from that team task effectiveness is often evaluated by school management, and managers have the subjective perceptual bias, so the effect of heterogeneity on team task effectiveness may be strengthened to a certain extent. The aforesaid conclusions verify the mixed results of heterogeneity one more time, that is, member heterogeneity plays both positive and negative effects on team effectiveness.

No matter what discipline team is, synergy often plays a significantly direct impact on the team effectiveness because the mutually high trust among members provides the premise and foundation for close collaboration, which is also an important guarantee for the survival, maintenance and development of the team. The current study shows that synergy, including goal identification, active coupling, information communication and complementary surplus and deficiency between members can strengthen the promotive action of external heterogeneity on team effectiveness and lessen the negative effect of internal heterogeneity on team effectiveness. Obviously, synergy plays an important intermediary role in the action mechanism of various collaboration related factors and team effectiveness, especially the role of internal heterogeneity on team effectiveness is fully

mediated by collaboration, which affects the performance of individual members in the team only after team members subjectively identify with and accept teaching belief, self-efficacy, value orientation, thinking mode, behavioral style, etc.

It is obvious that the operation of college foreign language teachers' team is a dynamic cooperative process, so how to improve the synergy of college foreign language teachers' team members is an issue that college administrators must be taken seriously. First, the common value goal of the team should be established and the organizational identity of members should be strengthened, which is not only the basis for the survival of college foreign language teachers' teams, but also the driving force for the realization of team vision, enabling members to understand the interdependence between personal goals and team goals, consciously dealing with the conflict between goals from the perspective of team effectiveness, producing a strong centripetal force, and finally bursting out great positive energy; Secondly, the internal management coordination mechanism is established to improve the collaboration awareness among members, and encourage innovation and knowledge sharing, which implies sharing and cooperation to become the subjective and conscious behavior of members, and strives to create a positive and healthy collaborative atmosphere; Thirdly, the subjective well-being of members is deeply concerned, the degree of mental acquiescence is greatly improved, strengthen the management of dynamic psychological contract and the degree of intervention in the psychological crisis of members to avoid the occurrence of destructive conflict such as catfish effect and ensure the best coupling of psychological contract among members; Finally, the importance should be attached to shaping and building team collaborative culture, and creating the harmonious researching and teaching atmosphere. In addition, Cultivating the participatory culture, perfecting the culture of communication and stimulating the learning culture play a directional role in teaching and scientific research activities, and lay a good foundation for the sustainable development of the team.

To sum up, the present study takes the college foreign language teachers' teams as the object to analyzes the role of collaboration-related factors on college foreign language teachers' team effectiveness, and reveals that synergy plays an important intermediary role between member heterogeneity and team effectiveness. Based on the findings of the current study, it can be concluded that (a) the external heterogeneity played a significantly positive impact on team effectiveness, whereas the internal heterogeneity played a negative impact on team effectiveness; (b) synergy played a significantly positive effect on team effectiveness; (c) synergy played a partial mediating effect on the relationship between external heterogeneity and team effectiveness, and the internal heterogeneity played a full mediating effect on the relationship between internal heterogeneity and team effectiveness.

Based on the findings of the present study, several recommendations for further research might be as follows: (a) The current study focused on teams as samples, which, on the one hand, it cannot ensure that all members of the team participate in the questionnaire, and members of the team, on the other hand, were randomly selected, which is unfavorable to collect the opinions of all members, inevitably resulting in some errors in the measurement indicators of team. Therefore, future studies could carry out the stratified sampling to increase the external validity of the samples; (b) In the current study, Allison's differential coefficient was employed to measure the external heterogeneity variables, while Blau's index was used to calculate internal heterogeneity. However, the measurement standards of the two indicators are not unified, which inevitably affects the accuracy of the research results; (c) In practice, the relationships between member heterogeneity and team effectiveness are really complex and changeable, which was empirically proved by previous studies. Specifically, some variables such as conflict, communication, integration and knowledge sharing have played a mediating role in the relationship between member heterogeneity and team effectiveness. Moreover, in the actual operation of the team, these variables are commonly

interwoven and cannot be separated. However, bearing in mind the limitations of research ability, the current study just explored the synergy of team, and yet the interaction between other variables and synergy was not involved in the relationship between heterogeneity and team effectiveness. Therefore, future studies could take the interaction between different variables as the direction of exploration.

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