
Guest editorial: Relations across cultural boundaries: working with difference

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Introduction

This special issue of Team Performance Management has been compiled as a tribute to Dr Richard DeRidder who regretfully passed away in 2023. Richard was a playful and creative social psychologist, who conducted group research throughout his academic career, initially of a fundamental but later in his life of an applied nature. His obituary can be found directly following this introduction. Richard spent his research life studying dyadic and triadic aggression, intergroup norm violation, intercultural negotiation and multiparty collaboration. His colleagues who knew him and were inspired by his thinking have been invited to submit a paper for this special issue, around a theme or perspective that was of demonstrable interest to Richard.

Since Richard had a broad interest in social life, four quite different papers resulted, that study a wide variety of group phenomena, occurring within and between various types of groups, namely: a study into the role of positive psychological capital in experiencing of task conflict and relational conflict among military groups in Romania; a technical and critical paper on the notion of culture as an explanatory concept and how an emphasis on cultural difference rather than similarity dominates training in cross-cultural communication; a study of forgiveness and retaliation following (reactions to) norm violations between Hindus and Muslims in India; and finally, a viewpoint on the playful learning of and about the dynamics of multiparty collaboration.

It was difficult to find an overarching and fitting title which does full justice to each one of these papers while not being too general. The “good enough title” has become: *Relations across cultural boundaries: working with difference*. This introduction to the special issue will first present the four papers. After that, the relevance of the themes and findings of these papers for team researchers – and thus for *TPM* and its readership – will be highlighted.

The first paper by Maria Telecan, Petru Curșeu, Claudia Rus and Lucia Ratiu, studies how individuals’ positive psychological capital impacts intrateam and interteam relational and task conflict, namely, how conflict is anticipated, expressed and transformed over time (from task into relational conflict and vice versa), as experienced by members of two teams of the Romanian Armed Forces, deployed on a military mission. Also studied is how conflict is related to self-efficacy. The findings show that psychological capital protects against conflict expression and transformation, while relationship conflict diminishes deployment self-efficacy, providing promising avenues to develop conflict management strategies.

A paper by Rama Tripathi, Vaibhav Dwivedi and Rasmi Kumar follows. Using vignettes, they study retaliation and forgiveness among Hindus and Muslims in India and seek to predict the ingroup members’ responses (Hindu or Muslim), after initial norm violating behavior by the ingroup was reacted to by outgroup members (Muslim or Hindu). Forgiving or retaliatory reactions were predicted by social identities, fraternal relative deprivation, relative power, anger, hate and the perceived appropriateness of the ingroup reaction. The authors test predictions derived from Norm Violation Theory (DeRidder, Schruijer and Tripathi, 1992) so as to understand the potential escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict.



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The third paper is by Ype Poortinga. He addresses how “cultural difference” often uncritically is invoked as an explanatory variable of human behavior, and how stereotyping and other social judgment processes impede looking for communalities and findings ways to improve cross-cultural communication. Poortinga applies his thinking in preparing military personnel for international peace keeping operations, where militaries are confronted with multiple nationalities, and complex situations (see also [DeRidder, 1994](#)). The paper is classified as a “technical paper” yet it also embodies an important conceptual dimension for understanding diversity within and between groups.

The final paper is written by Sandra Schruijer, Tharsi Taillieu, Leopold Vansina and Petru Curşeu. They present their action research approach in understanding the dynamics of groups that consist of members representing different organizations, each organization having its own interests and identities. They introduce the notion of “transitional change” that inspires their work regarding helping protagonists develop collaborative interorganizational relationships. A two-day behavioral simulation that the authors have developed and played for many years, “The Yacht Club,” is elaborated upon. It helps participants gain an understanding of multiparty group dynamics through experiential learning.

Communalities of the four papers pertain to the fact that they all deal with real, living groups, that work on real tasks/concerns and operate in a larger organizational and/or societal context. The group is conceptualized as an open system and a multilevel perspective is taken. Furthermore, the main theme of all papers is diversity, both within and between groups. Different types of groups are studied (intraorganizational teams; societal groups; multiparty work groups), as well as different types of diversity (religious, organizational and personal resource). Cultural differences feature explicitly in two papers, while the remaining papers explicitly address difference and how to work with it. Two papers present new empirical findings, while one paper is a viewpoint largely based on action research, and one a technical paper using research findings to develop a training.

At a first glance, only one paper seems to fit a typical team research tradition best, by examining how positive psychological capital influences task and relational conflict in military groups. However, the themes of the other three papers bear relevance for group or team researchers too. For example, the concept of culture as an explanatory concept is relevant in the case of nationally and ethnically diverse groups. Frustration or conflict in such groups can easily be attributed to cultural differences, but is this justified? Furthermore, existing relationships between social groups in society (between men and women for example, or, between ethnic or religious groups) are represented in organizations and affect the quality of intragroup, intraorganizational and interorganizational relations ([Brown, 1979](#)). Thus, getting acquainted with the social psychology of intergroup relations (e.g. [Brown and Gaertner, 2003](#)) pays off in understanding the dynamics of groups, especially since phenomena at different system levels can spill over (e.g. [Curşeu and Schruijer, 2018](#)). Finally, multiparty groups are temporary groups that consist of members that represent different organizations; they are interdependent in addressing societal, often wicked issues. Such groups have become very common in current society.

The term “team” thus, has a broad meaning in the special issue. “Team” is a fashionable concept, taken from sports, like many other concepts that have entered the organization and management literature (“coaching,” “pitching,” “champion,” to name a few). However, organizing processes cannot simply be equated with sports. The popular phrase “There is no I in a team” illustrates its false simplicity. There *is* an I in a team, actually, as many as there are team members. Group dynamics occur precisely because there are I’s and there is a collective (“how can I be me while still being part of a group?”, or, in society, “how can we maintain our unique social identities while also belonging to the overall societal group?”).

Not only is it surprising that the term “team” appears to have replaced the term “group” despite their identical meaning (interdependent individuals that interact and work toward a group goal (e.g. [Shaw, 1981](#); [Forsyth, 2018](#)); with the demise of the term “group,” we lost research into group dynamics too ([Schruijer, 2013](#)).

The term “performance management,” a definitional element of *TPM*, implying an organizational and managerial focus, also can be interpreted more widely. While not all groups perform in the managerial sense (a family, for example), one can argue that well-being and happiness are relevant outcome variables for such groups. And, from an organization development perspective (e.g. [Cummings and Worley, 1993](#)), also for organizational groups: organizational performance and effectiveness not only embody task performance, yet, also the quality of the organization as a social system and its humanness ([Vansina, 2013](#)). Furthermore, managing performance not only implies control, yet also creating conditions for necessary change to happen, often not knowing beforehand what type of change is called for. Providing space to play and be creative is essential for development of social systems.

The spirit from which the papers in this special issue are written fits a developmental research perspective. It aims to help groups and their members to work with diversity – within groups and between groups. To help them learn to understand and handle the normal emotional dynamics of groups, and to respond rather than to react in the words of Edith [Eger \(2020\)](#), thus preventing, for example, escalation of conflict. Also, to go beyond quick explanations of undesirable behavior to “culture,” which tends to end exploration, and rather engage in joint sense-making.

The adage “if you really want to understand something, try to change it,” attributed to Kurt Lewin ([Tolman, 1996](#)), speaks for engaged scholarship and action research so as to contribute actionable knowledge ([Argyris, 2005](#)). Good research has direct societal relevance and applied value, a statement Richard DeRidder surely would have endorsed.

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