

Impact of Team Relationship Differentiation on Team Creativity: A Qualitative Research with Psychological Safety in the Team as a Mediator

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Qualitative Study

Abstract

Background: The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of team relationship differentiation on team creativity from the perspective of psychological safety of teams in China.

Methods: Qualitative research methods were used to conduct in-depth online and face-to-face interviews with respondents. The interviewees were 7 team leaders aged 23-43 years in the professional services, and retail and manufacturing sectors, which account for a large proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Data were collected by exploring the perspectives and experiences of the team leaders, analyzing the material in detail using content analysis, and then, managing and interpreting the data using NVivo software.

Results: The results show that the effects of the differentiation of team relationships on team creativity are mainly reflected in two aspects: differentiation of exchange relationships between the leader and team member (leader-member exchange) and differentiation of relationships between team members. In particular, psychological safety in the team plays an important role as a bridge and mediator.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that in the case of different levels of team psychological safety, the difference of the relationship between superiors and subordinates and the relationship between team members will have difference in the impact strength of team creativity. If the impact of the differentiation of adjustment relationships on the team cannot be balanced, it will hinder the team's innovation activities and the improvement of team effectiveness, thus affecting the team's overall creativity.

Keywords: Team psychological safety; Team creativity; Qualitative research

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Introduction

In today's intense competitive business environment, enhancing creativity is crucial for a company to maintain a competitive edge (Lv, Chen, & Ruan, 2021). Domestic and foreign scholars pay more and more attention to this topic year by year (Ding, Liu, Huang, & Gu, 2019; Luqman, Talwar, Masood, & Dhir, 2021). They have emphasized that it is not only necessary for individuals to have the ability to innovate, but also to establish an open communication atmosphere within the team. However, the "circle" phenomenon in the Chinese culture and the differentiated relationship between leaders and members may affect the willingness of team members to share and discuss. The potential impact of team relationship differentiation in the context of the Chinese culture and its mechanism are very important for in-depth analysis and improvement of team innovation ability of Chinese enterprises.

Research indicates that, compared to westerners, Chinese individuals seem less inclined to share and collaborate (Wang & Zhong, 2011). Leadership is considered crucial for achieving team goals, and the exchange relationships between leaders and members may affect members' willingness to discuss and share ideas. The prevalent "circle" culture in Chinese society, reflecting hierarchical features, profoundly influences interpersonal interaction rules and team outcomes (Zhang, 2018).

The quality of relationships within work teams has been shown to significantly impact individual and team creativity (Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011), encompassing both leader-member exchange (LMX) and team-member exchange (TMX). As an innovation in the organizational behavior field, exchange relationship theory highlights the quality differences in social exchange relationships within work teams (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Yet the issue of exchange relationship differentiation has not been thoroughly addressed (Hammond et al., 2011; Pan, Wang, Zhou, Miao, & Zhao, 2017). Addressing relationship differentiation allows the simultaneous consideration of the coexistence of different exchange relationships within teams and members' reactions in this context, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding when explaining team creative output. Therefore, further exploration of the relationship between relationship differentiation and team creativity is needed.

A project team made up of members from different cities, backgrounds, and industries can use individual networks to bring in expertise and resources from each region or industry (Brunetta, Marchegiani, & Peruffo, 2020). Defining creativity and innovation as employees using their knowledge and skills to creatively integrate resources to advance the interests of the company (Olaisen & Revang, 2017) will inject multiple innovative perspectives into the team, helping to break through traditional thinking and increase the level of creativity. Conversely, if members from different regions feel excluded from communication and decision-making, resulting in blocked information and divergent opinions, team creativity may be affected (Herman, Troth, Ashkanasy, & Collins, 2018). In china's "circle" culture, the diversity of relationships represents both a challenge and an opportunity. leaders and members must adapt flexibly to maximize the potential to unleash the team's creativity (Liu, Liu, Chen, Li, & Julie, 2020).

Team creativity is closely linked to team psychological safety, with the latter significantly influencing the former (Mehmood, Jian, Akram, Akram, & Tanveer, 2022). Moreover, local enterprises can effectively manage teams from the similar perspective of leader-member relationship differentiation by adopting flexible team management models and HR practices that are consistent with Chinese cultural and

ethnic characteristics (Chen, He, & Weng, 2018). Accordingly, it is interesting for this study to extend the research framework on applying the concept of relationship differentiation and explore the effects of team relationships on team creativity mediated by team psychological safety using a qualitative research design, offering insights for improving team management and fostering a positive psychological safety environment to enhance team creativity.

Due to the differential characteristics of Chinese traditional culture, the differentiation of interpersonal relationships within a team has a profound impact on the rules of interpersonal interaction and team output within a team, so this study is necessary. The results of this study can help local enterprises in the management of teams from the perspective of relationship differentiation and improvement of team creativity. In the process of establishing creative teams, it is also conducive for local enterprises to adopt a suitable team management mode and human resource practice mode to adapt to China's national conditions. According to the existing literature, although scholars have made a series of discussions on the team outcome variables of team relationship differentiation, there is very limited research on the relationship between team relationship differentiation and team creativity. Therefore, the authors of this study believe that it is necessary to explore the impact of team relationship differentiation on team creativity through the mediation of team psychological safety. Therefore, as mentioned above, the purpose of this study was to focus on the impact of team relationship differentiation on enterprise team creativity and the mediating role of team psychological security in this relationship under China's national conditions and national characteristics.

Methods

Study Design and Participants: The research strategy used in this study was a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were used to attempt to explain the impact of team relationship differentiation on corporate team creativity in the context of China's national and cultural setting, as well as the mediating role of team psychological safety in this relationship. Qualitative research aims to explore the background of why individuals or groups make decisions and behave in certain ways and provides explanations for why certain phenomena occur. Bi-directional communication helps to obtain more data throughout the interview process, which requires in-depth knowledge. It allows researchers to ask questions that go beyond the parameters of semi-structured surveys, allowing for more effective data collection and subsequent action (Limna, Siripipatthanakul, & Phayaphrom, 2021; Tong-On, Siripipatthanakul, & Phayaphrom, 2021). According To Bryman (2006) and Siripipatthanakul and Bhandar (2021), although semi-structured interviews are widely used in research, their diversity, underlying structure, and extensive application in qualitative research are often overlooked. Therefore, this study utilized a semi-structured interview approach by collecting data from 1 team leader in each of the 7 selected small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in China, resulting in 7 interview transcripts. Purposive sampling requires researchers to select the most helpful samples based on their expertise. This method is often used in qualitative research to gain deeper insights into specific phenomena or populations (Limna, Siripipatthanakul, Siripipattanakul, & Auttawechasakoon, 2022). The data is collected through purposive sampling. The 7 key informants for this study were team leaders from 7 SMEs in China. The study inclusion criteria were: 1) being leaders of teams in SMEs in China, 2) being between 23 and 43 years of age, and 3) having awareness

and knowledge of team relationship differentiation, team creativity, and team psychological safety.

Sample Size: According to the inclusion criteria, 7 managers with special characteristics in promoting creativity in their respective teams were selected as a sample. The 7 respondents were between 33 and 43 years of age, their companies had between 10 and 300 employees and were SMEs. These interviewees have outstanding expertise and different management characteristics in their respective fields and have different opinions on building their own team creativity. This ensures the authenticity and universality of the data.

Instruments and Variable: The researchers conducted an in-depth review of secondary data (Literature Review) to obtain the original data results for the relevant research questions. The interview questions were based on reliable and effective sources as described in the research by Cappelli (2008). The following is a list of interview questions for the survey.

Q1 : What influence do you think positive leadership has on team creativity?

Q2 : How do you create and maintain the psychological safety of your team through positive leadership in the organization?

Q3 : What role do you think team psychological safety plays in the impact of positive leadership on team creativity?

Q4 : In your opinion, how does positive leadership affect the promotion orientation of teams?

Q5 : In your opinion, what role does the team's promotion orientation play in the impact of positive leadership on the team's creativity?

Q6 : In your opinion, how does positive leadership affect the team's entrepreneurial passion?

Q7 : What role do you think the team's entrepreneurial passion plays in the impact of positive leadership on the team's creativity?

Analysis: The participants in this study were team leaders from 7 SMEs in China; 6 men and 1 woman were selected through purposive sampling. According To Limna et al. (2022), content analysis is a qualitative technique in which meaningful conclusions are systematically and objectively drawn from verbal, visual, or written data to describe and quantify phenomena.

In this paper, the researchers used content analysis to conduct a detailed analysis of qualitative data collected through in-depth online and face-to-face interviews. By delving deeper into team members' perspectives and experiences, we seek to understand how relational differentiation directly or indirectly affects team creativity and explore the mediating role of team psychological safety in this relationship. Moreover, the process of qualitative data analysis involves the systematic collation and coding of interview recordings and textual material. To support data management and interpretation, we used NVivo (version 14; QSR International, Burlington, MA, USA). The software helps us to effectively organize and sift through large amounts of qualitative information so that we can identify underlying patterns, themes, and trends. When interpreting the results, we relied on the visualization tools and reporting features of the software to clearly and comprehensively present key insights from the qualitative data analysis.

Ethics: The researchers collected data and obtained valid and truthful information through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The format and duration of each interview varied depending on the content of the topic and the circumstances of each participant. It depended on a variety of factors, such as time, perception, and personal

desire. Thereby, the interviews were recorded after the initial coordination. The researchers conducted the narrative interviews between December 2023 And January 2024. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes, and where possible, the audio recordings were tape-recorded, and then, transcribed verbatim. Once the interviews were completed, the rich data was saturated from the participants' experiences.

Results

Demographic information of participants: The participants were mainly from the professional service sectors, which accounts for a significant proportion of SMEs, including 6 people from the internet and technology services industry and 1 person from the retail and manufacturing sectors. They were between 23 and 43 years of age, including 6 male team leaders and 1 female team leader. They provided insights into team relationships and team creativity in their respective teams and were able to identify the impact of team relationship differentiation on team creativity.

Leader-member exchange differentiation and team creativity

Social comparison theory states that individuals who compare themselves to others can trigger negative emotions, such as frustration, jealousy, and rejection of others. When maintaining a differentiated exchange relationship between leaders and team members, employees with low exchange relationship quality may have less communication with leaders and have power distance (Gooty & Yammarino, 2016). This can stimulate positive performance, but may also lead to conflict with close ties to the leadership of the staff, make them reluctant to provide more feedback and new ideas for the team, and be more focused on individual ability to ascend (Lin, Chen, Tse, Wei, & Ma, 2019). Low-quality exchange relationship is reflected in the failure of leaders to motivate and praise employees for their efforts in performing their duties, which may inhibit the enthusiasm of subordinates and prevent them from expressing their opinions. With the further deepening of LMX differences, the enthusiasm of subordinates may decline significantly, which has a serious negative impact on team creativity.

"When communication between our leader and team members is relatively limited, resulting in a significant power imbalance between the leader and employees, I have found that some colleagues are more motivated and strive to improve their individual performance. In such situations, they may actively adapt to the leader's expectations and strive for more recognition" (Interviewee 1: Mr. Guo, male, 37 years old, Engineer in a small electronic technology company).

"Some partners may be more actively engaged in their work and strive to improve the overall performance of the company because they feel motivated. On the other hand, some partners may be less willing to cooperate due to dissatisfaction with the distribution of power. This situation can lead to a tense atmosphere within the team, which hinders smooth cooperation and is not conducive to creating a healthier and more dynamic working environment." (Interviewee 5: Mr. Li, male, 43 years old, Partner in a law firm).

Team Psychological safety as a mediator in differentiated leader-member exchange relationships and team creativity

Differences in LMX can have a psychological impact on team members, causing internal tensions and feelings of insecurity as members vie for the leader's attention. Inappropriate distribution systems can also affect team members' trust and sense of belonging. Research shows that people assess the safety of the environment before actively sharing suggestions and ideas (Wang & Niu, 2004). The psychological safety of a team is based on a working atmosphere characterized by high trust and mutual

respect among members. In teams with high psychological safety, members are more willing to express their ideas in detail and give constructive feedback, which promotes learning and innovation in the team (Pan, Zhou, & Zhou, 2010).

The exchange relationship between leaders and members represents a leadership style and reflects the overall team atmosphere. Differences in LMX can lead to the deterioration of relationships between team members (Sherony & Green, 2002). Studies show that the more similar the LMX quality is to the team leader, the better the quality of colleague relationships (Sherony & Green, 2002). LMX differences can disrupt the internal psychological safety of the team, and the leader's differential treatment of subordinates can lead to the fragmentation of team members into informal subgroups, increasing interpersonal risks within the team and increasing the likelihood of conflict (Ma & Qu, 2010). This ultimately reduces the psychological safety of the team. In summary, LMX differentiation can undermine team creativity by reducing the psychological safety of the team.

"Members, who feel insecure while competing for the attention of leaders, experience a decrease in trust and sense of belonging to the team due to an unfair distribution system. Having recognized these situations, I know how important it is to create psychological safety in the team in an open and relaxed atmosphere." (Interviewee 4: Mr. Qin, male, 39 years old, director of a technology company).

"I have found that differences in relationships between leaders and members can lead to the deterioration of relationships between colleagues, especially when there are conflicts between leaders and partners. This can disrupt psychological safety within the team, increase interpersonal risks and increase the likelihood of internal conflicts." (Interviewee 5: Mr. Li, male, 43 years old, head of a law firm).

Differential team member relationships and team creativity

The interactionist view of creativity assumes that creativity is not only influenced by individual characteristics, but also by social and contextual factors, especially in the context of teams. The differentiation of exchange relationships between team members leads to differences in the extent to which social-emotional resources are exchanged (Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010). The shared atmosphere within a team, members' emotional care and resource support have a positive impact on individual creativity, with high-quality exchange relationships significantly influencing creative behavior (Muñoz-Doyague & Nieto, 2012; Zhou & George, 2001).

The interactionist perspective emphasizes the crucial role of interaction between individual and contextual factors for creativity. In this framework, it is assumed that the exchange relationships between team members play a moderating role in the process in which individuals with high central self-evaluation influence creativity through harmonious passion. Harmonious passion has a significant positive impact on individual creativity, especially in the context of high-quality exchange relationships between team members. Under such circumstances, resources are aligned, and emotional support is exchanged between team members, and this promotes individual creativity.

However, in the context of low-quality exchange relationships between team members, individuals with high harmonious passion may have difficulty receiving positive feedback through regular channels and may even face negative feedback such as jealousy (Braun, Aydin, Frey, & Peus, 2018) and rejection (Yan, Zhou, Long, & Ji, 2014). As individuals with high harmonious passion typically prefer interpersonal relationships, this negative feedback may affect their creative enthusiasm, which negatively impacts individual creativity.

"Information sharing, resource support, and positive feedback between team members play a crucial role in increasing individual creativity levels. Especially in situations where there are high-quality exchanges between members, it is easier for team members to engage in resource matching and emotional support." (Interviewee 2: Mr. Wang, male, 33 years old, engineer in a small information technology company).

"In a good relationship, our team members encourage each other through resource matching and emotional support, and receive positive support and feedback, which enhances our overall creativity. In teams with poor relationships between members, team members may have difficulty receiving positive feedback and may even be harassed by negative feedback, which affects the organization's innovation." (Interviewee 3: Mr. Tao, male, 40 years old, partner in an IT technology company).

Team psychological safety as a mediator in the relationship between team member relationship differentiation and team creativity

Psychological safety in the team as a social belief that creates trust, respect, and care within a team can play a mediating role in the relationship between the relational differentiation of team members and the creativity of the team. According to the IPO model (Input → Process → Output), Team input influences team processes and ultimately affects team results. The relationship differentiation of team members as a form of team input can affect the psychological safety of the team during team processes, and thus, influence the creativity of the team (Kozlowski, 2015). Relationship differentiation directly creates a tense atmosphere and forms an unsafe working environment (Gu, Wang, & Wang, 2013). In such a situation, communication barriers and obstacles to the sharing of resources can arise, which significantly affect the creativity of the team. By promoting psychological safety in the team, the team can better manage the challenges arising from members' different relationships, maintain efficient communication and collaboration of resources, and thus, unleash the potential for team creativity.

"Working in a law firm requires a high level of cooperation and coordination, and psychological safety within the team is the basis for open communication between members. We strive to create a working environment characterized by trust and respect. I promote psychological safety in the team through regular team training and maintaining open channels of communication. This ensures that team members can grow together in a safe environment, which promotes the ability to creatively tackle legal challenges" (Interviewee 5: Mr. Li, male, 43 years old, director of a law firm).

"From our daily management experience, we know that too much difference in the interaction between leaders and members can lead to internal division and the formation of small groups within the team. This can lower the overall level of psychological safety, and thus, have a negative impact on creativity." (Interviewee 7: Ms. Fang, female, 38 years old, director of a cultural and artistic creativity company).

Discussion

The aim of the present qualitative research was to investigate the impact of team relationship differentiation on team creativity in SMEs based on the national conditions and characteristics of China. The main objective of this study in this area was to identify the importance and role of psychological safety in the team as a mediator between team relationship differentiation and team creativity from the recorded statements of the participants. In our study, the process of increasing team creativity is described as a dynamic and evolving process.

The research findings support that of earlier studies by Henderson, Liden,

Glibkowski, and Chaudhry (2009), Boies and Howell (2006), Hooper and Martin (2008), Liden et al. (2006), Ma and Qu (2010), and Naidoo, Scherbaum, Goldstein, and Graen (2011). In particular, the study confirms that the differentiation of exchanges between leaders and members is a universal team phenomenon. It has a significant impact on team interactions, team effectiveness, team atmosphere, and relationships between team members. These influences have a direct impact on the development of team creativity.

The study also confirms the theories of Pan et al. (2010), Sherony and Green (2002) and Shalley and Gilson (2004), which emphasize the mediating role of team psychological safety in the relationship between differential LMX and team creativity. Differential LMX reflects the degree of resource allocation in the team and status differences among members, which inevitably affects the efficiency of interactions and psychological changes among team members. The difference in LMX between team leaders and subordinates can lead to negative relationships between colleagues, and thus, disrupt the psychological safety atmosphere in the team. In addition, the different treatment of subordinates by leaders can lead to a split among team members (Gerstner & Day, 1997; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984) and even lead to the formation of informal subgroups within the team. This increases interpersonal risks within the team, which increases the likelihood of internal conflict, and consequently, reduces the psychological safety of the team.

This study confirms the theories put forward by Seers (1989), Alge, Wiethoff, & Klein (2003), Shangen (2011), Gajendran and Joshi (2012), and Ismail, Hamzah, Ngah, Mustaffa, Zakaria, and Noordin (2012). In low-quality exchange relationships, communication between team members is passive and is only fulfilled out of a sense of duty to achieve common goals. In contrast, high-quality exchange relationships involve active participation of team members, with focus on emotional expression, mutual respect, and other aspects of communication during goal pursuit. The high quality of internal exchanges within a team reflects and altruistic work atmosphere, such as mutual benefit and information sharing among team members. Negative effects can affect the quality of social exchange, as team members who perceive poor quality of exchange relationships gradually lose trust in the knowledge and perspectives of other members. They also fail to appreciate the critical importance of internal knowledge sharing and communication to the overall benefit of the team. In such a situation, they are more likely to adopt an "outsider" attitude towards the team tasks, which poses a serious threat to the team's creativity. This tendency can lead to team members being less inclined to engage in intensive collaboration, creating internal barriers within the team, and hindering the emergence of innovation. Therefore, this study not only confirms the practical implications of relationship differentiation, but also highlights its potential harm to team collaboration and creative performance.

Finally, the research findings also suggest that psychological safety in the team plays a mediating role in the relationship between team members' relational differentiation and team creativity. This suggests that as the level of relationship differentiation between team members increases, the level of psychological safety in the team decreases, which in turn affects team creativity. This finding can be attributed to the team members' perception of interpersonal risk due to relationship differentiation, which leads to less involvement in collaborative decision-making and a lack of enthusiasm for creative activities. As a result, the overall level of team creativity decreases significantly.

This study examines team-level variables to help individuals better understand and adapt to the ever-changing social exchange relationships within teams. To reasonably mitigate the effects of differentiation on fostering team creativity, there are the following strategic recommendations for management practice. First, define innovation goals precisely by using quantifiable team innovation targets to maintain the team's efficient innovation capability. Second, emphasize the selection of team leaders with extensive professional experience, and a strong sense of honor and responsibility to avoid excessive relational differentiation. Third, ensure a rational distribution of team members' roles to minimize the degree of differentiation within the team. Fourth, create effective performance incentive mechanisms to reduce internal friction, integrate resources, and maximize the contribution of each team member.

Conclusion

In this study, the different effects of differentiating LMX and TMXs on team creativity are examined in detail. The introduction of the variable of psychological safety in the team illustrated that this variable serves as a mediator in both influence processes. This enriches the research on the outcomes of differentiation in relationships and contributes to the further development of differentiation theories. The research focuses on situational factors at the team level and uses qualitative analysis to validate the differences in the strength of the relationship between LMX differentiation, TMX differentiation, and team creativity at different levels of team psychological safety. This finding contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between relational differentiation and team creativity under different contextual conditions. The study focus is on a careful examination of situational factors, complements existing research, and provides a comprehensive conclusion for a more thorough understanding of the impact of relational differentiation on team creativity. In addition, this study serves as a valuable reference for future research and practical applications in related fields and provides a more detailed understanding of the mechanisms by which relationship differentiation affects team creativity under different levels of team psychological safety.

Although this research has some contributions in both theory and practice, there are still some deficiencies in this paper due to the limited attention paid to qualitative methods in research. First, the impact of relationship differentiation on team creativity requires balanced adjustments, as extreme levels can impede innovative activities. Second, when team psychological safety plays a differentiated role in the relationship between differentiation and team creativity, managers must choose the most effective methods to enhance team effectiveness. Third, the simplicity of interview methods results in somewhat limited persuasiveness, prompting suggestions for more in-depth quantitative research to deepen our understanding of these relationships.

The research findings indicate that in a high-quality team psychological safety environment, a reasonable control of the degree of team relationship differentiation is more likely to enhance team creativity. Managers can maintain internal status differences at an appropriate level, fostering the development of labor division and comprehensive employee growth, reducing the wasting of social resources in non-productive activities. However, when introducing status attribution methods, team managers should tailor them to their specific context. Additionally, team managers can increase employees' sense of psychological safety by improving task interdependence, setting shared goals, and enhancing leadership styles, thereby

minimizing the negative effects of team status threats on psychological safety.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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