

Impact of Ethnic and Language Diversity on Relationship Conflict in Project teams: Evidence from Pakistan

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Abstract

The increasing diversity among project teams has increased the importance of how demographics differences influences the project teams and their performance. This study will analyze the impact of ethnic and language diversity on relationship conflict, a culturally and language diverse country. Drawing from social identity theory, the research investigates how language and ethnic differences contributes tension, emotional and misunderstanding among project team members. Relationship conflict, characterized by incompatibility, mistrust and disagreement can negatively impact the project overall outcomes. Using quantitative research design, data are collected from project team members working in various organizations. This study investigates the extent to which ethnic and language diversity impacts the emergence of relationship conflict. This paper further explores how communication barriers, sub-group formation in teams, and other differences may intensify the relationship conflict. This paper contributes to the existing literature of diversity and project teams by offering insights of developing country, where language and ethnic differences are silent. The results of this study assist the project managers and organizational leaders to design effective practices for project teams, promoting effective conflict management strategies and also implementing it. At the same time, minimizing diversity adverse /negative impact. Finally, there is strict need to foster the collaborative project team environment to transform the diversity into innovation.

Keywords: Ethnic Diversity, Language Diversity, Relationship Conflict, Cultural Diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization are increasing around the world, as a result, diversity is increasing in various organization. In various project teams, mostly team members have different ethnic and language background (Qasmi, H.A.U., Khan, A.B., and Ali, R.M, 2023). Diversity can be beneficial because it adds in innovation, creativity and problem solving, but it also creates tension and interpersonal issues. The country Pakistan is multi-cultural country with different ethnicities including Punjabi, Sindhi, Balouchi, Pathan, Mahajir, Saraiki etc. Multiple languages spoken across the 04 provinces, In such environment, where employees, managers come from different backgrounds collectively work together, language, ethnic differences may impact trust, communication, and social relationship.

In the current economic crises, the government is not being able to provide the permanent jobs with several perks and incentives, for this reason; the government is focusing on project based employment in Pakistan (Hennekam et al., 2019; Aiswarya et al., 2024). Consequently, focusing cohesion among project teams is increasingly challenge, as the conflicts are unavoidable part in culturally diverse country like Pakistan (Freeman and Lindsay, 2012; Alagarsamy et al., 2024). Workforce diversity refers to the ethical, language, cultural, religious (Shia and Sunni) and political differences among project cross-functional teams within an organization (Ravazzani, 2016). Project cross-functional teams are not only adopting diversity to meet legal requirements but also leveraging it as tool for promoting innovation, problem solving (Roberson, 2019). If diversity is not effectively managed, diversity can lead to negative outcomes i.e. task conflict and finally relationship conflict (Launrence et al., 2018).

Two types of diversity that are common in project cross-functional teams namely ethnic diversity and language diversity (Lauring and selmer, 2012), concluded that language and ethnic diversity in project cross-functional teams may positively affect the teamwork outcomes (Ely and Thomas, 2001). Task related debates have been found to increase creativity as the members of project cross-functional teams have diverse knowledge and skills (Kratzer et al., 2004; Stahl et al., 2010) . As the work outcomes is creativity and performance, that have been mostly mentioned in previous literature (Cox, 1994; Srikanth et al., 2016).

Projects are working tremendously by hiring skilled graduates from four provinces in current economic crises and also global requirements of doing business (Bartlett and Goshen, 1992). Ethnicity is the basic element that shapes project team dynamics within workplace. Ethnic diversity refers to the heterogenic team members in terms of ethnicity and cultural background (Leslie, 2017; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Zhnag and Kommol, 2024). Similarly, diversity also operationalized by considering employee's language into projects (Lazear, 1999; Morgan and Vardy, 2009; Jansson and Bursell, 2018). The language is also key feature in Pakistan diverse cultural environment, specific challenges results from different language and belongs to different culture. Similarly, issues related to language can influence trust and environment of work due to various interpersonal conflicts. Language and ethnic diversity has received rare attention and is often neglected, it is just

treated as part of culture which actually because interpersonal conflicts is usually underexplored. The problem is that managing ethnic and language diversity to reduce relationship conflict is a challenge as well as very instrumental to make cooperative and harmonious cross-functional teams.

Today, cross-functional teams are the essential requirement of projects to meet modern business requirement, to embrace new structure to reduce cost; maximizing flexibility, productivity, in order to achieve competitive advantage. The paper mainly examines the impact of ethnic and language diversity on relationship conflict. Furthermore, Project cross-functional teams can use insights for team wellbeing, boost performance and overall productivity. This paper adds the body of knowledge to existing literature of ethnic and language diversity and conflict management in project cross-functional teams of Pakistan, which is too diverse.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The workforce diversity is required is essential part of project cross-functional teams, in context of Pakistan, work force diversity is comprised of visible and invisible attributes (Barak, 2016), such as ethnicity and language (yingjun et al., 2020). It encourages creative thinking, diverse talent, diverse background, problem solving capabilities (Yeager Nafukho, 2012). At the same time, both diversities is the key that acts a basis of discrimination among group. Ethnic diversity is the heterogeneity of cross-functional teams where differences mainly based on language, religion, race and culture (Leslie, 2017; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Zhang and Kommol, 2024). Categorization Elaboration Model (CEM) states that (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004) members of cross-functional teams in projects perceive and negatively evaluate dissimilar (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004) while positively consider similar ethnic members due to social categorization (Haslam, 2004; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Consequently, mental categorization leads to less or no communication, reduces trust and cooperation in ethnically diverse circumstances, ultimately reduces productive outcomes of project cross-functional teams (Dinesen and Sonderskov, 2018).

Ethnic Diversity

Ethnicity is the key factor that either unite or separate project cross-functional team (Taniya katren, 2010). While ethnocentric natured team members maintain social distance especially with members of different ethnicity within team (Ibarra, 1995). However, in interdependent cross-functional teams, no interaction is neither a sustainable nor practical. Further, purely task related and official communication increase the chances for anxiety and stress (Peterson, 2002). Although, when team members encounter difficulties due to communication gap and they failed to accomplish task, such circumstances escalate more chances misunderstanding, shifts ones behavior for blaming and finally relationship conflict emerged (Chan and Goto, 2003). Ethnic diversity is the key dimension encompasses differences in terms of race, religion and culture (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005). This form of diversity is typically measured by one's province, region, origin, which brings

together diverse norms and values to project cross-functional teams (Lazear, 1999; Morgan & Vardy, 2009). Consequently, ethnic diversity enhances creativity and innovation by bringing diverse skills together; at the same time, it also poses challenges in communication because many team members in project have different mother tongues or language (Henderson, 2005; Vulchanov, 2021).

Language Diversity

Language diversity refers to the members having different mother tongue, this type of diversity is seen as the main agent of integration into project cross-functional teams (Fredriksson et al., 2006). In the diverse project based cross-functional teams, it facilitates the language based clusters. Therefore, clusters form language based groups in project cross-functional teams. Language being reported as barrier for project team inter-communication, in culturally diverse country like Pakistan. Language differences appeared to be an obvious barrier to a project based team's proficiency in solving problems. Different language involves a barrier for communication align with difficulty in understanding oral messages and team documentation, isolate the members who are not be able to communicate proficiently with team members (Merschan et al., 1999). Previous literature shown that talking in common language rather than mother tongue is more demanding if there are highly qualified cross-functional teams in projects (Volk et al., 2014). Moreover, communications are often biased with whom one has linguistic affiliation (Harzing and Pudelko, 2013). In context of Pakistan, in Project cross-functional teams, it reduces willingness to interact and enhances internal sub-groups formation (Klitmoller and Lauring, 2016 and Selmer, 2012) with conflicts.

Since from the beginning, language diversity has received little attention or it is neglected in team setting. The language diversity has been defined as members with different mother tongues within project cross functional team setting. In context of Pakistan and Sindh, team members are very reluctant to accept member of other language (Jonsen et al., 2011), when team members have different language within group, it usually enables other team members to socially categorize (Jackson et al., 1993; Timmerman, 2000), and they perceive that member as heterogeneous. Consequently, they display negative or biased attitude towards linguistically different team member. In cross-functional teams, team members often likely to interact with members of same language (Spencer and Wollman, 2002), and they likely to communicate with them and overall they feel ease with them. However, communication is considered as central to group functioning within team (Reed, 2010; Taylor and Van every, 2000) in order to avoid misunderstanding. In addition, differences in language, behavior pattern, different communication pattrens, language barriers easily heat task related disagreement into interpersonal conflict (Taylor & corren, 1997).

Relationship Conflict

Relationship conflict refers to the incompatibilities among project team members, often characterized by tension, annoyance and friction. Task conflict is not always persistent with relationship conflict (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Tidd et al., 2004), but, different conclusions to task conflict confuse the diverse team that how task should be accomplished (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Although, when task failed to get solution, members having different ethnic and linguistic, background easily emerged in to relationship conflict, members blame each other, biased towards others, communication gap lead to separation among cross functional team (Tsui et al., 1992) than similar group having similar ethnic and linguistic, cultural, background identity. Conflicts are common in cross functional teams of project (Bayazit and Mannix, 2003). Moreover, Conflict is a situation where both parties within team hold different point of view in a manner that easily lead them towards clash (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Similarly, Jhen (2007) identified three main types of conflict i.e. Task conflict, Process conflict and relationship conflict. Conflict can be task, process and relationship based, it causes a divisions based on preferences (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which adversely impacts the performance, productivity. In cross-functional teams conflict usually hinders or frustrate each other in project (Alper, Tjosvold and Law, 2000).

Research Model

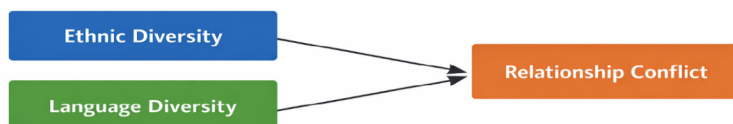


Figure 01: Impact of Ethnic and Language diversity on relationship conflict

Hypothesis

Both ethnic and language diversity acts as a base for discrimination and categorization within teams of projects. In response to economic pressures and lack of permanent employment, government is focusing on project based employment for specific period have compelled many individuals to work together as part of team (Nailah Ayub & Karen Jhen, 2015). As diverse members increases in project team, according to similarity attraction theory, team members maintain gap and they develop sub- groups of ethnically homogenous sub-groups . The nature of ethnic conflict in Pakistan differ greatly depends on historical context of 04 provinces historical grievances, unequal distribution of resources in 04 provinces, political power struggles and cultural differences can all contribute to differences, these

differences in project teams leads to aversion among team members of project , because when task conflicts occurred, the driving force behind the conflicts are deeply rooted that usually arises between different ethnic groups (Wikipedia, 2023). There are four major ethnicities in Pakistan and Sindh including Punjabi, Sindhi, Pathan and Baluchi, every ethnic group has different culture, when members evoke behavioral responses and emotions usually shaped by cultural norms (Cramton and Hinds, 2005). Moreover, Project heads tend to favor the contribution of same ethnic group and they ignore recognition and achievement of dissimilar members (Elsass and Graves, 2005). Resultantly, the ethnically diverse team members definitely perceive biasness and discrimination. For this reason, cross –functional teams failed to get benefit in various projects. The recent example is resources disputes, enforced disappearances, seriously affect Punjabis and Baloch communities have led to hostility and even target killing of Punjabis.

Hypothesis 01: The ethnic diversity is significantly impact interpersonal relationship conflict

Language is the in shaping cultural identity and social interactions among communities of Pakistan. Pakistan is multilingual country with diverse linguistic background. Urdu is the top most spoken language, along with English, Sindhi, Balouchi, Saraiki and Punjabi is the regional languages, widely spoken in 04 different provinces (Gulzar, 2016). Linguistic diversity presents various challenges particularly in project based cross–functional teams. The entire system focusses the english and Urdu, with little attention given to other languages (Rehman, 2019), For this reason; it negatively affects and marginalize certain communities. Communication barriers usually occurred in project cross–functional teams (Iqbal, 2019). Communication breakdowns usually caused by linguistic diversity within teams (Henderson, 2005). Effective and efficient communication is key to team functioning and when diverse languages will be spoken within same team, team members failed to maintain social relationship with each other (welch & welch, 2008), consequently, distance and communication gap remains (Jhonson & lederer, 2005). This social distances reinforces various stereotype that particularly related to that language, culture, provincial history that negatively impact team member's positive attitude and reduces team cohesion (Tsui et al.,1992). Consequently, various projects prefer domiciled based hiring from same province with same language (Spencer and Wolman, 2002), because they feel more comfortable with peoples of same language in order to avoid misunderstanding. In case of diverse hiring in project teams, Unintentional socio – cultural misinterpretation, ethnic stereotypes, communication barriers, lack of socio – Linguistic knowledge paves the way to relationship conflict among team members.

Hypothesis 2: Diversity of Language significantly impacts Relationship conflict

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

We have adopted a descriptive, cross sectional design to examine the impact of ethnic and language diversity on relationship conflict/ interpersonal conflict within context of cross functional teams of projects. We have used descriptive design, because it enables us to thoroughly examine phenomenon under study.

Research Strategy

A survey based strategy was employed, because organizational and behavioral studies widely employ this method due to its effectiveness in examining the relationship among the variables. Although, previous studies explored general or workforce diversity, empirical evidences on ethnic and language diversity within cross functional teams of projects remains limited. By keeping in view economic crises and globally increasing workforce heterogeneity is both relevant and timely.

Research Method

The paper has utilized the quantitative approach in order to achieve above given stated research objectives (Pollitt and Hungler, 1993). This method allows us to examine the causal relationship between ethnic and language diversity and its impact on relationship conflict/interpersonal conflict. Similarly, this approach focusses the relationship between two independent and dependent variables (Mouton, 1996). In this study data were collected through adopted structured questionnaire.

Data Collection Method and Sampling Technique

We have collected data through adopted structured questionnaire, questionnaire was physically distributed to respondents of project based cross functional teams working in Sindh i.e. Sindh water and agriculture transformation (SWAT) project based team, Solar energy project, Sindh Flood emergency rehabilitation project, Sindh peoples housing for flood affects and CPEC project. This study employed simple random sampling, because every participant has an equal chance of selection. The total sample for this study comprised of 250 employees of 15 cross functional teams across the various projects were. Group often composed of 10 to 13 employees. The sample size was calculated by using Sekaran sample size determination table.

Research Instruments

Self –Administered questionnaire was divided into two main parts; first part captured demographic information of the respondents including ethnicity (Sindhi, Urdu-speaking, Punjabi, Pathan, and Baloch), gender, and qualification. The second part covered the variables under study. Ethnic diversity containing 05 items adopted from M-Guzman universality -Scale (1999). But 4 items of language diversity were adopted from (Harzing and Feely, 2008; Hobman et al., 2004). Relationship conflict

containing 04 items adopted from jhen 1995.

Data Collection Sources

This study primarily relies on primary data. Data were physically conducted from respondents at various cross functional teams working in Sindh on different project Ethical Considerations

Formal permission was obtained from various project heads prior to data collection. Respondents were already informed by management. We assured them that confidentiality will be strictly maintained and data collection will only be used for academic purpose.

RESULTS

Demographic Data of Respondents (N = 250)

Table 01: Demographic Data

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Ethnic Group		
Sindhi Background	107	42.8
Baloch Background	89	35.6
Mahajir Background	47	18.8
Punjabi Background	7	2.8
Gender		
Male	167	66.8
Female	83	33.2
Qualification		
Graduation	169	67.6
Masters	71	28.4
M-Phil	10	4.0

The majority of respondents belonged to the Sindhi ethnic group (42.8%), followed by Baloch (35.6%), Mahajir (18.8%), and Punjabi (2.8%). Male respondents constituted 66.8% of the sample. Most respondents were graduates (67.6%).
Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

Table 02: Descriptive statistics and Reliability Analysis

Variable	Items	M	SD
Ethnic Diversity	05	2.1945	.68816
Language Diversity	04	2.1555	.60127
Relationship Conflict	4	2.2424	.7352

The mean score for ethnic diversity was 2.1945 (SD = .68816), Language Diversity was 2.1555 (SD= .60127), while relationship conflict had a mean score of 2.2424 (SD = .7352), indicating good levels of perceived ethnic and language diversity and relationship conflict among respondents.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Table 03: Reliability and Validity analysis

Variable	Items	α
Ethnic Diversity	05	.810
Language Diversity	04	.730
Relationship Conflict	4	.861

The mean values indicate strong ethnic and language diversity and relationship conflict. Cronbach's alpha values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming acceptable internal consistency and reliability of all measurement scales.

Pearson Correlation between Diversity and Relationship Conflict

Table 04: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3
Ethnic Diversity	1		
Language Diversity	.54**	1	
Relationship Conflict	.46**	.50**	1

Pearson correlation analysis revealed statistically significant relationship between ethnic , language diversity and relationship conflict.

Model Summary

Table 05: Model Summary

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error of Estimate
1	.59	.35	.34	.60

The regression model explains .35 % of the variance in relationship conflict, suggesting that ethnic and language diversity is a meaningful predictor of

relationship conflict.

ANOVA Results (N= 250)

Table 06: ANOVA results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	42.85	2	21.43	54.12	.000
Residual	152.90	247	.62		
Total	195.75	249			

The ANOVA results confirm that the regression model is highly significant ($F = 54.12$, $p < .001$), indicating strong explanatory power with 250 respondents.

Table 07: Coefficients value

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.
Constant	.69	.18	—	3.83	.000
Ethnic Diversity	.29	.06	.31	4.83	.000
Language Diversity	.36	.07	.38	5.41	.000

Both Independent variables (Ethnic and Language diversity) have significant impact on relationship conflict.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted to examine the impact of ethnic and language diversity on relationship conflict, data were collected from 250 diverse employees within project cross functional teams in context of Sindh, Pakistan. Among diverse 15 cross functional teams in Sindh, data were collected from 250 employees of who worked in different cross functional teams, overall, the findings suggest that language diversity has greater impact on relationship conflict than ethnic diversity. The overall correlation, regression analysis encompasses that as ethnic, linguistic, differences increases, it enhances the like hood of interpersonal conflicts/emotional conflict.

Consistent with social categorization and similarity attraction, suggesting that similar employees work together and perceive others as dissimilar. Pakistan is a country, where every province has provincial, political and historical differences are deeply entrenched, such categorization intensifies stereotype, misunderstanding and favoritism by head of projects. Consequently, task related disagreements easily emerged in relationship conflict that psychologically harm the cohesion of teams, wellbeing and infect influence overall performance. Overall, this study, focus ethnic and language diversity rather than general by providing evidences of highly diverse country like Pakistan. In sum, diversity is double edge sword; it benefits the firm

but also harm the firm if it is not effectively managed in project cross functional teams. By keeping in view the findings and conclusion, head of projects and leaders of teams should be trained with leadership styles that minimize favoritism.

As for as the limitations is concerned, this study only collected data from various projects teams of Sind, which restricts the general ability of findings to other provinces. This study only considers one antecedent of ethnic and language diversity and failed to consider other factors like leadership, culture and communication were not examined. Comparative studies could be conducted across the different cities of Pakistan for gaining insight into how different context impact the ethnic and language diversity –conflict dynamics. Qualitative studies i.e. focus groups, interviews on same topic could be conducted in order to gain their live experience of workforce diversity and conflict. Diversity trainings should be introduced for employees for diversity awareness to assist employees to respect each other rather than focusing one's ethnic, language, cultural differences. Projects should establish formal conflict management systems to address interpersonal conflicts of teams before they emerged into relationship conflict. Policy makers and various projects should design diversity friendly policies by keeping in view focus on cohesion and equity in setting of projects for peaceful work environment.

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