

# **Cross-cultural Communication and Multicultural Team Performance: A German and American Comparison**

by

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*This study builds on work by Matveev & Nelson (2004) which investigated the relationship between cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance using American and Russian managers. This study examines the impact of national culture on German and American subjects. While a relationship between cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance was found, it did not differ by overall national culture. Of the four dimensions of cross-cultural communication competence, only Cultural Empathy was found to be significantly different between Germans and Americans. No differences were found for the dimensions of Interpersonal Skills, Team Effectiveness, and Cultural Uncertainty.*

## **1. Introduction**

Worldwide intercultural cooperation drives corporate growth and development across the globe resulting in a heightened demand for a qualified but diverse workforce. Researchers have documented that the successful performance of multicultural teams is a vital and contributing factor to organizational success (Jackson, May, & Whitney, 1995; Snow, Snell, Davison, & Hambrick, 1996; Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996). The increased reliance on multicultural teams has renewed interest in understanding and developing the communication processes necessary to develop high performance teams across cultural differences. From surveying American and Russian managers, Matveev and Nelson (2004) found a significant effect of national culture on cross-cultural communication competence, suggesting the need to train managers to become more effective in culturally complex workplaces. Their research suggests that the national culture of team members plays a significant role in determining whether communicative behavior is perceived as competent, emphasizing the central role that national culture and

ethnicity plays in assessing communication competence already documented in the literature (Hughes, 1971; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993).

This study expands on the work of Matveev and Nelson (2004) by investigating the relationship between cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance of both German and American team members, and considers the effect that national culture has on cross-cultural communication (Figure 1). First, literature on multicultural team performance, cross-cultural communication competence, and national culture are examined, followed by our hypotheses. Methodology is then described and results are summarized and discussed.

## **2. Cross-cultural Communication Competence and Multicultural Team Performance**

In companies that work to expand globally, team performance becomes vulnerable to cross-cultural interaction problems (Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Managing cultural diversity, cultural differences, and cross-cultural conflicts have surfaced as frequent challenges for cross-cultural teams (Marquardt & Hovarth, 2001). Because of their diverse perceptions, managers are more likely to interpret and respond differently to similar strategic issues or team tasks (Schneider & DeMeyer, 1991). Cross-cultural communication competence is thus an important component of a manager's ability to address any performance challenges (Matveev & Nelson, 2004).

While many researchers have investigated cross-cultural communication competence and cross-cultural effectiveness (e.g., Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Redmond & Buniy, 1991; Samovar & Porter, 1991), understanding of the relationship between cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance is insufficiently developed (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Wiseman & Shuter, 1994). Furthermore, past research finds the relationship between ethno-cultural diversity and performance to be highly complex (Ng & Tung, 1998). Combined analyses of multicultural team performance, cross-cultural communication competence, and national culture orientations of team members could explain how communication competence influences the performance of multicultural teams.

In the multicultural work environment, obtaining information from a colleague requires a high degree of cross-cultural communication competence. Furthermore, Matveev and Nelson (2004) argue that high competence has a direct and positive effect on the decision making and problem-solving abilities of managers. Past research has identified various characteristics that constitute cross-cultural communication competence, including relationship skills, communication skills, and personal traits such as inquisitiveness (Black & Gregersen, 2000; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Mendenhall, 2001; Moosmuller, 1995). Cross-cultural communication competence entails not only knowledge of the culture and language,

but also affective and behavioral skills such as empathy, human warmth, charisma, and the ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1998; Spiess, 1996, 1998).

The Cross-cultural Communication Competence Model (Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Matveev, Rao & Milter, 2001) includes four dimensions: interpersonal skills, team effectiveness, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy (see Table 1).

**Table 1: The Cross-cultural Communication Competence Model**

Interpersonal Skills	Team Effectiveness	Cultural Uncertainty	Cultural Empathy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to acknowledge differences in communication and interaction styles</li> <li>• Ability to deal with misunderstandings</li> <li>• Comfort when communicating with foreign nationals</li> <li>• Awareness of your own cultural conditioning</li> <li>• Basic knowledge about the country, culture, and the language of team members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to understand and define team goals, roles, and norms</li> <li>• Ability to give and receive constructive feedback</li> <li>• Ability to discuss and solve problems</li> <li>• Ability to deal with conflict situations</li> <li>• Ability to display respect for other team members</li> <li>• Participatory leadership style</li> <li>• Ability to work cooperatively with others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to deal with cultural uncertainty</li> <li>• Ability to display patience</li> <li>• Tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty due to cultural differences</li> <li>• Openness to cultural differences</li> <li>• Willingness to accept change and risk</li> <li>• Ability to exercise flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to see and understand the world from others' cultural perspectives</li> <li>• Exhibiting a spirit of inquiry about other cultures, values, beliefs, and communication patterns</li> <li>• Ability to appreciate dissimilar working styles</li> <li>• Ability to accept different ways of doing things</li> <li>• Non-judgmental stance toward the ways things are done in other cultures</li> </ul>

In the *interpersonal skills dimension*, a team member acknowledges differences in the communicative and interactional styles of people from different cultures, demonstrates flexibility in resolving misunderstandings, and feels comfortable when communicating with foreign nationals. The *team effectiveness dimension* includes such critical skills as the ability of a team member to understand and clearly communicate team goals, roles, and norms to other members of a multicultural team. The *cultural uncertainty dimension* reflects the ability of a team member to display patience in intercultural situations, to be tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty due to cultural differences, and to work in a flexible manner with others on a multicultural team. Finally, in the *cultural empathy dimension*, a culturally empathetic team member has the capacity to behave as though he or she understands the world as team members from other cultures do, has a spirit of inquiry about other cultures and the communication patterns in these cultures, an appreciation for a variety of working styles, and an ability to view the ways things are done in other cultures not as bad, but as simply different.

### **3. National Culture Orientations**

Although the literature acknowledges many differences in cultural orientation (Gudykunst, 1997), Matveev and Nelson (2004) emphasize five cultural orientations that could influence cross-cultural communication competence: richness of the communication context, power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and performance orientations (Hall, 1978, 1989; Hofstede, 1980). While this research was based to a fair degree on Hofstede's (1980) study, in looking at German and American national culture we also consider the results of the GLOBE study (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness research ) (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) to complement Hofstede.

Both Hofstede (1980) and the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) are large data driven studies spanning many cultures. Hofstede's work surveyed IBM employees from 40 countries in the early seventies. The GLOBE study comprised 170 scholars surveying managers from different industries in 62 countries in the mid nineties. Hofstede's work produced five dimensions of national culture: Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, Individualism-Collectivism, Masculinity-Femininity, and Long term-short term orientation. The GLOBE study produced nine dimensions and each assessed managers' perceptions of the dimension "as practiced" and as "should be." From Hofstede's perspective (Hofstede, 2006), the GLOBE study maintained the dimensions (albeit not necessarily the meaning) of Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Long Term Orientation (becoming Future Orientation). Collectivism was split into Institutional Collectivism and In-Group Collectivism, and Masculinity-Femininity was split into Assertiveness and Gender Egalitarianism. New dimensions of Humane Orientation and Performance Orientation were added.

Comparisons of the two studies have yielded differences. In addition to the greater number of dimensions in the GLOBE study, one key difference is that, rather than self reports, the GLOBE respondents were asked to respond with perceptions of their society (Smith 2006). This can be difficult for questions that require an implicit comparison to other countries as a frame of reference. Venaik and Brewer (2008) find differences (with respect to Hofstede) in the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension to be the most problematic. Smith (2006) sees the values dimensions ("should be") to be conceptually different from the approach of Hofstede and prior research, and therefore should be treated as new dimensions in characterizing national culture.

Despite the difference, there are substantial similarities. In-group-collectivism and power distance correlate very highly between Hofstede and GLOBE (House et al., 2004). In re-factor analyzing GLOBE data, Hofstede (2006) finds five meta-factors that correspond fairly well with his factors. Smith concludes that because of advantages and trade-offs to both approaches, researchers should continue to use a wide range of methodologies to examine national culture.

#### 4. German and U.S. National Culture

We now compare German and U.S. national culture along the five orientations used by Matveev and Nelson (2004): richness of the communication context, power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and performance orientation.

Hall (1978; 1989) proposed a low- to-high-context continuum that categorizes cultures based on the degree of context accompanying communication. Low-context cultures communicate with information and meaning explicitly encoded in words. North America, which tends to follow a task-centered communication model, is an example of a low context culture (Marquardt & Hovarth, 2001). High context cultures on the other hand convey meaning and message through non-verbal context including physical settings and the individual's internal values, beliefs and norms (Hall, 1978, 1989). High-context cultures, such as French or Japanese, tend to absorb information from networks of colleagues, friends, family, clients, etc., and do not convey nor expect explicit background information in direct exchanges. Although Germans tend to be lower context than Americans, both are considered low-context cultures. Germans tend to compartmentalize life more, and therefore convey and expect more detailed and explicit background information exchanged with each interaction (Hall & Hall, 1990).

*Power distance* is defined as the degree to which members of a culture expect power to be unequally distributed (Hofstede, 1980), reflective of how cultures differentiate individuals and groups with respect to power, authority, prestige, status, wealth and material possessions (Javidan & House, 2001; House et al., 2004). Low power distance cultures prefer consultation, participation, cooperation and practicality, while high power distance cultures prefer autocratic or majority rule decision making and are reluctant to trust one another (Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Although Germans score slightly lower than Americans (Hofstede, 2009; House et al., 2004), American and German cultures are both considered low on power distance and prefer a participatory and egalitarian decision making process. High power distance cultures such as Russian and Spanish make clearer distinctions between who has status and power.

The *individualism-collectivism* orientation of a specific culture captures the integration of groups within organizations and society, including the role that individual and group goals play (Hofstede, 1980; Javidan & House, 2001). The evidence about which culture, German or American, is more collectivist is mixed. Hofstede's (1980) ground breaking work identified Americans as more individualistic than Germans, although both cultures were more individualistic than average. Other qualitative assessments of the individualism of Americans relative to Germans have been similar (e.g., Hall & Hall, 1990; Nees, 2000).

The more recent GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) finds Americans to be slightly more collectivist than Germans (Gelfand, Bhawuk, Nishii, & Bechtold, 2004) with respect to in-group (e.g., organizational) collectivism "as practiced,"

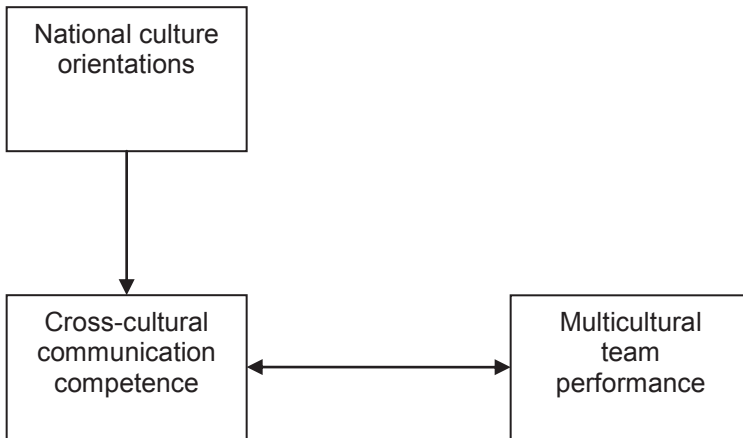
the more comparable measure to Hofstede's work and the measure relevant to our study. Although Germans scored lower than Americans, both cultures were below the overall mean in "as is" collectivism. In sum, although Hofstede's work finds Americans more individualistic and the GLOBE study finds Germans to be slightly more individualistic; both are relatively individualistic cultures (Gelfand et al., 2004).

*Uncertainty avoidance* indicates the perceived threat of both uncertainty and ambiguity within a culture (Hofstede, 1980), and the extent to which a society seeks orderliness and predictability through societal norms, formalized procedures, regulations, laws, etc. (Javidan & House, 2001). High uncertainty avoidance cultures like Sweden, Germany and Japan, tend to exhibit a high level of regulation, consistency, structured lifestyles, and clearly articulated expectations. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures like the United States, Ireland, and Jamaica are less concerned about following rules and procedures to alleviate uncertainty.

Lastly, Javidan and House's (2001) *performance orientation*, similar to Hofstede's (1980) *masculinity orientation*, refers to the degree to which a culture encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence. Performance oriented cultures like Singapore, Hong-Kong, and the United States value training, development, and initiative, and are typified by a sense of task urgency and "can-do" attitude. Low performance oriented cultures such as Russia, Italy, and Argentina value tradition, loyalty, and belonging, view feedback as discomfiting, and recognize family, background, or relationship more than performance. Germany falls slightly above the grand mean of 61 nations on performance orientation (House et al., 2004); Americans score higher than Germans and are at approximately the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile overall.

Figure 1 shows how these constructs are expected to relate. Cross-cultural communication competence relates to multicultural team performance while national culture differences impact cross-cultural communication competence. The following hypotheses consider the overall relationship between cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance (H1) as well as the differences due to national culture expected to be seen between German and American subjects on each of the four dimensions of cross-cultural communication competence (H2-H5).

**Figure 1: Proposed model of the relationships between national culture, cross-cultural communication competence, and multicultural team performance (Adapted from Matveev and Nelson, 2004.)**



## 5. Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1:** *A positive relationship exists between the level of cross-cultural communication competence of multicultural team members and the performance of a multicultural team.*

Cross-cultural competence helps overcome many of the challenges facing teams by developing the teams' ability to communicate, work well together and develop work relationship synergies that have a significant effect on team performance (Matveev & Nelson, 2004). Although Matveev & Nelson examined American and Russian managers, we can also expect the relationship to be significant with German and American nationals.

**Hypothesis 2:** *Americans will score higher on the interpersonal skills dimension.*

Hofstede (2009) scores both Germans and Americans low on power-distance (68/70th and 63/64th out of 79 national cultures respectively). Low power distance manifests itself in egalitarian behavior and participatory decision-making, which could translate into willingness to bridge differences in interaction styles and comfort in communicating with foreign nationals. However, Hall & Hall (1990) write that Germans tend to be more reserved and power and status oriented, while Americans tend to be more outgoing, open, and adaptable. With respect to nonverbal communication, Germans more often use tone of voice to express frustration, anger, and irritation in contrast to Americans, who are more likely to offer compliments and positive feedback, and to be more expressive of happy and positive feelings (Nees, 2000). While both cultures are known for directness,

German directness, “Klarheit,” tends toward stating facts, offering criticism, and issuing commands, in contrast with American directness which tends toward personal questions and revelations (Nees, 2000). While many of the American traits are often perceived by Germans as insincere or superficial, outgoing and adaptable personalities should help Americans deal with misunderstandings that arise within the team, and their less critical more positive communication style should help sooth emotions due to misunderstandings.

***Hypothesis 3:*** *Americans and Germans will score similarly on the dimension of Team Effectiveness.*

Differences between Germans and Americans in characteristics that impact team effectiveness could offset each such that neither is significantly more effective in teams. On one hand, Americans are somewhat more high performance oriented than Germans (Brodbeck & Frese, 2007; House et al., 2004). Palazzo (2002) calls it a “Just do it” problem solving mentality. Americans should thus be motivated to achieve team goals and “problem solve” when necessary. Less reserved, open Americans (Hall & Hall, 1990) will likely be able to give and receive constructive feedback and deal with conflict situations.

However, relative to Americans, Germans tend to use consensus decision making in team situations with slow, deliberate, and elaborate processes (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Nees, 2000). Time is taken to thoroughly analyze, understand, and define problems. Germans will typically set up goals and assign tasks in a fairly structured manner. Detail and perfection are prized (Schroll-Machl, 2008). This organizational ability might also make Germans effective in team situations.

***Hypothesis 4:*** *Americans will score higher on cultural uncertainty than will Germans.*

Germans are a high uncertainty avoidance culture compared to Americans (Hofstede, 2009; House et al., 2001). They are more uncomfortable with uncertain or unknown situations, preferring orderliness and predictability through formal structures, rules, and procedures. This will make them less able to deal with cultural uncertainty, and tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty due to cultural differences. Americans are likely to be more flexible and should be able to adapt more easily than Germans to the uncertainty that a cross-cultural situation causes.

***Hypothesis 5:*** *Americans will score higher on the Cultural Empathy dimension than will Germans.*

Cultural empathy should correlate with the GLOBE study’s (House et al., 2004) “humane orientation.” Germans scored among the lowest of 61 countries on humane orientation (Brodbeck & Frese, 2007), while Americans scored above the mean of those countries (Hoppe & Bhagat, 2007). Humane orientation measures the extent to which a society is and should be “fair, altruistic, generous, caring,



and kind to others” (Brodbeck & Frese, 2007). GLOBE questions mainly get at prosocial behavior in interpersonal situations such as concern for others, tolerance of errors, and being generous, friendly, and sensitive toward others. Germans tend to stick to rules and principles, leaving less flexibility toward individual situations or personal issues (Brodbeck & Frese, 2007). Germans may similarly be less sympathetic and patient with different ways and perspectives of different cultures. It seems altruism, generosity, and caring in Germany are done by state institutional systems rather than at the interpersonal level as in many other countries (Brodbeck & Frese, 2007).

In addition, greater collectivism should favor cultural empathy. As discussed earlier, Americans scored higher on in-group collectivism in the GLOBE cultural study (Gelfand, 2004). Concern about group outcome and performance may motivate Americans to put group cooperation above cultural differences.

## **6. Methods**

### ***6.1 Participants***

The subjects of this study were 71 American students in an MBA program in the northeastern United States, and 91 German business students from all over Germany, but primarily from central and southwestern Germany. The American students were primarily part-time students who worked full time. Their average age was 30 years, with men numbering 63 percent and women numbering 37 percent. The German students came from a program in which they alternated three month blocks of academic courses with three months work in business positions in German companies. Their average age was 24 years, with men slightly outnumbering women (53 to 47%).

These subjects were chosen for convenience. One of the authors taught both groups of students. Both have work experience in which they work in groups that include members from different cultures. The survey was done in English as the course instruction for both was in English. The German students were in an international management curriculum that was bilingual- German and English. The survey procedure was reviewed and judged to meet IRB requirements for the originating institution.

### ***6.2 Measurement***

Two separate measures were used to ascertain the level of cross-cultural communication competence and multicultural team performance (Richards, 1998). One measure was the seven-point, 23-item Cross-cultural Communication Competence questionnaire based on the CCC Model (Matveev et al., 2001). The CCC questionnaire included items such as “I acknowledge differences in communication and interaction styles when working with people from different countries” and “My team involves every member in the decision-making process without any consideration given to the national origin of a team member.” The Cross-cultural

Communication Competence questionnaire has an internal consistency alpha of .88 (Matveev et al., 2001). The second measure was the modified seven-point, 45-item High-Performance Team questionnaire (Wheelan, 1990, 1994). This questionnaire is based on the Integrated Model of Team Development and has an internal consistency alpha of .88 (Wheelan, 1990, 1994; Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996). The questionnaire includes items such as “Members of my team agree with the team goals” and “My team’s norms encourage high performance and quality.”

Correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between the level of team members’ cross-cultural communication competence and team performance (Kenny, 1987). Six t-tests were used to determine any differences in perception of the four dimensions of cross-cultural communication competence (interpersonal skills, team effectiveness, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy) between the American and German managers (Maxwell & Delaney, 2000; Stevens, 1996).

**7. Results**

The analysis showed a significant relationship between the cross-cultural communication competence mean scores and the multicultural team performance mean scores ( $r = .30, p < .01$ ) (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Pearson Correlations for Cross-cultural Communication Competence Dimensions and Multicultural Team Performance for American and German Subjects**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interpersonal skills						
2. Team effectiveness	.37*					
3. Cultural uncertainty	.41*	.51*				
4. Cultural empathy	.10	.05	.38			
5. Intercultural communication competence	.70*	.75*	.84*	.30*		
6. Multicultural team performance	.32*	.16	.21*	.14	.30*	

\*  $p < .01$   
 N = 140

Six t tests were used to test for significant differences on the dimensions of cross-cultural communication competence between American and German respondents (see Table 3). American and German respondents had significantly different mean scores on the cultural empathy dimension,  $t(159) = 3.85, p < .01$ . The German subjects’ mean scores on the cultural empathy dimension ( $M = 16.22, s.d. = 2.18$ ) were higher than the American subjects’ ( $M = 14.67, s.d. = 2.92$ ). No significant differences between American and German subjects were observed for the interpersonal skills dimension, the team effectiveness dimension, and the cultural uncertainty dimension of cross-cultural communication competence. A

significant difference was found to exist between American and German subjects on the team performance measure,  $t(143) = -3.36, p < .01$ . The team performance scores for the American subjects ( $M = 225.06, s.d. = 28.32$ ) were higher than for the German subjects ( $M = 210.35, s.d. = 24.08$ ). No significant differences between Americans and Germans were observed for the cross-cultural communication scores.

**Table 3. Tests of Mean Differences for the Dimensions of Cross-cultural Communication Competence and Team Performance**

Variable	Mean	s.d.	<i>T</i>	2 tailed Sig
Interpersonal skills				
American	27.74	4.38	-.36	.730
German	27.52	3.30		
Team effectiveness				
American	17.27	4.38	-1.12	.264
German	16.59	3.28		
Cultural uncertainty				
American	21.46	6.45	.55	.581
German	21.94	4.59		
Cultural empathy				
American	14.67	2.92	3.85*	.000
German	16.22	2.18		
Intercultural Communication Competence				
American	14.67	2.92	.62	.538
German	16.22	2.18		
Multicultural Team Performance				
American	225.06	28.32	-3.36*	.000
German	210.35	24.08		

## 8. Discussion and Conclusions

This study found an overall positive relationship between cross-cultural communication competence and performance of multicultural teams. Our analysis of this hypothesis (H1) found that overall cross-cultural communication competence accounted for 9 percent of the variance (Table 2) in the performance levels of multicultural teams. This result is consistent with earlier research investigating the relationship of appropriate communication behavior and team performance (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). A combination of high interpersonal skills, high team effectiveness skills, an ability to manage cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy serves as a template for effective team membership in both American and German culture.

When looking at the difference between Germans and Americans in cross-cultural communication skills, our evidence shows very few differences. Both groups' scores on the Interpersonal skills, Team effectiveness, and Cultural

Uncertainty dimensions were very similar and not statistically different. It may be that although German and American cultures are different, they are not different enough to cause significant differences in perceptions of cross-cultural communication competence. This is probably the case with interpersonal skills. Although we hypothesized (H2) that Americans would score higher, both cultures are very similar in power-distance scores (Hofstede, 2009). Perhaps this outweighed the observations of Hall & Hall (1990) of American openness and adaptability.

As we hypothesized (H3), Americans and Germans did not differ with respect to Team Effectiveness. We considered the benefits to Americans of a performance oriented, can-do problem solving mentality juxtaposed with the more deliberate, analytical, consensus oriented Germans. Perhaps these traits, all of which should impact Team Effectiveness, cancelled each other out as expected.

It might also depend on the task. Germans do not like things done sloppily due to time pressure and will take what time is needed to “do it right” (Schroll-Machl, 2008). Germans accordingly might do better in team effectiveness in more structured tasks over longer periods of time, while Americans might perform better in fast paced, less structured tasks. In the middle, or in an average situation, the two cultures might be similar in team effectiveness. Further research considering the impact of the context or nature of the team task is merited.

Our results did not find a difference in cultural uncertainty (H4) between Americans and Germans despite a difference in uncertainty avoidance (Germans 44<sup>th</sup> and Americans 67<sup>th</sup> highest of 79 countries, Hofstede, 2009; Germans at approximately the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile and Americans at approximately the world grand mean, House et al., 2004). Germans are sometimes stereotyped as needing strict order, rules, procedures, etc., to the point that one might guess they would become unnerved in a situation of cultural ambiguity. However, of 79 nations, at 44<sup>th</sup> they are very close to the half that can tolerate uncertainty; the GLOBE study results on uncertainty avoidance have been questioned (Venaik and Brewer, 2008). Perhaps this combined with aspects of their higher cultural empathy (see below) causes Germans be similar to Americans in dealing with cultural uncertainty.

Cultural empathy was one area where we found significant differences between Germans and Americans, but not in the direction we expected (H5). Our expectations were based on higher scores for Americans on “humane orientation” and “collectivism” from the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) that might motivate Americans to be more sympathetic to cultural differences for the sake of group performance and harmony.

One possible explanation is that perhaps collectivism for Germans is actually higher than for Americans as others have asserted (e.g., Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 2009; Nees, 2000). In addition, the West German score for “should be humane orientation” is much higher than for “as is humane orientation” (lowest of 61 countries), and virtually the same as the American “should be humane orientation.” Brodbeck and Frese (2007) suggest that “should be” scores reflect the

direction of cultural change; this may be more true for the younger age Germans of our study. In combination with the possibility of similar humane orientation and higher German collectivism, higher performance oriented Americans (e.g., initiative, sense of task urgency, “can-do” attitude) (House et al., 2004) might actually be less patient and sympathetic to cultural differences perceived to be hindering team performance.

Another explanation comes from experiences of one of the authors with the German respondents. There seemed to be a desire by many younger Germans to fit into a united Europe. This might have made them more open to seeing cultural differences in a positive light than might have been the case in the past. At the same time, some Americans seemed defensive about international criticism of U.S. policy on issues such as global warming and intervention in Iraq.

It is hard to know if these recent events have changed attitudes or not. However, events like these can trigger a direction in a culture that could be significant over a longer period of time. Although speculation on our part, we expect future cultural research will address the validity and impact of these anecdotal observations on culture over the longer term. Whether or not these attitudes reflect national culture, we believe they might have impacted responses to our questionnaire.

A higher German level of cultural empathy notwithstanding, with three of four cross-cultural communication dimensions not significantly different, one concludes that perhaps German national culture is similar enough to American culture that it does not have a very large impact on competent cross-cultural communication relative to Americans. Perhaps this is why Hall & Hall (1990) often put Germans and Americans in the same category to illustrate cultural dimensions in the first chapter of their book, even though they later devote chapters in their book to the differences between Germans and Americans. Additionally, Americans may be more German than they realize as German-Americans made up the largest ethnic group in the U.S. according to the 1990 U.S. Census. Many historically German attitudes are undoubtedly built into American culture.

There are several limitations to our study. The first limitation is a potential language barrier that the German subjects experience when completing surveys in English. Although their program was officially bilingual, their lesser English ability, especially with respect to business jargon, may have contributed to quite a lot of noise in the data. The second limitation is our focus on the national culture orientations as the primary variables when explaining the perceptual differences of cross-cultural competence and team performance among American and German subjects. Identifying other variables, such as task complexity, demographic diversity, and status differences might better explain the complex communicative behaviors on multicultural teams. Finally, further in-depth analysis of data from two globally important cultures can provide a finer explanation of the multifaceted culture-communication-performance relationship.

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