

# Examining Deep-Level Diversity in Top Management Teams: Team Power Distribution and Team Cognitive Diversity

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*This empirical study draws on research in sociology and cognition to examine the relationship between two deep-level diversity constructs: team power distribution and team cognitive diversity. Team power distribution reflects the extent to which power is distributed among team members evenly (team power equality) or unevenly (team power inequality). Team cognitive diversity reflects the extent to which strategic beliefs are held in common by the whole team (strategic consensus) or subgroups within the team (strategic dissent). Rather than using demographic measures as proxies for team cognition, this study employs a cognitive elicitation method to capture the mental models of 342 top managers from 49 US hospitals. I find that distinct power patterns are associated with distinct patterns of cognitive diversity, which suggests that the extent to which power is distributed within the team may affect the extent of strategic consensus and dissent within top management teams (TMTs). These findings contribute to the growing literature on group processes and managerial cognition.*

*Keywords: team power distribution, cognitive diversity, strategic consensus, strategic dissent, top management teams, deep-level diversity, cognitive elicitation method, visual card sorting, strategic consensus mapping, multidimensional scaling*

## INTRODUCTION

TMT cognitive diversity, defined as diversity in “information, knowledge, and perspectives” (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007, p. 527), is considered a crucial factor for organizational success. Due to its importance, there has been a recent surge in TMT cognitive diversity research, but two-thirds of studies used demographic information as proxies for cognition (Miller et al., 2022). The studies generally assume that TMT diversity with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, and functional background implies TMT cognitive diversity (e.g., Nadolska & Barkema, 2014). This operationalization of TMT cognitive diversity is advantageous as researchers can readily obtain demographic information from archival data. However, demographic information of teams, also known as surface-level attributes, may not accurately capture the underlying attributes of teams, also known as deep-level attributes (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998).

Several methodologies are available to measure TMT cognition (see Taracki et al., 2014, for a review). In line with these methodological advances, the present study employs deep-level measures to examine TMT cognitive diversity, defined as the extent to which strategic beliefs are held in common by the whole team (strategic consensus) or by subgroups within the team (strategic dissent).

Prior studies examining TMT cognitive diversity have traditionally focused on strategic consensus, i.e., “the shared understanding of strategic priorities among managers” (Kellermanns et al., 2005, p. 721). Yet,

the examination of another pattern of cognitive diversity – strategic dissent – has only recently gained traction (Samba et al., 2017). Given the impact of these patterns of cognitive diversity on organizational outcomes (see Miller et al., 2022 for a review), it becomes important to explore the antecedents of team cognitive diversity.

As Finkelstein (1992, p. 505) points out, “top managers’ power plays a key role in strategic decision making.” Because differences in thought and action among team members may arise from variations in power-dependence relationships (Johnson, Ford, & Kaufmann, 2000), I draw on sociology and cognition theories to examine the effect of team power distribution on team cognitive diversity. Team power distribution is defined as the extent to which power is dispersed (team power equality) or concentrated (team power inequality) within the team (Smith, Houghton, Hood, & Ryman, 2006).

By examining the relationship between these two deep-level diversity constructs, this study contributes to the growing literature on the examination of collective processes in top management teams (e.g., Kisfalvi, Sergi, & Langley, 2016). It also addresses the long-standing call for accurate conceptualization and measurement of team diversity constructs in general (Harrison & Klein, 2007) and team cognitive diversity in particular (Miller et al., 2022). The present study uses data from a rich field study involving 342 top management team members from 49 US hospitals.

This study is organized as follows. I first conceptualize the key constructs of the study – team power distribution and team cognitive diversity. I then develop a theory that explores the relationship between these constructs. Following the theory development section, I describe the methodology and present the results. In concluding the study, I discuss its contributions, limitations, and managerial implications.

## THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESIS

### Mental Models and Patterns of Cognitive Diversity

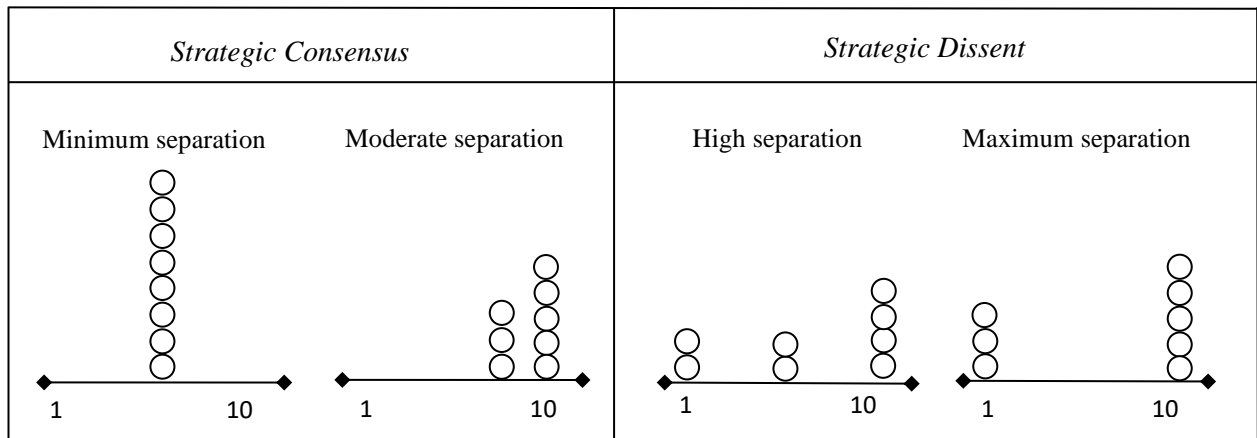
At the lowest level of analysis, an individual mental model is a cognitive structure of associations between concepts in each individual’s mind (Ward & Reingen, 1990). At the team level, mental models represent the members’ mental representation of knowledge or beliefs about key elements of the team’s relevant environment (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994).

Though many degrees of sharing may exist, the team mental model construct often refers only to the shared beliefs, i.e., the beliefs that all team members have in common, which is traditionally known as strategic consensus. The present study is interested in a more rigorous examination of team cognitive diversity. Rather than simply assessing the extent to which team-wide consensus exists, it considers other patterns of team cognitive diversity. Hence, it recognizes and measures the extent of overlap across the entire team (the “shared” portion) and the pattern of the remaining beliefs that are not uniformly shared (strategic dissent).

Team cognitive diversity is a measure of diversity as *separation* (Harrison & Klein, 2007), defined as the horizontal distance in a disagreement-agreement continuum. In this conceptualization, different patterns of cognitive diversity represent different situations, as illustrated in Figure 1. The team in the illustration has eight members, with each circle representing each of them. The continuum represents the degrees of agreement regarding a given variable X (e.g., the importance of employee wellness programs to organizational success). Low separation occurs when top managers are close to one another, meaning there is substantial agreement on the importance of employee wellness programs. Minimum separation can occur anywhere on the continuum of interest as team members may all strongly agree or disagree regarding variable X. Low and minimum degrees of separation represent team cognitive diversity as *strategic consensus*.

At high levels of separation, multiple subgroups of team members are at opposing endpoints of the continuum, with a few or no team members bridging the structural hole. For instance, a sub-group would not see investments in employee wellness programs favorably. In contrast, another sub-group would strongly support such programs. In this situation, team members share beliefs within their subgroups but not with other subgroups, meaning there is belief homogeneity within *subgroups* but belief heterogeneity within *teams*. High and maximum degrees of separation represent team cognitive diversity as *strategic dissent* or the existence of factions or subgroups within teams.

**FIGURE 1**  
**PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF PATTERNS OF TEAM COGNITIVE DIVERSITY**



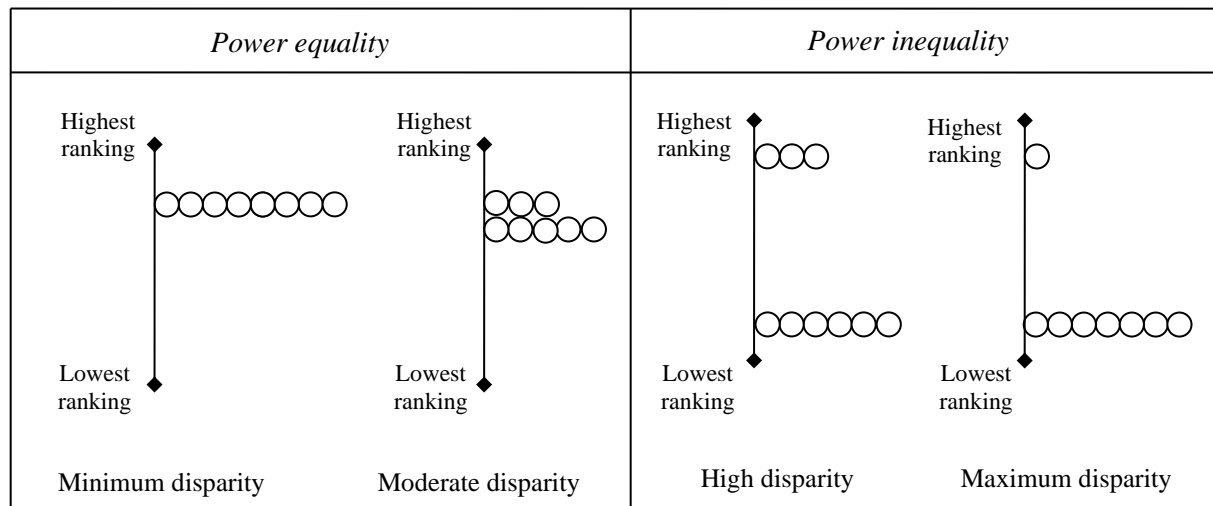
**Power and Patterns of Power Distribution**

As French & Raven noted (1959, p. 150), “the processes of power are pervasive, complex, and often disguised in our society.” Over 50 years later, researchers could not agree more with this observation as the power perspective remains an important lens to examine social phenomena. Several ways to define power have been proposed. French & Raven (1959) identified five major sources of power stemming from formal authority and personal characteristics: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, and expert power. Emerson (1962) developed the power dependence theory, which conceptualizes power as an attribute of the relationship rather than of the person. For instance, the power of A over B is conceived as the dependence of B on A. Sell et al. (2004, p. 47) rightfully argue that the availability of alternatives produces dependence: “The more dependent an individual is on a social relationship, the less power that individual has.”

These conceptualizations suggest the key characteristics of power in organizations. First, power distribution is the result of social processes. Power and prestige orders arise from interactions within any group of individuals engaged in a task (Berger & Conner, 1974), such as top management teams. Second, power may or may not derive from formal authority. For example, a top manager who goes golfing with the US President’s Cabinet members may have more power than any other top manager within his TMT, including the newly appointed CEO. This scenario underscores the importance of considering not only CEO power centralization, as most studies on power in top management teams do, but also the extent to which power is distributed across the team. The measure of individual power can be aggregated at the team level, and the shape of power distribution within the team is referred to as *team power distribution* (Smith et al., 2006).

Team power distribution is a measure of diversity as *disparity* (Harrison & Klein, 2007), defined as the distribution of differences in the possession of socially valued assets within a team. In some teams, one or a few members are powerful. In other teams, there is an even distribution of power. As illustrated in Figure 2, different patterns of power distribution imply qualitatively different power structures. Low to moderate disparity occurs in teams with *power equality* when all members possess the same degree of power (high or low) or differences among team members are compressed. At high levels of disparity, most team members are disadvantaged relative to a privileged few, representing *power inequality*. Moreover, when the discrepancy is at its maximum, one team member outranks all others, a common situation when the CEO is the sole powerful team member. Because such structures can impact group processes and strategic decision-making, I propose a theory about the relationship between team power distribution and team cognitive diversity in the next section.

**FIGURE 2**  
**PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF PATTERNS OF TEAM POWER DISTRIBUTION**



**The Relationship Between Team Power Distribution and Team Cognitive Diversity**

People are generally sensitive to variations in power-dependence relationships, leading to differences in thought and action (Johnson et al., 2000). When power is evenly distributed in a team, actors are in the same ranking, or their differences are compressed. As a result, mutual dependence is likely to develop, and the greater the degree of mutual dependence, the more likely parties will exhibit conciliatory and cooperative behaviors (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). Furthermore, when power distribution within a top team is balanced, broad participation and information sharing are likely to exist (Haleblian & Finkelstein, 1993). This situation helps crystallize consensus (Quinn, 1980), resulting in stronger agreement among TMT members.

However, when power is unevenly distributed, powerful team members may have greater influence than powerless ones because they speak more and have more time to explain their ideas (Berger & Webster, 2006). Indeed, interactions within the team are likely to be unbalanced (Mannix, 1993). Hence, a pattern of uneven power distribution may affect group decision-making. For instance, Pitcher & Smith (2001) reported that CEO power centralization reduced the heterogeneity of ideas during team meetings. Moreover, members of unequal-power groups are more likely to reject collaborative group decision-making and move toward more competitive and distributive negotiation strategies (Sell et al. 2004). Furthermore, because unequal power in exchange relations can produce negative emotions, even without punishment or coercion, power differences may often promote conflict, leading to disagreement (Johnson et al., 2000). As interactions among members decrease, the resulting team mental model becomes less similar over time (Levesque, Wilson, & Wholey, 2001).

In such situations, the polarization of ideas and strategic dissent are likely to emerge. Decision-makers take stock of their relative power positions vis-à-vis other decision-makers within the decision-making process. If their force is not strong enough to overcome opposition, they join together with others to form a coalition (Cyert & March, 1963). Members with different power endowments establish polarized factions because they view the world from a different perspective. These factions see themselves as separated from one another on fundamental beliefs (Wittenbaum, 2000), leading to restrictions in information sharing and less similarity in ideas and perspectives at the team level. Based on the above arguments, I propose that distinct patterns of power distribution within a team are associated with distinct patterns of cognitive diversity in teams. Thus,

***H1: Team power distribution is positively associated with cognitive diversity in that (a) power equality is associated with strategic consensus, and (b) power inequality is associated with strategic dissent.***

## METHOD

### Sample and Data Collection

This study uses data from a rich field study involving practicing managers. The data is from a survey of 342 top managers from 49 hospitals in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. A detailed description of the sample selection process can be found in Houghton, Stewart, & Barr (2010). Data were collected individually from members of TMTs using a card-sorting task and a questionnaire instrument.

### Measures

According to Harrison & Klein (2007), the choice of diversity measure should be driven by the theoretical specification of diversity type; otherwise, research conclusions may be misleading. Following their lead, the present study operationalizes the two deep-level constructs using appropriate diversity measures. The operationalization of each variable is described below.

#### *Dependent Variable*

**Team Cognitive Diversity.** The operationalization of this measure involved three steps: elicitation, analysis, and measurement (Tarakci et al., 2014). Elicitation involves eliciting the mental model of each TMT member. Each mental model was captured using a card-sorting task methodology (Walsh et al., 1988). This process involved asking each manager to think about what he or she believed was important for organizational success. Next, the manager received a set of 48 stimulus cards. The manager sorted the cards into two stacks -- important and unimportant factors for organizational success. The important stack was then sorted into stacks of similar items. Finally, the manager was asked to rank order the stacks from most to least important for organizational success. The ranking for each stack became that card's score for each person. Cards in the unimportant stack received the lowest ranking (i.e., if the manager sorted the important cards into six stacks, the unimportant cards would be ranked seventh).

The second step is analysis. The rankings were input into an individual-differences multidimensional scaling (MDS) algorithm. The algorithm assumes a common set of underlying dimensions in the data but assumes individuals differ in their perceptions of the importance of these dimensions. In addition, an individual may have a score of zero on the dimensions that are meaningless to the individual. Therefore, this technique allows the researcher to understand the structure of each individual's mental models and compare this structure to the structures of other team members. The procedure yielded nine distinct strategic dimensions.

The third step was measurement. Team cognitive diversity was calculated by averaging the squared Euclidean distance between team members' nine-dimension scores, assuming each member is represented as a point in n-dimensional space. Because the distances are squared, the measure emphasizes the separation in strategic beliefs between team members. Low scores indicate that team members have similar or identical scores for their strategic dimensions, which reflects strategic consensus. Higher scores indicate the presence of multiple subgroups of team members with overlapping mental models, which reflects strategic dissent. In between these patterns, there are teams where some strategic dimensions are shared and others are not, leading to an average amount of team cognitive diversity.

#### *Independent Variable*

**Team Power Distribution.** The executives were asked to assess the relative power of their team members (including himself or herself) to influence the strategic agenda of the team. This data was captured using a seven-point scale ranging from "extremely powerful" to "not powerful at all," which was reverse-scored. The instrument was customized with each team member's names listed in alphabetical order. Each team member's score for power was the average of the scores given to that individual by all team members. The team score for power distribution was the coefficient of variation of the individual power scores on each team (standard deviation of the power scores divided by the mean power scores). Harrison & Klein (2007) observes that the coefficient of variation is highly sensitive to team size in that highly dispersed teams with fewer members would be regarded as having less inequality than those with more members. Hence, I use a

standardizing adjustment for team size (Martin & Gray, 1971) in which power distribution can be expressed as a proportion of its maximum. The adjustment is described as follows:

$$PowerDistribution = \frac{CV}{\sqrt{k-1}} \text{ where } k = \text{team size} \quad (1)$$

### Control Variables

I included several control variables. Following prior research in top management teams, I control for *team tenure* because a team with long tenure might be less likely to have different perspectives. Team tenure is measured as the average of individual tenure scores. Another control variable is *organizational size*, measured as the log of the number of licensed beds, a common measure of hospital size. I do not control for *team size* because the measure for power distribution accounts for the effect of this variable.

When testing the effects of variance measures, diversity scholars recommend that analyses be conducted to control for central tendency (Harrison & Klein, 2007; Jackson et al., 2003). Moreover, they note that the coefficient of variation, which is the standard deviation (SD) divided by the mean, is, in fact, an interaction (SD \* 1/mean) (Harrison & Klein, 2007; Sorenson, 2002). Thus, these two terms (SD and 1/mean) should be entered into the model as main effects. Scholars argue that a lack of consideration of these main effects may lead to an incorrect interpretation of the results since the mean or the dispersion rather than the coefficient of variation might be the reason for significant results. To rule out this possibility, I included these two terms as control variables: *team-level standard deviation of power scores* and the *inverse of the team-level mean of power scores*.

## RESULTS

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations. Both organizational size and team tenure are negatively correlated with team cognitive diversity, and team power distribution is positively correlated with team cognitive diversity. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) values ranged from 1.05 to 1.20, indicating that multicollinearity is not a cause for concern.

**TABLE 1  
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS AMONG STUDY VARIABLES**

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Team cognitive diversity	0.2	0.08			
2. Organizational size	4.96	0.74	-0.37*		
3. Team tenure	6.84	6.98	-0.29*	-0.16	
4. Team power distribution	0.2	0.07	0.40*	-0.03	0.18

N = 49. Correlations greater than .20 are significant at the p < .05 level.

Table 2 presents the results of the OLS regression analyses. Model 1 is the baseline model comprising the control variables – team tenure and organizational size. Model 2 includes the two power variables: SD(power) and 1/mean(power). Finally, Model 3 tests the association between team power distribution and team cognitive diversity.

In Step 1, the control variables were entered into the model. Results showed an adjusted R-squared of 23%, with organizational size being a strong predictor of variance in the dependent variable. In Step 2, SD and 1/mean were entered into the model, and the adjusted R-square increased by 13%. These control variables are significant, but organizational size is now marginally significant. In Step 3, team power distribution is entered into the model. The adjusted R-squared increased by 42%, and the coefficient for team power distribution is positive and significant (B=1.305, p<.001). Thus, *H1* is supported.

**TABLE 2**  
**OLS REGRESSION RESULTS: DV = TEAM COGNITIVE DIVERSITY**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Organizational size	-0.418**	-0.263+	-0.007
Team tenure	-0.126	-0.224	-0.086
SD (power)		0.371*	-0.819***
1/ Mean (power)		-0.510**	-0.471***
Team power distribution			1.305***
R-squared	0.23	0.36	0.78
Adj. R-squared	0.20	0.30	0.76
$\Delta$ R-squared	0.23	0.13	0.42
F	6.98**	6.13***	3.26***

N = 49. Standardized regression coefficients are reported.

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## DISCUSSION

A widely accepted assumption in management research is that TMT diversity in ideas and perspectives impacts organizational outcomes and plays a key role in decision-making processes. This study contributes to the TMT cognitive diversity literature by examining the relationship between two deep-level team diversity measures. I found evidence that distinct patterns of team power distribution are associated with distinct patterns of team cognitive diversity. Specifically, power equality in TMTs is associated with strategic consensus, and power inequality is associated with strategic dissent. These results are consistent with the idea that disparity leads to an increase in separation, as sociological theories contend (e.g., Phillips & Zuckerman 2001). Indeed, power can be “a megaphone, amplifying the voices of those who possess them and drowning out the voices of don’t” (Klein & Harrison 2007, p. 31). Since sociology emphasizes the structures or constraints that surround the actors, these results suggest that future research should include sociological variables when investigating group processes.

These findings have important managerial implications. CEOs should be mindful of the power dynamics within their teams, as such dynamics may give rise to pockets of dissatisfied top managers who may refrain from voicing their concerns. Similarly, boards of directors, as the group representing the interests of shareholders, should carefully observe the CEO’s leadership style and intervene if the CEO’s power centralization becomes so extreme as to mute dissenting voices. Instead, leaders should nurture a culture of dissent in their organizations to ensure a free exchange of ideas (Iglesias & Iglesias, 2022).

This study is not without limitations, which provide opportunities for future research. Although I use OLS regression for hypothesis testing, the data is cross-sectional, so causation cannot be inferred. Collecting longitudinal data to examine the causation and relationships between deep-level diversity measures over time would be important. This study also does not delve into the interactive effects of surface-level and deep-level diversity constructs. Future studies could examine, for example, whether and how team power distribution moderates the effect of surface-level diversity measures on strategic consensus and dissent. Future research is also encouraged to examine the effects of such interactions on organizational outcomes, such as firm performance and innovation.

The present study develops a theory about the association between team power distribution and team cognitive diversity. Future research should examine a potential reverse relationship: the impact of team cognitive diversity on team power distribution. If differential knowledge can be a source of power (Pettigrew, 1972), would knowledge asymmetries influence power configurations – i.e., ‘knowledge is power’? Consider the case where expertise is located in particular individuals or subgroups within the team. These individuals are perceived by others as more expert and are thus able to exert greater influence. We could expect that the greater the team’s reliance on the expertise possessed by particular individuals and subgroups, the greater the power imbalance within the team.

I believe the limitations of this study are offset by its methodological strengths. The study uses data from over 300 practicing top managers, whereas most studies rely on student samples. Also, rather than using surface-level measures as proxies for cognition, the study employs a cognitive elicitation method and multidimensional scaling, which are aligned with methodological advances in the field (Tarakci et al., 2014). I hope the study’s methodology and findings encourage investigations into this fascinating area of research.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that there is more “beneath the surface” when it comes to examining cognitive diversity in top management teams. Our task as researchers is to further examine deep-level constructs and group processes to better understand the dynamics within teams and provide actionable advice to decision makers.

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