Leadership in Intercultural Teams

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to deliberate about the leadership status in students' intercultural teams, correlations between this position and the status of confidant in the team, subjective satisfaction with life, and objective stress burden. The applied methods for data gathering are sociometric analysis measuring both leadership skills and trust, Schedule for the Evaluation of Individual Quality of Life (SEIQoL), and The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). The quantitative survey was conducted on the sample of bachelor students who attended the course 2OP337 taught at the Faculty of International Relations. The data are evaluated mainly via correlation analysis and interpreted in the context of managerial and psychological theories with an emphasis on the ontological stage of young adulthood. Findings are useful for both policy makers, and university lecturers whose work is related to management of the young adults in project teams.

Keywords: leadership position, intercultural teams, young adulthood leadership, stress, life satisfaction

JEL Classification codes: M54, J24, I31

INTRODUCTION

The mental well-being of people in organizations has become one of the crucial factors for management theory and practice in recent years. After the difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic, a war broke out in Ukraine. Consequently, the Czech Republic had to deal with the migration of war refugees, who gradually became active in the Czech labor market. Also, universities were affected by these problems in society. The attack by an active shooter at Charles University in December 2023 was one of the most dramatic events. Universities are traditionally a place where people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds meet. This is doubly true for the Faculty of International Relations when we consider its mission. The Faculty of International Relations of the Prague University of Economics and Business has the internationalization of its study programs as one of its key priorities. This paper focuses on international cooperation within the project groups that are created within the voluntary course 2OP337 Psychology in Organizations. Students enrolled in this course have the task of elaborating team projects. Such an experience gives them a unique opportunity to cooperate in a culturally diverse environment, and via psychometric methods, they can understand the team dynamics on a deeper level. The aim of this paper is to deliberate about the leadership status in students' intercultural teams, correlations between this position and the status of confidant in the team, subjective satisfaction with life, and objective stress burden. Additionally, outputs from the team managerial game are included.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health and well-being of university students have received increased attention. In addition to the consequences of the pandemic, the inclusion of students with specific needs (such as autism, ADHD, or learning disabilities) has played a significant role and was present in the research interest also before the pandemic and still remains an important topic for academic research (de la Torre et al., 2023; Glennon, 2001; Steinberg, 2011). While previous publications focus on the topic of stigmatization of students with learning disorders and special needs, some authors (like Portešová, 2011) talk explicitly about giftedness and gifted students with learning disorders.

The authors have discussed the importance of supporting networks and counseling centers and their role in building resilience, coping strategies, and measurement procedures. (Abdullah et al., 2022) revealed that academic workload, family support, and financial issues predict depression among university students, and the students who encounter depression are more likely to adopt rational and spiritual coping strategies.

Petrovic et al. (2023) explored the impact of online mindfulness induction on mind and body state mindfulness in university students with and without a history of non-suicidal self-injury with the following findings: "Although findings are tentative and should therefore be interpreted with caution, they suggest a unique responsiveness of university students with a history of NSSI to a body scan meditation in the face of a stressful experience, particularly in terms of their state mindfulness of the body, suggesting that further examination of brief mindfulness inductions among this population is warranted."

There are objective and subjective instruments for measuring well-being and quality of life. A typical individualized instrument for measuring the quality of life is SEIQoL (Schedule for the Evaluation of Individual Quality of Life), which is based on the phenomenological definition that the quality of life is what the respondent says it is (Ring et al., 2007). This instrument was used both for the patient population (O'Boyle & McGee, 1992) and the student population (Ring et al., 2007; Masárová & Gullerová, 2012). Ring et al. (2007) measured the quality of life on a culturally diverse sample of 136 students (consisting of Europeans (30%), Asians (40%), and Middle 315 Easterners (12%), and also 10% of the respondents originated from North 316 America, Australia, and New Zealand and 3% from the rest of the world) with following results: "The mean SEIQoL index score was 65.1 (±13.2 SD) (range 28–97; possible range: 0–100). The validity of the SEIQoL judgment analysis procedure, as 319 indicated by R2, was acceptable (0.63 ± SD 0.15). Test–retest reliability of 320 the 10 repeated cases were 0.59."

Masárová & Gullerová (2012) used the instrument on the sample consisting of 90 students of Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin, Faculty of Social and Economic Relations, program of study: Human Resources and Personnel Management with the following results: "Having calculated the quality-of-life scores by SEIQoL methodology, we can conclude that the quality of life of respondents amounts to 49.43%. Respondents rated the quality of life within society identically (49.45%). On the graphic scale, however, the life satisfaction indicated by them was higher by 22% (71.72%) on average than the quality of life of the society (49.45% reported)."

2 METHODOLOGY

The data were collected during two academic years, specifically in the winter and summer semesters of the academic year 2021/22 and in the winter and summer semesters of the

academic year 2022/23. From the total of 7 teaching classes, 165 observations were used for this analysis, out of which 35% were men and 65% were women. These frequencies correspond to the usual distribution in the population in study programs at the faculty (Matysová, 2017). The age of all respondents ranged from 20 to 24 years. Regarding the students' nationalities, they covered a broad spectrum. The prevailing national cultures were citizens of the USA, the Russian Federation, Canadians, French, Spanish, Scandinavians and Finns, Mexicans, Czechs, Slovaks, Vietnamese, and Chinese.

Three assessments fulfilled by students were used in this paper; two are related to mental health and satisfaction and are not dependent on the project team, and the third inventory summarizes experiences from the group cooperation. Students evaluate their teammates as leaders considering their managerial skills and as confidants, meaning their capability to create trust in the group. Due to the complexity of data collection, observation gaps arose because students did not always complete all activities assigned as homework.

The Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory SRRS (The Social Readjustment Rating Scale), which consists of 43 so-called Life Change Units, was used to assess stress burden. As stated by Noone (2017), the advantages of the inventory include its availability for free and, at the same time, a high degree of consistency across cultures; the author demonstrates this both with high correlations for healthy adults (r=0.96 – 0.89) and for patients (r=0.91 – 0.70). The output of the inventory is a score predicting the risk of developing a stress-related illness; values below 149 indicate low risk, moderate risk is between 150 and 299, and values above 300 indicate high risk.

The second tool is the SEIQoL (Schedule for the Evaluation of Individual Quality of Life), which original administration (O'Boyle et al., 1993) was slightly modified; students choose five life goals, which they then evaluated regarding their importance and satisfaction. The modification of the administration consists in the fact that the students should specify these goals in the form of life roles that they currently have in their social, work, or study life or those that relate to their spiritual life and physical health or body care. This instruction is consistent with suggested administration, where the authors (O'Boyle et al., 1993) state that the administrator should refrain from providing prescriptive examples but may mention the following areas: "family, relationships, health, finances, living conditions, work, social life, leisure activities, religious and spiritual life." The resulting value ranges from 0 to 100. Similar to the previous inventory, the SEIQoL is commonly used and, in addition to its diagnostic purpose, also serves didactic purposes in the teaching of managerial and health psychology; e.g., Jaro Křivohlavý describes inventory administration in the Czech environment (Křivohlavý, 2001).

The last tool is sociometric analysis, the outputs of which are presented and interpreted in the form of a sociometric matrix. This is a classic tool developed by J.L. Moreno to map socio-preferential and emotional relationships in a group (Nakonečný, 1999). In the 2OP337 Psychology in Organizations, students evaluate each other in terms of trust and in terms of managerial competencies, which correspond to classic management functions (organizing, planning, leading, controlling, and decision-making). The evaluation takes place at the end of the semester when the teamwork is over; the students have approximately 2,5 months of project team experience.

Additionally, individual and group results of the managerial game "Moon Survival" (Bottger, Yetton, 1985) were also used; according to the authors: "The task seems too analogous to managerial problems where knowledge of the problem space varies across group members, and where initially, members are unaware of their colleagues' relative task expertise." This task demonstrates the superiority of group problem-solving over individual problem-solving.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the monitored variables while the first four variables relate to sociometric analysis (Leader, Confidant, ENGL=engagement in leadership and ENGT=engagement in trust); the following two relate to mental health (SEIQoL and SRRS); and the remaining two to "Moon Survival" task (MSI=individual score and MSG=group score).

Tab. 1 Descriptive Statistics (n=165)

	Leader	Confidant	ENGT	ENGL	SRRS	SEIQoL	MSI	MSG
Valid	129	129	133	133	131	132	108	114
Missing	36	36	32	32	34	33	57	51
Mean	8.067	9.732	9.753	8.000	208.137	76.538	41.722	34.684
Std. Deviation	2.385	1.834	2.001	1.761	115.669	11.223	12.237	11.521
Minimum	3.000	5.000	4.000	2.000	11.000	41.000	4.000	6.000
Maximum	12.000	12.000	12.000	12.000	653.000	100.000	71.000	56.000

Source: own research

From the descriptive statistics, it is evident that the group solution of the managerial game "Moon Survival" is more successful than the individual solution; the lower score indicates better problem-solving. On average, there is an improvement of 7.038 points, which is in line with the theoretical assumptions suggesting that the creative error correction process occurs in the group.

The data were further processed using correlation analysis and are presented in Table 2, which shows Pearson's correlations and their corresponding p-values for the two-tailed hypothesis; the test's significance is marked below the table.

Tab. 2 Pearson's Correlations (n=165)

Variable		Leader	ENGL	Confidant	ENGT	SEIQoL	SRRS	MSG	MSI
1. Leader	Pearson's r	—							
	p-value	—							
2. ENGL	Pearson's r	0.088	—						
	p-value	0.319	—						
3. Confidant	Pearson's r	0.422 ***	0.164	—					
	p-value	< .001	0.064	—					

Tab. 2 Pearson's Correlations (n=165)

Variable		Leader	ENGL	Confidant	ENGT	SEIQoL	SRRS	MSG	MSI
4. ENGT	Pearson's r	0.186 *	0.389 ***	0.553 ***	—				
	p-value	0.035	< .001	< .001	—				
5. SEIQoL	Pearson's r	0.121	-0.138	-0.074	0.030	—			
	p-value	0.220	0.154	0.458	0.757	—			
6. SRRS	Pearson's r	0.062	-0.360 ***	0.063	-0.063	-0.185	—		
	p-value	0.528	< .001	0.522	0.516	0.051	—		
7. MSG	Pearson's r	0.087	0.116	-0.086	-0.056	0.140	-0.127	—	
	p-value	0.380	0.235	0.387	0.568	0.174	0.221	—	
8. MSI	Pearson's r	0.198	0.247 *	0.169	0.054	-0.109	-0.096	0.465 ***	—
	p-value	0.051	0.012	0.096	0.589	0.300	0.371	< .001	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Source: own research

Correlation analysis confirmed a statistically significant relationship between trust gained (status of Confidant) and trust assigned to other team members (ENGT). We can argue that there is a dependency between the affiliation (that is, the trust shown) to team members and the popularity that a person gains in the team. Parallel reciprocity in the relationship between the Leader and ENGL does not apply, so engagement in leading others does not predict that a person will be elected as a group leader. It is necessary to repeat that these are student project teams that require a specific type of leadership and are characterized by informal leadership statuses. Furthermore, the correlation between the status of the leader (variable Leader) and the status of the most trustworthy member (variable Confidant) was demonstrated. This suggests that trust is correlated with the position of the leader; however, the leader must gain this popularity also through various strategies than the confidants, whose strategy could be to show personal emotional ties since the correlation between the variables Leader and ENGT was low. Another proven correlation is the relationship between the tendency to relate to other members as leaders (ENGL) and, at the same time, to trust them (ENGT). Diffusion of personal and work areas could hypothetically have cultural causes (see Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2009), but this is logically excluded in relation to the intercultural nature of the sample.

The results of the SRRS can be understood as an objective stress burden, i.e., an objective measure of stress that a person experiences in his life, regardless of whether he experiences it positively (as so-called eustress) or negatively (as distress). In the case of this sample, it can be concluded that, to some extent, the stress load, which on average indicates a moderate risk of developing a stress-related disease, is experienced positively since no correlation

between the SRRS and SEIQoL variables was confirmed. The negative correlation between stress burden (SRRS) and the tendency to choose others as leaders (ENGL) was confirmed. Considering that this is only a predictive type of research, it is not possible to draw a causal attribution between this relationship. The predictive relationship suggests we do not relate to others as leaders as the stress burden increases. A deeper investigation of this relationship could bring interesting findings for managerial practice.

Last but not least, the correlation between individual and group solutions to the problem task "Moon Survival" was proven. Individuals' scores from this managerial game indicate knowledge expertise and partly reflect general aptitude for problem-solving tasks, i.e., general intelligence. The remaining proven correlation is between MSI and ENGL; the test is statistically significant; however, the correlation is quite low.

The research was conducted on a sample of students of the course 2OP337 Psychology in Organizations, mainly from foreign mobilities or from the Czech and English programs of the faculty. According to the authors of the SRRS inventory, their stress burden is of medium-height (average 208.138), which, in addition to the usual stress burden, may also be related to the burden associated with traveling abroad and culture shock, which, according to theory, occurs between 4 and 6 months of stay abroad (Zadražilová, 2017). For comparison, Dumitriu et al. (2023) report the average stress of company workers using the same inventory with a value of 322. These authors recommend increasing employees' awareness of the consequences of stress through campaigns and courses and the implementation of stress management strategies.

In different research (Volfová et al., 2023), we came to the conclusion that autonomy (independence and self-sufficiency) and homonomy (connectedness) are complementary phenomena; thus, managers should support both of them. The holistic concepts of autonomy and homonomy postulated by the Hungarian psychiatrist Angyal (Lester & Dench, 2011) overlap with the widely accepted motivational theory of self-determination theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000); precisely, they overlap with two innate needs autonomy and interdependence (also known as relatedness or belongingness). The research involves a sample of students between the ages of 20 and 24. According to ontological theories, it can be assumed that individuals in the period of young adulthood experience a crisis of intimacy and isolation, i.e., a dilemma of both independence and building harmonious relationships. The data of the conducted research indicate that interdependence prevails in the field of emotional and personal ties, as those who show trust in others are perceived as popular and trustworthy. In the field of leadership, however, there is no correlation between engagement in others' leadership and the assigned leader status, which implies greater autonomy of students in leadership positions.

The correlation between ENGT and ENGL is interesting. In relation to the holistic concepts cited above, this phenomenon could be understood in the context of deficit forms of autonomy and homonomy, which Angyal refers to as non-commitment and vicarious living (Lester & Dench, 2011). Elsewhere (Matysová & Volfová, 2023), we pointed out that an immature form of autonomy was manifested by students during the COVID-19 epidemic who felt it was the duty of teachers to push them to complete tasks in the online environment and who wanted to be more controlled. Mareš (2013) points to a similar phenomenon of contamination of perceived roles, which concerns the evaluation of university teachers by students: "Friendly teachers (types 1 and 2) are perceived by students as competent, showing interest in students and caring about them, even if they sometimes behave inappropriately. On the contrary, unfriendly teachers (types 3 and 4) who display inappropriate behavior are perceived by students as incompetent, uninterested in students, and untrustworthy." Considering defense mechanisms, the "reaction formation" can play a central role in the background of these

phenomena; (McWilliams, 2015). In "reaction formation," a person convinces himself that he feels only one pole of a complex emotional reaction.

Since the relationship between objective stress burden (measured by SRRS) and subjectively perceived evaluation of the quality of life (measured by SEIQoL) was not confirmed, it can be assumed that young adults are psychologically resilient or perceive stress load as eustress, i.e. positively experienced stress. Kaya Özbağ (2022), who investigated the stress load and satisfaction of seafarers, argues similarly; she failed to find a link between workload and subjective well-being, which she explains by the fact that seafarers have built up a higher resistance than the general population. Another explanation can be the job-strain theory (Karasek, 1979), according to which work strain is compensated by the autonomy that the worker has. Thus, for example, the intellectual load can contribute to increased satisfaction and reduced symptoms of depression; the author talks about active occupations. Conversely, undemanding occupations with limited decision-making powers can lead to increased passivity and apathy. In the case of the students analyzed in this paper, the specific workload was not tested, but the load was generally connected with life. Regarding the cited results from secondary research in the theoretical part, we can assume that, on average, the examined students are quite satisfied (SEIQoL on average 76,538).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to deliberate on the leadership status in students' intercultural teams, correlations between this position and the status of confidant in the team, subjective satisfaction with life, and objective stress burden. The data was collected as part of the elective course 2OP337 Psychology in Organizations, which is offered to both Czech and foreign students and thus becomes a platform for intercultural encounters, in which students simulate work in project teams, which they then analyze using psychometric inventories. The data on a sample of 165 respondents was analyzed using correlation analysis and subsequently interpreted.

The paper discussed and interpreted correlations between the status of Confidant and engagement in interpersonal and emotional relationships. Furthermore, a correlation between the status of the Confidant and the status of the Leader was revealed and discussed. However, the position of the Leader has a low correlation with the preferences assigned to others in the criterion of trust and no correlation with preferences assigned to others in the criterion of managerial competencies. No correlation was identified between objective stress load and subjectively perceived individual quality of life. Relevant managerial and psychological theories, contemporary empirical findings, and possibilities for further research were discussed in the paper.

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