

**Chapter 2**

What’s the difference? Insider Perspectives on the Importance and Meaning of Intra-team Differences

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**Introduction**

The growth of diversity in the workforce over the past 20 years has spawned a large amount of research on heterogeneity, dissimilarity, and related conceptions of within-unit differences in organizations. The conventional focus in these studies has been on connecting differences among team members on such variables as demographic characteristics, tenure, functional background and educational background to such outcomes as team commitment, citizenship behavior, conflict, turnover, innovation, and performance (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, & Oosterhof, 2003). Unfortunately, few clear and consistent findings have emerged from these studies. Indeed, reviews of this literature indicate small effect sizes and often contradictory empirical results (Milliken & Martins, 1986; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998; Tsui & Gutek, 1999; Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Three research approaches have been used to explain the confusing findings of the effects of differences in teams. The first is that researchers have started to identify the conditions under which differences within teams affect team processes and outcomes negatively or positively (e.g., Randel, 2002, Pelled et al., 1999, Van der Vegt et al., 2003). The second is that researchers have tried to develop typologies based on the assumption that team processes and performance are more likely to be influenced by the aggregate of similar characteristics than by a focal or single attribute (e.g., Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled, 1996). And the third approach has been that instead of focusing on the relationship between actual differences and team members’ behavior and performance, researchers have started to examine the role of team members’ perceptions of actual differences (e.g., Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002; Hobman, Bordia, & Gallois, 2003; Van der

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1 This chapter is based on Oosterhof, Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, Sanders, and Kiers (submitted)
Although research suggests that all of these approaches have merit, in this study we argue that they also have a number of weaknesses caused by the fact that they all adopt an *outsider* perspective on the effects of differences in work teams. That is, in all of the studies so far, the choice of the difference attributes under examination depended on the preferences and choices of the researcher(s). In contrast, we emphasize the importance of an *insider* perspective, in which the focus is on how team members themselves experience their interpersonal differences. Such an approach provides not only suggestions for what types of differences should be studied in future research but also deepens insight into how employees in a certain work context evaluate their interpersonal differences.

Below, we first elaborate on each of the recent developments in deductive diversity research mentioned above and highlight their strengths and weaknesses. Then, we describe the benefits of an inductive approach, and report the results of a study designed to examine how team members themselves experience and value interpersonal differences in an organizational context using such an alternative inductive approach.

**Background**

**Explanations for Mixed Findings**

Ever since reviews in the late 1990s concluded that diversity research had produced a confusing and inconsistent pattern of results (e.g., Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998), researchers have tried to increase understanding of the influence of interpersonal differences by adopting more sophisticated approaches of empirical investigation. The implicit aim of all of these research approaches has been to identify which differences are important and/or salient in specific contexts, and to explain why certain kinds of differences have positive or negative consequences for team member attitudes, behavior, and performance.

The first of these approaches is a contingency approach that has tried to identify the *conditions* that may shape how team members react to interpersonal differences. Researchers adopting this approach often hint on the probability that certain kinds of differences will become more important or salient under the conditions studied. Moreover, they have tried to identify the conditions under which interpersonal differences are either positively or negatively related to attitudes, behavior, and performance of team members. These studies showed, for example, that the salience of certain kinds of differences depends on their numerical distinctiveness (Chattopadhyay, 1999; Randel, 2002), that individuals react positively to interpersonal
differences when tasks require that team members interact with each other and engage in task debates (Pelled et al., 1999), and when task and goal interdependence are congruent (Van der Vegt et al., 2003).

The second approach is to argue that different sorts of interpersonal differences will have different effects. To that end, several researchers have proposed *typologies* that parsimoniously classify different types of differences into taxonomies. Several of these taxonomies include the distinction between clearly visible differences which may be less related to the tasks at hand, and less visible differences which are more related to the tasks at hand (e.g., Harrison et al., 1998, 2002; Jackson, May, & Whitney, 1995; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled, 1996; Webber & Donahue, 2001). Clearly visible differences that are less task-relevant (e.g., differences in age, race, and gender) have been argued to be easily detectable, more accessible, and therefore likely to be negatively valued because they induce responses such as in-group biases and relationship conflict. Conversely, less visible differences that are more task-related (e.g., differences in tenure, educational background, and functional background) are argued to be more positively valued because they are more relevant to the task performed by a team and tend to have a stronger impact on task-related team processes (Jackson et al., 1995; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled, 1996).

A final approach is to argue that instead of focusing on *objective proxies* of differences, including differences in gender, age, ethnicity functional background, and educational background, it is important to focus on the *perception* of differences (e.g., Randel & Jaussi, 2003; Van der Vegt & Van de Vliert, 2005). Specifically, researchers adopting this perceptual approach, argue that objective proxies may fail to map all relevant differences between team members, and do not address the possibility that the same interpersonal differences can be experienced quite differently by different team members (cf., Lawrence, 1997; Riordan, 2000). Individuals compare, and judge others, depending on what is relevant, important or salient to them in a certain context. Moreover, individual team members may differ in their knowledge of the actual differences between team members as a result of, for example, differences in the amount of time that they have spent together (Harrison et al., 2002). For this reason, it has been suggested that it is important to pay attention to the perception of actual differences. Research from this perspective indeed suggests that including perceptual measures of interpersonal differences increases the predictive power of diversity factors (Harrison et al., 1998, 2002; Riordan, 2000; Van der Vegt & Van de Vliert, 2005).

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Past Approaches**

All of the aforementioned approaches have of course strengths and weaknesses. A
strength of the contingency and perceptual approaches is that they both acknowledge that not all interpersonal differences are equally important, but that certain differences can be more or less important and/or salient than others. A major strength of the typological approach is that it acknowledges that interpersonal differences may overlap or are correlated to each other (e.g., differences in educational and functional background together represent differences in knowledge and skills), and that examining the effects of these broader categories of interpersonal differences may result in a deeper and broader understanding of the effects of interpersonal differences. Finally, both the contingency and typological approaches acknowledge that individuals can react differently to interpersonal differences, depending on the context or the type of differences that are considered.

The three research approaches also have a number of weaknesses. First of all, a general weakness of the approaches is that they all adopt an outsider perspective on the effects of interpersonal differences. That is, the choice of the attributes under examination depended on the preferences and choices of the researcher(s). As a result, most diversity research is limited to a relatively small number of obvious attributes, namely gender, age, race/ethnicity, tenure, functional background and educational background (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). A crucial question is whether these differences are actually the most important ones in work settings. It is well possible that by examining the effects of differences of their own choosing, researchers have overlooked aspects that are much more relevant for the participants in their studies. In other words, by taking an outsider perspective it is extremely difficult to determine what kinds of differences are dominant, salient, and central for social divisions (cf. Mannix & Neale, 2005). Although the contingency approach tried to tackle the problem by examining the role of moderator variables that may determine the salience of interpersonal differences, in runs up against the insuperable difficulty that the number of potential moderators is practically unlimited.

Second, the existing approaches often apply theory-based classification schemes. A limitation of these classification schemes is that whereas distinctions between attributes can be clear-cut in theory, they may be less straightforward in practice. For example, some researchers assume on the basis of theory that differences in age are not task-related because they do not directly shape the perspectives and skills related to cognitive tasks (e.g., Pelled, 1996). However, in practice age differences may be highly task-related because they can be associated with task experience. Moreover, in applying these classification schemes, researchers assume that the types of differences in these schemes are relevant for all organizational contexts. A limitation is it that some differences may well be only salient in certain organizations. For example, it is possible that in some organizations differences in gender are
salient because of a heterogeneous gender composition, whereas in others they are not as a result of a homogeneous gender composition (cf., Randel, 2002). In sum, the limitation of theory-based classification schemes is that they are developed with the implicit assumption that distinctions between categories are just as clear cut in practice as in theory and that they can be generalized to all sorts of different organizational contexts.

Third, existing research from each of the three approaches has typically been based on the logic that differences that evoke social identity/self-categorization processes have negative effects, whereas differences that give rise to changes in information and perspectives have positive effects (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). By adopting this logic, researchers seem to assume that differences are either negatively or positively valued. Although this seems to make intuitive sense, recent research does not support this line of reasoning. For instance, whereas in some studies demographic differences were negatively related to affective/evaluative processes, in other studies these differences were positively related to basically the same affective/evaluative processes (e.g., Jehn et al., 1999; Webber & Donahue, 2001). In addition, whereas in some studies differences in educational and functional background were positively related to cooperative team processes and performance (e.g., Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002), in other studies these differences were either unrelated or negatively related to cooperative team processes and performance (e.g., Pelled et al., 1999). The question arising from these results is whether interpersonal differences are either positively or negatively valued. It is very well possible that interpersonal differences are both positively and negatively valued depending on an individual’s goals. For example, interpersonal differences might be positively and negatively valued depending on whether or not the differences contribute to the completion of tasks (cf., Glaman, Jones, & Rozelle, 2002).

An Alternative Approach

In this chapter, we try to overcome the weaknesses of existing approaches to examine interpersonal differences from an outsider perspective. Because for researchers it is difficult to gauge the relevance and salience of dissimilarity attributes, we propose to investigate interpersonal differences from an insider perspective by investigating how team members themselves experience interpersonal differences. We do this by combining a free-listing task technique (Borgatti, 1999; cf., Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) and a concept mapping technique (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). This approach has at least three advantages.

First, asking team members themselves what differences they perceive, increases the validity of identifying the relevant and salient attributes. That is, the free-listing
task technique will elicit those attributes that are salient for these team members and will result in a list of relevant attributes mentioned by team members (Borgatti, 1999; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Applying this technique makes it less critical to attend to possible context variables that may make certain attributes more or less salient.

Second, the interpersonal difference attributes mentioned by participants can be used in follow-up analyses to determine to what extent these differences can be grouped into more or less similar categories. Specifically, by applying a participatory concept mapping technique we can assess how team members group these dissimilarity attributes. In addition, we can provide a visual representation of relationships between these groups of dissimilarity attributes (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). As a result, we will be able to verify to what extent existing theory-based categorization schemes are supported by empirical data, and to identify the relevant and salient dissimilarity categories within a specific organizational context.

Finally, by asking team members to what extent they negatively or positively value each of these interpersonal differences, we are able to investigate whether some interpersonal differences are either positively or negatively valued, or whether they are both negatively and positively valued as is suggested by other research findings (e.g., Baxter & West, 2003).

Method

Research Setting
The sample consisted of 80 participants from 15 diverse teams working in a nonprofit governmental institution in the Netherlands. This governmental institution operates on the administrative layer in between the national government and the local municipalities, having the responsibility for matters of sub-national or regional importance. The duties and responsibilities of teams in our sample ranged from monitoring bridges in the region to maintaining the corporate website, from maintaining the waterways to projects on sustainable energy, and from being responsible for human resource policies to projects on soil improvement. In terms of Cohen and Bailey’s (1997) typology of teams, our sample included two work teams and thirteen project teams. Work teams are continuing work units responsible for providing services. Project teams are units that produce one-time outputs which are non-repetitive in nature and that draw their members from different disciplines and functional backgrounds.
Participants
The sample was obtained with the assistance of a contact person inside the organization. The teams were randomly selected. Participation was voluntary and confidential. All of the participants were Dutch. The sample included 66.70 percent males and 65.40 percent of the total sample worked full time, 51 percent had a university degree; 44 percent received higher vocational education; 4 percent received intermediate vocational education; 1 percent received lower vocational education. There was substantial variation in educational background (37 percent engineering; 19 percent social science; 19 percent business/economics; 11 percent legal; 7 percent biology; 4 percent administration; 3 percent other). The mean age was 42.06 years ($SD = 10.39$), mean position tenure was 10.65 years ($SD = 11.19$), and mean team tenure was 2.31 years ($SD = 2.10$).

As this study is about perceived differences between individuals in teams, it is informative to show how the participants objectively differed. As can be seen from Table 2.1, in all of the relations there were considerable differences in gender (in 38% of relations), education type (in 71% of relations), education level (in 49% of relations), age (in 98% of relations), position tenure (in 98% of relations), and team tenure (in 95% of relations).

**TABLE 2.1**
**Objective Differences Between Individuals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of difference</th>
<th>Number of relations with differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differences in gender</td>
<td>66 (38%)</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in education type</td>
<td>118 (71%)</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in education level</td>
<td>82 (49%)</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in age (in years)</td>
<td>163 (98%)</td>
<td>12.14</td>
<td>9.34</td>
<td>0 - 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in position tenure (in months)</td>
<td>162 (98%)</td>
<td>130.22</td>
<td>119.18</td>
<td>0 - 363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in team tenure (in months)</td>
<td>158 (95%)</td>
<td>20.34</td>
<td>25.99</td>
<td>0 - 133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 166 relationships

*Note:*
Differences in gender, education type, and education level are dichotomous variables (0 = no difference; 1 = difference)

Differences in age, position tenure, and team tenure are Euclidian distances between two individuals (e.g., Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992)
Procedure

**Perceived differences.** Data concerning what differences individual team members perceived were collected during face-to-face meetings. We used a freelist task which is a common method in the social sciences to elicit items that are salient to individuals (cf., Borgatti, 1999; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Specifically, we asked participants to answer the question: *What are the differences between you and X?* They were encouraged to write down as many differences with this specific colleague as they were aware of, and could use as much time as they needed to complete the list. Participants had to do this task for work relationships with two or three fellow team members, randomly selected by the researchers. This resulted in a total of 166 unilateral relationships.

**Grouping of perceived differences.** To investigate how the dissimilarity attributes mentioned by the participants could be grouped into categories, we took several steps based on Jackson and Trochim’s (2002) concept mapping technique. First, we asked a group of nine persons to sort the mentioned attributes that were written on cards. These sorters were randomly selected from the pool of 80 participants to ensure that the concept map would reveal categories that are relevant within the organization (Jackson & Trochim, 2002).

Sorters were given written instructions to put each card in a pile with other cards that contained statements they thought were similar. There was no limit to the number of piles they could create. In accordance with Jackson and Trochim’s (2002) procedure, the sorters were not allowed to create a “junk” pile. Any attribute they did not judge to be similar to any other attribute should be left in its own pile. We did this to improve the fidelity of the data by excluding the possibility that a non-interpretable “junk” cluster would appear after the final analysis. Finally, they were asked to give each pile a name that they thought most accurately represented the dissimilarity attributes in it.

Then, for each sorter the sorting results were summarized into an item-by-item matrix. The cell values represented whether (1) or not (0) a pair of statements was grouped by that sorter into the same pile. After creating these matrices for each of the sorters, the matrices were added together to form one aggregate matrix. On the basis of this aggregate matrix, we generated a two-dimensional map of distances between the dissimilarity attributes using multidimensional scaling (MDS) analysis in MATLAB (MathWorks, 2004; Kruskal & Wish, 1978).

To determine the appropriate number of clusters that parsimoniously represented the data we performed k-means cluster analysis in MATLAB (MathWorks, 2004; Kruskal & Wish, 1978).
Steinley, 2003). This was done by sequentially comparing the fit of several solutions. Specifically, beginning with 2 clusters, we compared the fit of solutions up to a 16-cluster solution.

Finally, we interpreted the clusters by using centroid\(^4\) analysis (see Jackson & Trochim, 2002 for details). This involved computing the centroids for the clusters, and then computing the Euclidian distance between a cluster’s centroid and each pile label. This resulted in clusters associated with pile name labels. The decision about how to label each cluster was made by combining our own interpretation of the cluster with the labels that had the smallest Euclidian distance with the centroid of that cluster.

**Evaluation of differences.** During the interview, participants were asked to evaluate their dissimilarity to each of the randomly chosen members of their team for each of the attributes that they had mentioned during the free-listing task. Specifically, participants were asked to rate how positively (1 = “not positive”, 7 = “very positive”) and how negatively (1= “not negative”, 7= “very negative”) they valued their dissimilarity to the other team member on each of the specific listed dissimilarity attributes.

**Results**

**Perceived Differences**

In total, the free-listing task generated 497 dissimilarity attributes, which is a mean number of 2.99 differences per relationship (\(SD = 1.98, \text{minimum} = 1, \text{maximum} = 12\)). There was no significant difference between the number of differences mentioned by men and women \(M_{men} = 3.08, SD = 2.08; M_{women} = 2.89, SD = 2.01; F (1, 165) = .31, ns\), and the type of team in which team members were operating \(M_{work\ teams} = 2.22, SD = 1.22; M_{project\ teams} = 3.11, SD = 3.11; F (1, 165) = 2.99, ns\).

**Grouping of Dissimilarity Attributes**

**Sorting.** From the 497 attributes, 121 were identical. To reduce the burden for the sorters, we decided to include only one of these identical attributes in the final list of attributes they had to classify. Further reducing the amount of attributes was deemed to introduce an unacceptable level of researcher bias. Thus, the total set of attributes the sorters needed to classify consisted of 376 unique dissimilarity attributes.

**Multidimensional scaling analysis.** We performed multidimensional scaling (MDS) analyses to examine whether the fit of a one-, two-, or three-dimensional solution was the best. In order to determine the appropriate number of dimensions

\(^4\) A centroid is an average or mean value of the objects contained in a cluster (Jackson & Trochim, 2002).
in which to represent the data, we used the recommended criteria of (a) examining the improvement of fit of a solution by means of the elbow criterion, and (b) yielding a parsimonious and conceptually interpretable solution (Kruskal & Wish, 1978). The improvement from a one-dimensional solution to a two-dimensional solution was considerably larger than the improvement from a two- to three-dimensional solution (goodness-of-fit one-dimensional solution = 73.40%; goodness-of-fit two-dimensional solution = 88.40%, goodness-of-fit three-dimensional solution = 93.81%). In combination with the considerations of interpretability, we decided a two-dimensional solution was the most adequate solution to our data. Additional MDS analyses using the leave-one-out procedure (Miller, 1974) yielded that the two-dimensional solution was stable.

**Cluster analysis.** After comparing the fit of solutions with 2 to 16 clusters, we concluded on the basis of the elbow criterion (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984) that including more than five clusters resulted in relatively low fit increases. Therefore, five clusters represented the most concise and accurate clustering summary of the data points.

**Interpretation of the clusters.** After associating the sorter’s pile names with the clusters using the centroid analysis described above, we interpreted the clusters. The clusters were interpreted as extraversion, work pose, approach to work, task-related expertise, and seniority.

The cluster solution is represented in Figure 2.1. The gray-shaded shapes are the clusters and the dots in these shapes correspond to dissimilarity attributes. The position on the map (i.e., top, bottom, right, or left) of the shapes and the dots is not meaningful. Only the distance or spatial relationship between them is interpretable. Specifically, the proximity of the shapes and dots corresponds to how similar they were judged to be: shapes and dots that are farther apart on the map are dissimilarity attributes that were sorted together less often.

Specifically, the extraversion cluster was represented by statements such as “has got ambition”, “plays the first fiddle”, and “is extraverted”, while the work pose cluster included statements as “likes to be straightforward”, “prefers a hands-on mentality”, “typical bureaucrat”. The cluster approach to work was represented with statements such as “is working in an ad-hoc way”, “needs a structured task”, and “is focused on the goal”, while the task-related expertise cluster included statements related to, for example, differences in technical communication, legal background, and educational background. Finally, the cluster seniority included statements such as “age”, “life phase”, and “has got children”. The ten dissimilarity attributes that were most representative for each of the five clusters are provided in the Appendix.
Interpretation of the dimensions. The distinction between the clusters extraversion and task-related expertise seemed to discriminate between two distinct aspects of individual qualities: those specifically relating to relational or interpersonal qualities, and those specifically relating to task-related qualities. In addition, the distinction between the clusters approach to work and work pose on the one hand, and seniority on the other hand seemed to reflect observable and less easily observable attributes.

We summarized the descriptive statistics of the clusters in Table 2.2. As can be seen from the table, differences belonging to the task-related expertise cluster were mentioned in 62% of the relationships, and difference attributes belonging to the extraversion cluster were mentioned in 50% of the relationships. A sign test (Moore & McCabe, 2002) revealed that, compared to the other clusters, differences belonging to the task-related expertise cluster were mentioned most ($p < .05$). Furthermore, differences in extraversion were mentioned more than the attributes belonging to clusters work pose and seniority ($p < .01$).
TABLE 2.2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE CLUSTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Number of relations in which cluster was observed</th>
<th>Maximum times mentioned(a)</th>
<th>Total sum(b)</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task-related expertise</td>
<td>103 (62%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>31.60</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>83 (50%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>25.35</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to work</td>
<td>69 (42%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>17.50</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>54 (33%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>14.69</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work pose</td>
<td>46 (28%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10.86</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>497</td>
<td></td>
<td>497</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 166 relationships
\(a\) This refers to the maximum number of times a statement from this cluster was mentioned by an individual describing a relation with a colleague
\(b\) This refers to how often statements from a certain cluster were mentioned over the whole sample

Evaluation of Differences
Table 2.3 gives descriptive statistics and correlations for the evaluation of the clusters. As can be seen from the correlations between the positive and negative evaluations, the scales for the clusters extraversion and approach to working were largely and significantly negatively related (\(r = -.68\) and \(r = -.63\), respectively). This indicates that participants tended to contrast positive and negative evaluations regarding these types of differences.

TABLE 2.3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF EVALUATION OF ATTRIBUTES IN CLUSTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>(r_{positive&amp;\ negative})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task-related expertise</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>-.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach to work</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>-.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>-.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work pose</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An illustrative example of such contrasting evaluations is the following excerpt in which a participant (P) described his reasoning behind the evaluation of a specific type of difference to the interviewer (I):

I: Okay, you’re saying: he’s very eager. To what extent do you think that difference is positive?
P: I think, uh, ... pooh... that’s difficult... because it often is irritating... at least that is what I think.
I: Yes, that’s possible.
P: It’s just that... he’s just too eager...
I: Yes?
P: So, on a positive scale I think that’s a two.
I: And to what extent is it negative?
P: Ehm, his personality... often he’s too eager, too impatient and that’s just too much. So, let’s say... on a negative scale that’s a six.
I: Could you clarify why it’s too much?
P: Yes, well... Then he just rushes into my office and starts telling about how well he organized things and that he accomplished this because of his tenacity, well bla, bla, bla... that often annoys me, and that’s why I gave a six on the negative scale.

This passage illustrates that the positive and negative evaluations of differences are contrasted when the difference in question frequently leads to irritation or annoyance.

In contrast, the positive and negative evaluations of types of differences belonging to the clusters task-related expertise, work pose and seniority seemed to be more independent, which may imply that participants indicated that these kinds of differences could be experienced as both negative and positive or neither positive nor negative at the same time. An illustrative example for such a pattern is this exchange:

P: He’s got a different type of education. Whereas I am an environmental scientist, he’s got a background in, eeh, business administration.
I: Yes
P: There’s a difference between these education types... I mean in the approach of work.
I: Okay, to what extent is that positive?
P: Not always, but sometimes I think: “Glad he operates like that.” But it’s not
always positive…
I: No?
P: Sometimes it does not serve my purposes… [Because of his background] he’s more focused on the process… whereas I’m more result-orientated. I guess that’s in essence the difference between these two educational backgrounds…
I: So, to what extent is that positive and negative?
P: Well, yes… by itself we’re complementary, but I don’t think that’s always positive. It depends on the task… On a positive scale it’s a three and on a negative scale it’s a five. Then it’s more or less in balance.

This passage illustrates that the positive and negative evaluations of differences are more independent because the difference can sometimes be positive and sometimes be negative depending on the goals and the tasks an individual has.

**Discussion**

Prior research has primarily adopted an ivory tower approach to examining individuals’ experiences of interpersonal differences in teams. That is, in all of the studies examining the role of interpersonal differences so far, the choice of the difference attributes under examination depended on preferences and/or choices of the researcher(s). In contrast, we adopted a grass root approach by examining what kinds of differences team members *themselves* experience in real-life work teams. Specifically, this insider approach enabled us to tap salient differences between team members within a specific organization, and to explore the value that team members attached to these perceived differences. Below, we summarize the key findings, consider limitations of our method, and outline potential directions for further research.

First, most prior research has focused on the effects of demographic differences such as age, gender, tenure, and differences in functional and educational background in work teams. The assumption has been that these variables represent important and salient differences because of their immediate observability, their task-relevance, or both (e.g., Jackson et al., 1995; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled, 1996). If this assumption was valid, one would have expected that the team members in our sample would have mainly reported differences on these variables. Surprisingly, however, our findings showed that participants in our study mentioned only few of these differences, namely differences in task- related expertise, and differences related to age (i.e., the cluster seniority). Most of the differences they mentioned were related to the personality dimension of extraversion, work pose and approach
to work. This is interesting because compared to the large number of studies focusing on the effects of demographic differences, relatively few studies have examined the effects of differences on these kinds of more specific and deep-level attributes (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Our findings therefore suggest that the relatively small effect sizes obtained in past research may be caused by the fact that researchers have simply focused on the effects of differences that are less important in work settings, and they empirically underscore the recent call of researchers to go beyond investigating demographic differences and differences in functional and educational background and to focus more on underlying, less visible differences instead (e.g., Ragins & Gonzalez, 2003; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Second, the participants in this study also mostly mentioned underlying, non-visible dissimilarity attributes. Thus, rather than focusing on differences in immediately observable attributes they focused on underlying differences that may be associated with these observable attributes. For example, our findings regarding the seniority cluster suggest that it is not actual age differences but rather the characteristics that may be associated with age that individuals perceive (see Appendix). That is, being older or younger did not seem to matter, but rather the substantive characteristics that were more or less related with these objective differences seemed to be of relevance. This seems to suggest that, at least in our sample, team members used demographic differences to make inferences about underlying attributes and that it is likely that these associations with underlying differences are the ultimate causes of the effects of interpersonal differences (cf., McGrath et al., 1995; Northcraft, Polzer, Neale, & Kramer, 1995).

Third, our results revealed interesting information regarding the higher-order structure of the attributes mentioned by team members. Specifically, the positioning of differences in seniority (i.e., differences in age-related attributes) opposite to differences in approach to work (i.e., differences in cognitive style to approaching tasks), disclosed the dimension visible versus non-visible differences. Furthermore, the positioning of differences in task-related expertise opposite to differences in extraversion revealed the dimension task-related versus relations-oriented differences. This empirically-based taxonomy therefore corroborates some of the existing theory-based taxonomies. Specifically, these findings are in line with the taxonomies of Jackson et al. (1995) and Pelled (1996) who proposed to view interpersonal differences within the context of their level of visibility and job-relatedness.

However, our results also challenge some of the assumptions of existing theory-based taxonomies. In most of these taxonomies, researchers make distinctions between dissimilarity different categories based on the assumption that the aggregates of similar characteristics can be clearly grouped into mutually exclusive
categories. However, our results show that these distinctions between categories are less clear-cut in practice than in theory. For example, we found that differences in seniority were positioned closely together with differences in task-related expertise suggesting that both kinds of differences were to a certain extent task-related. Furthermore, differences in extraversion were positioned closely with differences in seniority suggesting that these kinds of differences share that they are more visible to perceivers than differences belonging to the clusters of work pose and approaches to work. The collocation of the clusters in the concept map thus suggests that types of differences are likely to be confounded rather than clearly different, and suggests that researchers should be cautious in applying theory-based taxonomies (cf., Van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

Finally, we explored how individuals evaluated their specific kinds of interpersonal differences. Our results show a complex pattern. Specifically, we found that team members tended to contrast positive and negative evaluations of differences related to extraversion and approaches to work. In addition, they tended to conceptualize positive and negative evaluations of differences related to task-related expertise, seniority, and work pose as less contrasted phenomena. Although it was beyond the scope of our study to systematically examine the reasons behind individuals’ positive or negative evaluation of interpersonal differences, excerpts from our interviews seemed to corroborate findings from the relational dialectics literature (e.g., Baxter & West, 2002). Specifically, findings from this literature indicate that dispositional personality differences (such as extraversion and approaches to work in our sample) result in contrasting evaluations because they either facilitate or hinder communication. In contrast, the evaluation of other kinds of differences is less polarized because the evaluation of these differences depends on whether they benefit goal accomplishment such as task completion. For instance, individuals valued differences in task-related expertise both positively and negatively because they sometimes did and sometimes did not offer resources for task completion. This may indicate that individuals evaluate differences in a less polarizing way when the evaluation depends on the purposes served (cf., Davis, 1981; Glaman et al., 2002). Even though our findings regarding the evaluations of differences only offered an indication, they may serve as a fruitful starting point for additional study that might help to understand the often equivocal findings of research on the consequences of interpersonal differences. Specifically, our findings underscore the double-edged nature of interpersonal differences in that participants can both positively and negatively value similar kinds of differences at the same time (cf., Milliken & Martins, 1996).
Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study and the avenues for future research tend to go hand in hand, so they will be discussed in a parallel pattern. To begin, the primary goal of this chapter was to introduce a new approach to understanding what kinds of differences are salient to individuals. For that reason, this study set aside the question of the exact relationship between actual and perceived dissimilarity. Future research could assess the link between actual and perceived dissimilarity given that our results suggested that aspects that are associated with actual differences rather than actual differences per se are important to individuals working in teams. Specifically, it would be interesting to investigate how individuals use actual differences in for example gender, ethnicity, tenure, job type, educational background and functional background as a basis of perceived differences (cf., Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992).

Second, combining a free-listing task with a participative content analysis allowed us to get insight into which dissimilarity attributes were relevant in the organization without introducing a researcher bias. Specifically, letting participants list all the possible perceived differences between them and others, and letting ten original participants do the sorting ensured maximum representativeness of the taxonomy that emerged from the analysis. Nevertheless, because this taxonomy was based on the aggregate of the similarity judgments of no more than ten sorters, an interesting direction for future research would be to examine the similarity judgments of all participating individuals. This would not only further increase the reliability and validity of the taxonomy (cf., Jackson & Trochim, 2002), but would also offer possibilities to investigate which types of differences are salient within and across teams in organizations.

Finally, even though we used real-life teams with different tasks and responsibilities, a limitation of this study is that these teams came from only one organization. Consequently, it is uncertain whether our results are restricted to this organization’s management policies or culture. For example, it may well be that the perception of differences depends on how the organization approaches the issue of diversity in the workplace (cf., Ely & Thomas, 2001). Furthermore, the finding that participants mentioned especially less visible differences instead of visible differences may be attributable to the fact that the average team tenure was quite high (M = 2.31 years). It is possible that the familiarity between team members caused that team members were more focused on less visible differences than on visible differences (cf., Harrison et al., 2002). An interesting avenue for additional research would be to investigate which types of differences are salient in other types of organizations, and to examine whether the types of differences that individuals mention are dependent.
on, for instance, the time individuals have known each other.

**Conclusions**
In terms of outcomes, our study offers several contributions. To begin, this study showed the usefulness of a practical approach to examine what kinds of differences team members perceive in real-life teams. Specifically, by approaching the topic from an insider’s perspective, the study offered a unique insight into team members’ perceptions of differences, and an empirically based typology that can serve as a foundation for future research. In addition, the results regarding the evaluations of differences offer a fruitful starting point for research that further investigates what value team members attach to interpersonal differences in work teams and why team members value interpersonal differences in work teams.