The Role of Space as Both a Conflict Trigger and a Conflict Control Mechanism in Culturally Heterogeneous Workgroups

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Les travaux sur les groupes de travail culturellement hétérogènes (CHW) abondent en exemples de performances insatisfaisantes dues à des difficultés relationnelles. Bien qu’il soit universellement admis que la culture est à l’origine de l’interprétation que les gens donnent des comportements et de leur style d’interation avec autrui sur leur lieu de travail, ce qui reste ambigu, ce sont les déclencheurs des conflits. On défend ici la thèse selon laquelle de normes culturelles différentes et une perception spécifique des espaces psychologique et physique sont des déclencheurs majeurs de conflits dans les CHW. Les résultats d’une étude de terrain corroborent l’idée que des points de vue différents sur l’utilisation de l’espace, l’impossibilité d’échapper aux autres, le rétrécissement de l’espace interpersonnel et l’invasion de la sphère privée influencent la relation entre la diversité culturelle dans le groupe de travail et le type, la fréquence et la durée des cas de conflit dans les CHW. Cet article représente une première étape dans l’élucidation du rôle de l’espace dans les interactions transculturelles sur le lieu de travail et montre que l’espace peut devenir pour les managers de groupes de travail culturellement diversifiés un outil de contrôle des conflits potentiellement efficace.

The diversity literature is replete with examples of poor outcomes in Culturally Heterogeneous Workgroups (CHWs) caused by relational difficulties. Although it is widely recognised that culture shapes people’s interpretation of behavior and their style of interaction with others in the workplace, what is ill understood is what the specific conflict triggers of these conflicts are. In this paper, we argue that differences in cultural norms and views of physical and psychological space are major triggers of conflict in CHWs. Findings from a field study support the proposition that different viewpoints regarding the use of space, the inability to retreat from exposure to others, decreased
interpersonal space, and privacy invasion moderate the relationship between cultural diversity in the workgroup and the type, frequency, and duration of conflict events in CHWs. The paper represents a first step in elucidating the role of space in cross-cultural interactions in the workplace and how space may be a potentially important conflict control mechanism for managers of culturally diverse workgroups.

INTRODUCTION

The study of diversity is important for organisations in the 21st century. Faced with an increasingly competitive and globalised world economy and demographic changes (Johnston & Packer, 1987), modern management must find effective ways to manage the increasing heterogeneity in its workforce and consumer base (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002). This imperative is made clear by the numerous examples in the diversity literature showing underperformance of Culturally Heterogeneous Workgroups (CHWs) caused by conflict (Edgan & Tsui, 1992; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993), poor cohesion, and lack of social integration (Hambrick, 1994).

Although it is widely recognised that culture shapes people’s interpretation of behavior and their style of interaction with others in the workplace (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999), what is ill understood is what the specific triggers of these conflicts are (Alder, 1991; Härtel & Fujimoto, 1999, 2000). Scholars in this area of organisational studies have identified cultural differences in task orientation and interpersonal norms as important conflict triggers in culturally diverse workgroups (cf. Jehn, 1997; Tsojvold, 1991). In this paper, we introduce another important conflict trigger in CHWs, namely differences in cultural norms and views of physical and psychological space. We conclude our discussion with recommendations for group leaders of culturally diverse workgroups on the use of space as a conflict control mechanism.

Before beginning our discussion on conflict processes and outcomes in workgroups, it is necessary to define key terms and the research scope. The term “Culturally Heterogeneous Workgroups” (CHWs) is used to describe groups that comprise members from different ethnic, racial, cultural, or national backgrounds. We use the term interchangeably with the term diverse workgroups. The term “conflict” is defined as the perceived incompatibilities by parties of the views, wishes, and desires each holds (Jehn, 1992), regardless of any overt displays of hostility (Deutsch & Shichman, 1986).

The research scope is limited to addressing the conflict sequence in culturally heterogeneous workgroups as impacted by workgroup members’ spatial interaction. The research also addresses the role of leaders since they play a key part in determining and managing the allocation of workspace and managing conflicts ensuing from spatial encroachment.

Studies of group behavior show that the triggers of intra-group conflict events relate to task and social issues (Jehn, 1997). Task conflict pertains to the conflict of ideas in the group and disagreement about the content and issues of the task. It is the awareness that there are disagreements about the actual tasks being performed in the group (Jehn, 1997). Social conflict, on the other hand, pertains to relationship conflict and therefore is sometimes referred to as emotional conflict (Jehn, 1997).

A group may experience task-related conflict even when they share the same goal and objective about the task. These conflicts can produce better outcomes for the group or can occupy the group in disputes over how to accomplish tasks or fail to inform better decision making. Task conflict has been closely linked with value diversity in workgroups (Jehn, 1997), which is a key descriptor of CHWs. Thus, task conflict is more likely in CHWs as work orientation and style are features that differentiate cultures (Härtel & Fujimoto, 1999).

Social or emotional conflict produces negative affective reactions manifested as friction, frustration, and personality clashes (Ross, 1989). These negative affective reactions inhibit personal relationships and limit group cohesion and efficiency (Bercheid, 1983; Härtel & Fujimoto, 1999). Because people often find it more difficult to socially identify with persons dissimilar to their own race and tenure, interpersonal attraction, and consequently, positive affect between group members is likely to be lower in multi-race and mixed-tenure settings (Fujimoto, Härtel, Härtel, & Baker, 2000; Pelled et al., 1999). For this reason, Pelled et al. (1999) have suggested that management of group processes in CHWs is critical to achieving team goals (cf. Tjosvold, 1991). Considerable evidence points to detrimental effects of unmanaged conflict, including poor task performance, low social cohesion, high absenteeism, high stress, and high turnover and turnover intentions (Jehn, 1997; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The present research furthers the course of successful management of conflict in CHWs by examining the effect of leader behaviors and attitudes on intra-group conflict. Before we examine how group leaders can assist CHWs to avoid destructive conflict and enjoy constructive conflict, we introduce the concept of physical and psychological space as a third trigger of conflict.

**SPACE AS A PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: WORKPLACE DESIGN/ORGANISATION OF SPACE**

There are four principal workspace types: production space, office space, transit space, and social space (Fisher, 1997). Production space refers to a setting for industrial work formed by workshops, such as the workstations...
where different production processes take place (Fisher, 1997). Office space, on the other hand, includes all of the space reserved for administrative and data processing tasks. Because the participants in our research are pink-collar and white-collar workers, we focus on research relating to office rather than production space.

For a long time, the prevailing administrative model for the office environment was the enclosed office (Fisher, 1997). The closed office mirrors an individual conception of activity that gives seclusion and protection from intrusion and permits physical and psychological control over one’s environment. Its limits are fixed building blocks that clearly define the territory of one or several individuals.

More recently, however, the open office has become a prevalent office space design. Also called the landscape office (Fisher, 1997), the open office breaks down the traditional concept of an office. Everything that constitutes a physical barrier to communication such as doors and walls is eliminated in order to create a transparent fluid space where nothing can prevent the circulation of information (Fisher, 1997). The argument for this type of office is that it increases productivity through the facilitation of information flow. However, by eliminating both spatial and social systems at the same time, the open office obliges employees to control themselves at all times (Fisher, 1997). In addition, the non-differentiation of roles and of space gives no possibility of withdrawal into a private zone. In this context, superficial behaviors such as stiff smiles emerge which are symptomatic of an interior tension directly linked to the impossibility of retreat. In such spaces, employees see themselves as unprotected and develop escape behaviors to avoid transparency (Fisher, 1997). The problems that the open office presents to employees leads us to hypothesise that conflicts in CHWs will be higher in open space office plans than in closed office plans.

SPACE AS A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Space is not only a medium for material functions but also a medium for social values (Lewin, 1951). According to Garling (1998), space controls the strength and directness of communication and it sends a social message about the group or society that occupies it (i.e. its style of living and its values). Humans therefore, through a variety of adaptations and changes called appropriation, apply physical and psychological control over space. Appropriation includes forms of interaction that are based on occupation or a particular use of space and that provide individuals with self-affirmation with respect to their environment. For example, the corridors or hallways used as a passage to get to one’s office are not merely a physical system for getting from one place to another, they are spaces known to promote or assist certain encounters and to avoid others (Fisher, 1997).
The social psychology approach to workspace, which descended from the psychological study of industrial space (Fischer, 1980), is centered on the study of various forms of interaction between workers and their work environment. The approach is based on Lewin’s (1951) model of social analysis of space and the fact that work structure is reflected in the distribution of space. Lewin’s (1951) model depicts individuals as part of a system where all behavior depends on the environment in which it expresses itself. Lewin identified two levels of environment linked to individual space behaviors: the material environment (geometric form and defined objectively) and the psychological environment as defined by its qualitative properties (Lewin, 1951). Scholars working with this approach conceive space as being the objective pre-perceptual context for behavior that shapes the activities performed within it (Barker, 1968). In sum, the environment provides the setting that stimulates or prevents specific behaviors. Thus, a church, playground, movie theatre, or coffee shop are expected to trigger different specific behaviors.

SPACE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

Concept of Territory

Ethology depicts territory as the fundamental need of all animals to have space and keep a certain distance from others (Fisher, 1997). This concept of territory has been applied to human behavior. The functioning of a group or of a society can be interpreted by looking first to the territorial basis which allows it to express its instinct and which comprises one form of its equilibrium (Fisher, 1997). Others use territory to designate a place, or geographical area occupied by a person or by a group who use it in a certain way as their own property permitting exchange, work, or retreat (see Altman, 1975). Territory, in this sense, means appropriation or the personalisation of a space using markers (e.g. a name plate on a door, a property sign). It can also be defined as the existence of interpersonal barriers where intrusion provokes various defensive reactions such as aggressiveness, warnings, discomfort, and anxiety. Territoriality therefore is fundamentally a mechanism that regulates the boundary between others and us and implies the personalisation and the demarcation of a space (Altman & Chemers, 1980). Creation of territory occurs for three major reasons: to react to the materialised or implicit presence of others, to respond to environmental characteristics, and to satisfy emotional needs (Altman & Chemers, 1980). This phenomenon is closely related to communication and to the regulation of privacy, and consequently is relevant to considerations of interactions among diverse workgroups and the emergence of conflict.

Privacy

The concept of privacy is central to understanding the relationship between environment and behavior (Oseland & Donald, 1993) and studies have established a strong link between privacy, personal space, territoriality, and crowding (Atman, 1975). Privacy can be defined as the regulation of interaction between the self, others, or environmental stimuli (Kupiritz, 1998). It reflects a social behavior that encompasses withdrawal from people (Altman, 1976; Bates, 1964), control of information (Margulis, 1977; Westin, 1967), and the regulation of interaction (Altman, 1975; Sundstrom, 1986). Privacy theories propose that one of privacy’s main functions is to help maintain an individual’s self-identity by creating personal boundaries (Altman, 1975). Thus, visual and acoustical barriers may accommodate privacy by allowing an individual to act “out of role” occasionally or to discuss confidential information and therefore maintain psychological boundaries (see Sundstrom, Burt, & Kamp, 1980).

Privacy is affected by the use of a space and the task the individual wishes to carry out. For example, studying will require fewer disturbances than doing household chores (Caudill & Plath, 1966). While there is some evidence of similarities across cultures regarding the activities associated with different spaces, there is also evidence that differences in the use of space exist across cultures (Caudill & Plath, 1966). Rules associated with particular environments are likely to be culture specific rather than universal and these cultural differences are likely to affect perceptions about privacy (Canter, 1983). We could uncover no research, however, that examined the role of space in cross-cultural interactions in the workplace. The research presented in this paper is a first step in elucidating these relationships.

Territorial Control

Atman and Chemers (1980) suggest that territorial control is often symbolised by personalisation or by merely occupying a space and that individuals react negatively when there is a threat to or actual loss of territorial control. Territorial control also indicates the amount of freedom and control the organisation allows the individual to exercise (Sundstrom, 1986). Territorial reactions to workplace intrusions may be related to workspace control such as the amount of time workers spend in their workplaces, resistance to a permanent workplace change, and workers’ reactions to others’ attempt to control behaviors performed in personal territories. Furthermore, interpersonal factors such as sensitivity to invasions of personal space and traits such as anxiety may also be related to negative reactions to workplace invasions. In sum, personal space and territoriality are both privacy regulation mechanisms (Altman, 1975).
Establishing a territory and personal space behavior appear to enhance people’s sense of control over their environment and others’ behavior (Atman, 1975; Bordens & Wollman, 1985; Edney, 1976; Wollman, Kelly, & Bordens, 1994). Thus, it is suggested that workers who express a dislike for being directed by someone other than a supervisor, being moved from their workspace, or having their personal space invaded are expressing an aversion to the loss of control over their environment and others’ behavior (Wollman et al., 1994).

Regardless of organisational type or geographic location, negative reaction to potential territorial invasions of one’s workplace is predicted by one’s aversion to being told how to do one’s job by someone other than a supervisor and by one’s sensitivity to personal space intrusion (Bordens & Wollman, 1985). Research in this area also suggests that regardless of whether one shares an office or has a private office, negative reactions to territorial invasions are predicted by both negative reactions to others’ attempts to control behaviors performed in one’s territory and resistance to permanent workspace changes.

Sharing an office with a few co-workers is also a predictor of negative reactions (Wollman et al., 1994). For workers sharing an office, additional factors that predict negative reactions to territorial invasions include exposure to frequent territorial intrusions by other co-workers as well as their co-workers’ visitors. This, in turn, leads to greater vigilance and a readiness to react to potential territorial invasions (Wollman et al., 1994). Private office holders, by contrast, may not need to be highly vigilant and assertive in defining their personal territories as normal behavioral rules protect them from unwanted entry into their office space (Wollman et al., 1994). Thus, co-workers in shared workspaces are likely to experience more conflict than workers with private space as they have less control over their environment, are more vulnerable to perceiving invasion of personal space and territory, and are less able to withdraw when they perceive that conflict is eminent. This conflict sequence is portrayed as being impacted by employees’ spatial interaction. This leads to our major proposition:

Workspace will act as both a conflict trigger and a conflict control mechanism in culturally heterogeneous workgroups.

SPACE APPROPRIATION, SELF-IDENTITY, AND THE PERSONALISATION OF SPACE

Appropriation is the process that helps account for various forms of dominance that we bring to bear on an environment (Fisher, 1997). This concept generally means the act of making something one’s own, of claiming ownership of something even if it does not legally belong to us (Fisher, 1997).
From a psychological point of view, appropriation is a mechanism that includes all the forms and all the types of activities involved in taking possession of something. It is a specific spatial behavior that exerts physical or cognitive dominance over a given territory (Fisher, 1997).

Space takes on different meaning for different cultures and identity can be expressed through the personalisation of space. Sommer (1974) defines the personalisation of space as the decoration, modification, or deliberate design of a space by its user in order to reflect his or her personal values. In the organisational context, this process recognises that the individual has some degree of liberty to adapt his/her territory or control it (Sundstrom, 1986). Additionally, personalised workspace reveals the work style of the occupant (Goodrich, 1982), which can be communicated to and influence relationships with others (Sundstrom, 1986).

The presence of real or imagined tension, rivalry, or conflict in an organisation influences the emotional value attached to one’s workspace. Research identifies a typology of conflict consisting of interpersonal, inter-departmental, and hierarchical types of conflict (Fisher, 1997). It also shows that the more conflict one feels with the outside, the more one is attached to the space in which one finds oneself. Thus, the level of attachment one exhibits towards one’s space can be symptomatic of the existence of conflict (Fisher, 1997). Interestingly, individuals’ attempts to create more privacy by putting physical barriers between themselves and others (e.g. desks) can produce more friction, which, in turn, reinforces attempts to demarcate personal space (Fisher, 1997). In other words, a vicious cycle between space-provoked conflict and interventions to enhance privacy can be set up. Such conflicts and cycles are proposed to be prevalent in CHWs since cultural differences are often associated with different styles of relating to work and space.

**SUMMARY OF MODEL AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS**

So far, we have shown that space comprises both a physical and psychological dimension and that each of these dimensions plays a central role in controlling the nature and interpretation of the communications and interactions occurring within a given space. Consequently, we have argued that space will be a significant predictor of the amount, intensity, and frequency of conflict in CHWs. We could uncover no research, however, that examined the role of space in cross-cultural interactions in the workplace. The research presented in this paper is a first step in explicating this relationship. Specifically, the research investigates the proposition that space is both a conflict trigger and conflict control mechanism in CHWs. Since attraction between members is often lessened by observable dissimilarity (Härtel & Fujimoto, 1999, 2000), it is proposed that differing viewpoints regarding the use of space and inability to retreat from exposure to others and increase interpersonal space (lack of privacy) will be major triggers of conflict in CHWs. Next, we consider how group leaders affect the occurrence and outcomes of conflict events in CHWs and how applying knowledge about the cultural role of physical and psychological space may help their management of CHWs.
Leadership is variously described (Bass, 1990). However, put succinctly, it is an influence process concerned with defining and implementing task objectives and strategies and defining and maintaining organisational culture and people’s identification with such tasks and culture (Yukl, 1989). Thus, leaders craft the norms and visions held by their followers, which directly affect the interpretation and response to events in the workplace. The focus of this paper is diversity leadership, a term we use to describe processes used to lead or influence a diverse or heterogeneous workgroup.

Culturally diverse workgroups appear to prefer different ways of being led (Hofstede, 1993). Given that leadership is often credited with successful performance in international competition (Hodgett & Luthans, 1994), it is important to secure leaders who can effectively manage culturally diverse workgroups. In spite of this recognition, few studies have captured the leader behaviors, activities, or specific skills needed to manage conflict and promote effective task and social outcomes in culturally heterogeneous workgroups (CHWs). One of the aims of this study was to examine the effect on CHWs of leader behaviors and attitudes, such as the manner with which the leader conducts him/herself and the leader’s approach, mind-set, way of thinking, expressed emotions, and ways of behaving.

First, we include in the model of diversity leadership the skills identified as distinguishing effective from ineffective leaders (cf. Blake & Mouton, 1982; Yukl, 1989). Thus, the three skills generally supported by research as necessary for managerial positions (i.e. technical, conceptual, and administrative skills) are included in the model (Bass, 1990). Added to these skills, we propose two interpersonal skills to be particularly crucial to effective diversity leadership, namely, conflict management skills and openness to dissimilarity.

Because individuals’ dispositions are rooted in their early social and cultural experiences and because conflict is an interpretive behavior, culture shapes people’s interpretation of behavior and their style of interaction with others. Modal practices relating to conflict management therefore may vary according to one’s cultural background (Rahim & Blum, 1994; Triandis, 1994). For example, collectivistic cultures characteristic of Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries tend to adopt a harmony perspective of conflict (Kamil, 1997). In contrast, a confrontational perspective is often used within individualistic cultures characteristic of Western countries. Eastern European and iberic countries are likely, on the other hand, to adopt a regulative model of conflict, which relies on bureaucracy and organisational structure to contain conflict (Kamil, 1997). Furthermore, research shows that culture influences the role that manager(s) and peers play in subordinates’ conflicts (Elangovan, 1995; Kozan & Ergin, 1998). Since
organisational conflicts are affected by the particular interpretations members bring into the workplace, leaders of culturally heterogeneous workgroups need to have a cross-cultural understanding of conflict.

The second additional skill we argue is needed for diversity leadership is dissimilarity openness (Härtel & Fujimoto, 1999, 2000). Dissimilarity openness refers to the openness, even interest, in interacting with others perceived as dissimilar from one’s self (Härtel, Douthitt, Härtel, & Douthitt, 1999; Härtel & Fujimoto, 1999, 2000). Dissimilarity open leaders do not exclude others from their in-group on the basis of dissimilarity (cf. Byrne, 1971; Härtel & Fujimoto, 2000). When leaders allow a sharply differentiated in-group to emerge in their workgroup, feelings of resentment and lowered team identification result among those subordinates who are excluded from the in-group (McClane, 1991; Yukl, 1989). Discrimination and self-segregation, in turn, disrupt group interaction (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999).

Self-categorisation is the process by which people define their self-concept in terms of their membership in various social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Categorisation can be based on the situation, because different aspects of a person’s self-concept may become salient in response to the distribution of the characteristics of others that are present in a situation (Markus & Cross, 1990). A salient social category is one that functions psychologically to influence a person’s perception and behavior and how others treat the focal individual (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, & Reicher, 1987). Research reveals that people frequently use demographic characteristics (basing salient social categories on demographic attributes) to categorise others and predict their likely behaviors (Allport, 1954; Milliken & Martins, 1996). For these reasons, we propose that the leader’s own openness and treatment of dissimilar others in the workgroup (i.e. ability to reduce the in-group/out-group distinction in the group) will reduce the amount of conflict generated in the group and increase cohesion and integration which, in turn, leads to more positive task and social outcomes. Similarly, it is proposed that leader management of own and group members’ openness to diversity is critical in the reduction and resolution of space-related conflict within the group.

In summary, our proposed model of conflict in CHWs depicts the cultural diversity within the workgroup as giving rise to conflict events falling along social and task delineations. These conflict events, in turn, have both proximal and distal consequences. In the short term, group members respond cognitively and affectively to the conflict. These reactions may initiate a cycle of productive or destructive conflict. Over time, the types of cycles experienced by the group impact upon the group’s social and task characteristics. This conflict sequence is depicted in the model as being impacted by employees’ spatial interaction. Leaders are included in the model as determining and managing allocation of workspace and managing conflicts.
ensuing from spatial encroachment. The research exploring these propositions is described next.

METHOD

 Culturally heterogeneous workgroups within two large organisations in Australia were selected for this research using the following criteria: individuals within each group acted as a group, tasks were interdependent, members identified themselves as a workgroup, and groups were recognised as being an interdependent group by others such as supervisors and customers. Brief background information on the participant workgroups and their organisations follows.

 Organisation A is a large local government organisation responsible for roads, property rates, and waste management. Two workgroups from this organisation participated in the research. The first workgroup, referred to as A1, deals with workplace health, equity, and staffing issues. Diversity is therefore their business because according to their policy, “it was core for them to reflect the customers they serve out there in the community”. This group also deals with the creation of policies or mechanisms underpinning the implementation of diversity activities at different times.

 The second participating group from this organisation, A2, is charged with the purchase and maintenance of the local government’s fleet of vehicles. Tasks are shared by members in this group, so that people spray, panel beat, or engage in different activities at different times.

 Organisation B is involved in a state-wide research and training program that develops resources for the cross-cultural child care industry and other agencies interested in children’s issues. The organisation also deals with access and equity issues for various ethnic groups across the state. Four groups from this organisation participated in the research. The B1 group is involved in looking after a diversity program that supports teams of workers across the state that, in turn, support parents and child care centers where children from diverse cultures are located. Two other groups, B2 and B3, are from the group of support teams in the organisation that work together to facilitate inclusive child care practices in the child care industry. The B4 workgroup is involved in the same business as the previously described support teams except that it additionally looks after children with disabilities. Overall, maintaining, supporting, and implementing diversity policies are key to the very existence of these participating groups.

DEMOGRAPHICS

 Participants from both organisation A and B came from diverse cultural backgrounds. B2 was the most culturally diverse workgroup (with members...
originally coming from 12 national/ethnic backgrounds) while A2 had the lowest cultural diversity with two ethnic backgrounds represented. Further breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the participating groups is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

### PROCEDURE

Qualitative techniques were used to obtain data. These are elaborated in the sections that follow.

#### Participant and Non-Participant Observation

One workgroup was selected for a participant observation study. This method allows the observer to be immersed in the contextual setting of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), which is crucial to deepening the understanding of the delicate and emotional nature of conflict management processes enacted by leaders. In the selected CHWs, the first author was a participant observer for a period of six months, assisting with group tasks and recording observable verbal and nonverbal reactions to conflict. Observation of this group commenced before the interviews and other observational studies so that information gleaned from this study could inform the design of the interviews and observational measures.

### Non-Participant Observation

Six groups were observed for 12 weeks each for a minimum of two hours twice a week. Each group was observed at various times throughout the
workday. Group members worked together for more than 25 per cent of the day and frequently crosschecked issues with each other throughout the day. Group members were in close proximity to each other between 98 and 100 per cent of the time, more so when the workplace was an open-plan setting. During the observation period, the researcher did not interfere with the day-to-day functioning of the work units and attempted to remain unobtrusive by sitting apart from the group and working on other non-organisational tasks while taking notes. The observer was blind to each unit’s performance level. All witnessed behaviors and feelings were recorded.
Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six managers of the six CHWs to provide information about the participant organisations and workgroups. Apart from interviews with group leaders, the first author also conducted a total of 30 interviews with 25 members from these six workgroups. Interviews ranged from 1 to 4 hours in length; depending upon the time it took to develop the rapport and trust necessary for informants to divulge details about conflict experiences in their workgroup. All interviews were carried out in private at the workplace and were audio-recorded. Because of the sensitive nature of conflict (Kolb & Putnam, 1992), special techniques were used to elicit information from interviewees. First, the interviewer did not use the word conflict. Instead, interviewees were asked, “Do you encounter any difficulties or problems as you work daily in your work unit?” This was followed by a question such as, “Can you tell me if these difficulties or problems concern your duties or were related to interactions between you and other people at work?”

The structure of the interview was designed to help the interviewee develop confidence and trust in the interview process. For example, the structured questions were divided into sub-sections. The first section dealt with issues relating to the organisation in general (mission, structure, policies, finance and budget, number and extent of employees’ cultural diversity), while the second section concerned itself with the job of the interviewee (e.g. “Can you tell me what your job entails?”), background experience, and tenure in the organisation or work unit. These questions were followed by questions about the problems they encountered in their daily work in the unit. The aim of this third section was to identify the types, amount, frequency, intensity, duration, and triggers of conflict experienced by the interviewee and the team as a whole. Information about informants’ behavioral and emotional responses to conflict as well as the effect of these responses on individual and group was solicited in a question such as, “What was your instant reaction to the problem/differences/difficulty.”

Sections four and five of the semi-structured interviews elicited responses about the short- and long-term effect of conflict on individual and group outcomes. Informants were asked, for example, to describe how they felt during a particular problem or difference or difficulty in the group. In addition, they were asked to report on the processes by which such differences or difficulties were resolved in the group.

Finally in section six, questions such as, “Can you describe your physical setting at work for me?” and “Could you tell me please the effect of your setting on the work you perform?” were specifically asked to gauge informants’ reactions to their workspace environment.

The data were analysed using systematic interpretative techniques such as content coding, content analysis, and linguistic text analysis (cf. Jehn, 1997). Three intercoders who were blind to the aims of the research were asked to go through the transcripts and identify the emerging themes. Intercoder agreement on emerging themes from the transcripts was 80 per cent.

RESULTS

This study’s main focus is on the role that the use and interpretation of space as well as privacy play in the types, amount, intensity, and frequency of conflict in culturally or ethnically diverse workgroups. The key themes emerging from analyses of the qualitative data are presented.

Physical Environment and Conflict

Physical environment as a source of conflict and difficulties emerged in the interviews without solicitation. All participating groups experienced the physical environment as a source of conflict. For example, when asked about the causes of the problems encountered in her group, one respondent from B4 replied,

part of the differences had to do with the venue where we operated from. It was an “oldish” building, we didn’t have natural light, it was on a busy street, people used our office as a walk through to go to the toilet and it wasn’t our space. Our coordinator also in our opinion made a mistake by letting anyone who wanted to use our computers, who wanted to use our space, bring their children to work, it wasn’t ours anymore, children would be under our feet, eating chips, drinking things, using the computers when we needed it, mucking up the computers, leaving the dirt. It wasn’t our area.

In addition, not only did members of this team indicate feelings of powerlessness in terms of space ownership, they also reported that they did not own their team meetings. For example, one team member said, “When we had team meetings that were supposed to be team meetings, she [the manager] used to invite any of the volunteers that walked in off the street, she would say you can sit in too.”

Space design also emerged as a crucial factor underpinning conflict in CHWs as illustrated by this B1 informant’s comments:

I feel that as a professional person: I still have to have freedom to make up my own mind and I don’t want to be fed with somebody else’s problems . . . and different work ethics [where] one is much better for example at managing time and getting things done within a short period of time and one is chatting, chatting, chatting doing this and that and constantly not get the work done and yes that can be one big problem you know if you are not allowed to
When this informant was asked whether or not she would still experience the same problem of distraction if she had a room to herself at work she responded, “. . . I wouldn’t get so many interruptions to start with and I could concentrate on what I’m doing and people wouldn’t just go past and say hey can you help with this, can you come and show me this and the constant noise in that regard is also not very good . . .” Observation notes revealed that the workers’ office was a renovated old house. The space was constrained, with three employees sitting crammed in a semi-open space.

Although A2 did not occupy a traditional office space, they also experienced space-related conflict. An informant from A2 commented “You might have heard that we came from a previous depot called E. Farm. That E. Farm depot was absolutely brilliant for space; it was space unlimited. Now they’ve combined two big depots into a small space. There’s a lot of space trouble . . . , even parking a vehicle when you’re working on it. I think by law now we are not allowed to spray outside the spray booth. Most of the painters and panel beaters think that is an absolutely silly law.”

In response to how the lack of space translated into conflict, another respondent from A2 said,

There’s finding a car in your work area, where you’re working. That really cheeses us off, where you’re working on a vehicle and someone moves it and puts their own vehicle in there. Then finding the vehicle, sometimes they park it outside, it could be pouring down with rain and you’ve got to walk out there and get it. We’ve got a specific area where we rub down our cars . . . what’s called a wash bay. It’s in between the two big spray booths . . . the people who designed this place say that there is enough room for four vehicles in that. Well obviously they are just seat policies . . . no one can fit four vehicles in there and work on it. To work on each individual vehicle, you’ve got to have room. That cheeses us off too. Mind you, if there are four vehicles in there, those four vehicles have to be worked on. You’re working shoulder to shoulder and there are so many water hoses . . . someone turns off a water hose and the hose next to you, the pressure goes sky high.

Observation notes confirmed the lack of space: “It is difficult for workers to get vehicles in and out the workshop and the smell of paint is sickening.”

The complexity of the space problems becomes evident when considering the amount of time wasted to get things done in the limited workspace. Over 90 per cent of the participants agreed that space-related problems lead to poor time management. A respondent from A2, answering a question on the effects of limited space on performance said,
... time is money and money is efficiency, they all go together. Like I said before, we’ve got a certain amount of time to do a specific job and if ... there’s a vehicle already in the booth and nobody’s around, well you’ve got to get that vehicle out yourself and find a space to park it and then move your vehicle into the booth. It sounds petty but it takes time to do it and that time has to be booked onto a job somewhere.

Also, open office space emerged as a trigger of conflict as indicated in this comment:

... you have to write and plan and have people constantly interrupting what you’re doing and looking at what you’re doing and coming in to chat to you when you don’t want to chat . . . and then some people are talking there when you are trying to work and the noise is there all the time then, it is going to be difficult to get your work done on time.

A manager respondent from B3 indicated that their open space design office exposed workers to each other’s moods, saying,

Basically, we’re an open sort of office, we’re an open work environment and you have your own desk. And when you walk in you say “Morning, how are you?” . . . and just do that social little bit before everybody starts. Well, on the mornings when you could cut the air, there was none of that . . . they wouldn’t stick their head around the corner, if they did it was to complain . . . So then you knew that you were in trouble for the day.

Outcomes of Space-Related Conflict

One of the major outcomes for space-related conflict was ill health. One of the respondents commented about the effect of conflict on her, “I looked very cranky and even my husband said, you look so awful—and it affects my family and it affects my health.” Another informant from B3 said, “I had a car accident . . . just too long of hours and too much tension.” Observation notes recorded, “This respondent looks tired and weary and a bit shaken telling me this story . . .”

Another respondent from the same organisation said,

the space, the environment was horrible . . . there wasn’t any health and safety cover in there. Like we had computers, the wires were all over, we used to fall down because of the wires, and our chairs weren’t really standard. And the space we lived in was dark, and we noticed at the end that, every couple of days they used to buy Panadol because the girls used to get headaches . . . because there wasn’t any fresh air, there weren’t any windows that they could open and have fresh air . . . the actual electrical lights were few. So yeah, it was a very imposing place to work and she [the manager]
wanted to move our unit out and take it somewhere else and be the only boss in that unit... she spent the money to rent a place and that led to her first conflict with the management which affected us.

In addition, depression was reported in A1, B1, and B4. Reporting how another co-worker dealt with conflict in her group, a respondent said, “... Yeah, she was depressed and sad.” Even though this particular member referred to here was not a party in the group’s conflict, she was still exposed to the effect of group conflict primarily because of the open space design.

Another major outcome of space-related conflict was turnover and withdrawal. For example, even though the manager of this work unit was looking for a better workspace for them, members of the group were distressed by the perceived lack of space ownership. One of the group members said, “... and we were the only people [unit] suffering... not getting any conditions so we could work better or more hours... to lessen the frustration of doing one’s job. So it became really ugly, at the end... so she [manager] resigned.” A respondent from B1 reporting on an incident in her group noted, “... they never could get along with each other, I mean, they had to work together you know, and it became a bit tense, but yeah, she found a job and she left.” Analyses also revealed that workers did not want to stay in an ugly social and physical environment to work. To illustrate, one respondent said, “I stay in this office as minimally as I can to avoid interactions with people.” Another respondent, from B3, said, “... my self esteem plummeted down, I felt tired, rushed out, feeling scared to go to work, starting to think of changing jobs, but thinking this was my dream job and it could be the dream job and I mean I now know it is.”

One other major outcome of space-related conflict in CHWs was feelings of mistrust, sadness, guilt, victimisation, and anger as illustrated by this comment, “... It became very bad, we started to mistrust, and relationships were lost yeah...” Informants from B3 and A2 reported feelings of “anger, mistrust, and extreme mistrust” while group members from B4 described feelings of anger and self-doubt, “... everybody was really sad about what was happening, and self-doubt actually crept in”. Group members reported feelings of guilt as they thought perhaps it was their fault, and felt they could have offered more support to the other party who felt victimised.

**Space as a Social Environment**

The majority of respondents from the organisations studied described their social environment at work as tense. For example, respondents from B4...
described their social environment as “unwelcoming” and reported that, “there is tension in the air . . . you can feel it, and sometimes you say, ‘oh God, you don’t want to be in the office’, you wanted to get away and work somewhere else, you can’t really . . . concentrate and work with the vibes you can pick up.” Unwelcoming behaviors in the environment according to one of the respondents included “. . . not saying hello, not contributing to things going on in the environment, not talking to others . . . ignoring others and when you want to talk people sometimes say ‘oh I don’t have time’. . . it just was such a frustrating situation. So technically I do, I just switch off.”

Corroborating this, the group leader from B1 said, “some days were really, really bad, . . . you could have cut the air with a knife . . . yeah, you could certainly feel it, you could . . . just the vibes were enough some days that you knew that you were going to be in for a rough day.”

Analysis of transcripts indicated that the social environment and the physical environment interacted and contributed significantly to the flow of work and the amount, type, and frequencies of conflict in CHWs. Responding to the question on how often they socialise at work, a respondent from A2 said, “. . . there is only one person that I’ve socialised with outside of work and that’s ‘L’. . . . But on average, we don’t, not on a weekly basis, no.” This was reiterated by another respondent, “. . . I socialise probably for an hour or two. I don’t tend to socialise with them too much but we don’t go over to each other’s house or anything like that.”

In a different organisation, a respondent from A1 said, “We don’t socially go out too much. We’ve got Christmas or we might have somebody leaving or those sorts of things and we do get together for those. But, no, there is certainly a bit of a gap there, but when we do get together we certainly do enjoy each other’s company.”

While open space encouraged a high perception of lack of support from others in the group as a trigger of conflict in B4, staff from B1 and A1 blamed giving too much support to others in their workgroups on their open workspace design. For example, the conflict erupted in B4 when a group member, S, criticised other members sitting around her for not giving her enough support at work. Those criticised were really devastated by that comment because they felt that they had supported S quite well. In B1 and A1, many respondents said that giving support to others should be minimised in the workplace as it affects their own individual output negatively. Both B1 and A1 informants felt that giving support to others on a constant basis was a burden for them. A respondent from B1 for example reported, “I also found that I was constantly helping others, to carry on their tasks, this had obviously become too difficult.” Commenting further, “. . . you see it’s always difficult when you start a job somewhere. You want to please. You want to be helpful. You want to do everything possible where you can help, but yes it can be very stressful, very stressful . . .”

For some respondents, pressure to participate in social activities was problematic. An informant from B1 said,

I work well in a group and I work well alone but what bothers me is when I am somehow being forced to participate in some social groups that I don’t want to relate to . . . I don’t like to feel obliged to be part of a group if I don’t want to and again it applies even if they were all my own countrymen. I choose my own social outings and I don’t actually believe that you should have too much dealing with your workmates to start with.

This feeling of the need to conform or being forced to conform according the respondent is aggravated by the open space design.

**Space as a Storage Resource**

Another major difficulty related to space was the storage of resources. A respondent from B4 reacting to the question on workplace difficulties said, “. . . we had resources and we didn’t have any special area for our resources. So my colleague used to take field equipment in her car, things you know can get lost. This created problems because there was no storage, no proper place for keeping things.” Another informant from this same group substantiated this, “You can’t keep track of the resources . . . so we argued a lot, we used to say where is this, where is that, . . . and this made for a lot of speculations and problems. So, if you have an environment that permits access to things easily and naturally, you have less frustration and you can function better.”

Even in A1 arguments over space for resources translated into interpersonal conflict as staff members blamed each other for missing resources. The resultant feature for this interpersonal conflict was a reduced performance as the group members in B4 for example reported being frustrated in the office and had a high preference to work outside the office.

**Workspace Appropriation/Self-Identity as a Trigger of Conflict**

In the CHWs studied, workers created their identity through the appropriation of space. The intention for minorities appeared to be a reassurance that their cultural identity had not been lost in a majority culture. For example, one minority informant from A1 commented on her workspace in these words,

My workspace is what I created. I have the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag. I have done tables, I brought in my own furniture with Aboriginal
artwork on it . . . my role is counseling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees . . . the artwork was an invitation for staff to be able to come to my workplace, sit down and have a cup of coffee. I brought all these sorts of things into my workplace as a way of making my own workplace.

However, creating a workspace that reflected the respondent’s identity was received with mixed feelings. “Some people say ‘this is the nicest workplace in this organisation that I’ve ever seen’ and paradoxically, the same people would go around and say, ‘. . . you’ve got to have the standard equipment’ and all that sort of stuff . . .”

Appropriation of space for the above respondent sent messages to colleagues from her own ethnic background, . . . I think it’s more than just a statement saying this is me and this is how I feel comfortable, it was more of a statement to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff out there to say come, you’re welcome here . . . this is an indigenous friendly environment. However, there was some hesitance from the white staff. Anyone who was indigenous just walked straight through into there and then they perceived it as being the black space.

Commenting further on the different effect her space had on the majority culture, the respondent said, “. . . unknown to me, while I personally like seeing that stuff on the walls, I wasn’t really aware of how much the white staff had seen it and then it became a bit of an issue . . . ‘J’ and ‘Je’ [mainstream staff] found it difficult to come into my space for team meetings.”

Other employees from the same group confirmed this problem, saying, “. . . she [the indigenous staff] being different got focused on a lot and she was louder and . . . would bring furniture in there without permission . . .”

Workspace design was found to be a principal contributor to the amount of conflict evident in CHWs. One respondent from A1 gave a vivid account of how space design and specifically the use of the network printer was a contributing factor to a major conflict. The document that was forgotten by another staff at the printer caused the conflict:

. . . it would not have been an issue if it had been a white staff. They would have chucked it in the bin, but simply because it was a black staff that was involved it became an issue. Somebody physically took it off, went and told J. Had it been a white staff, my sixth sense says it would have been ignored. Oh somebody left it there. But somebody read it at the machine, saw that T had written this letter and wanted to make an issue of it. I believe it possibly could come from some of the stereotyping and you know, oh you know they can’t write or they can’t . . . It comes from that sort of thing.

Observation data for this group reveals that the office space is open with individuals creating partitions with cardboard to separate themselves from
others. A central printer is used. Observation notes taken at meetings in A1 also revealed that there was still some animosity about the above reported conflict event.

Privacy Invasion as a Trigger of Conflict

Incidents of privacy invasion were reported. An extreme instance was described by this respondent from B2,

And the staff member and her husband came around to my house . . . the husband told me what a horrible, dreadful load of people worked for me and that they didn’t support his wife and were rude. Then, he tried to tell me how to run the unit, so um, I sort of suggested to him that I didn’t employ him, I employed his wife and if there was a problem that she and I could work on it. A couple of weeks later he rang me and told me once again how distressed his wife was and he was only ringing me to tell me how dreadful my staff were.

The respondent manager reported feeling violated in terms of privacy at her home, saying “. . . I should not have allowed myself to be abused on the phone by her husband and I should not have allowed them to visit me at home in my private space, in my private time. I will not allow that to happen again . . .” Commenting further on the same issue, the manager added, “. . . I think, you know, it was very, it was rude, but I just get angry . . .”

In the description of another conflict related to privacy violation, a respondent reported from B3,

I was on the phone with a person who never has been nasty to me but someone else had had problems. This other person comes you know all hyped up and absolutely you know incredibly nervous and stressed trying to tell me not to say something when I’m on the phone and that’s when I said, look I am fine to handle this person the way I want to, I don’t need your help and I don’t appreciate that you come and interrupt me when I’m on the phone . . . I was angry . . .

When asked why she became angry she responded,

I was violated . . . my territory, my whole profession was violated . . . it was not right. I felt terrible. I felt like walking away and if this is the level of professionalism they can have, I will not want to be part of it because it is not the way. you know. I would be doing things and I don’t want to compromise my professionalism . . . so, I resigned.

Again observation notes revealed, “. . . people are talking to each other across the tables regardless of what the other employee is doing. Phones are
ringing from left right and center and it is amazing how they carry out their work here.”

Analysis of the transcripts revealed evidence of different interpretations about the use and invasion of space. Such interpretations are rooted in the “differences in culture”. For example, an employee compared herself with a co-worker from a different culture.

I am Latin American and we are very open and very informal about things. I’m sitting in my work and people come along and they will talk to me and I don’t have any problems, but the librarian, she is European, she really concentrates and she couldn’t switch from what she was doing to listening to somebody else. She couldn’t cope with that. So we respect that.

**Conflict Triggers, Individual/Group Outcomes and Leader Conflict Management Style**

**Individual and Group Outcomes.** Overall, the data analysis from participating groups reveals that space-related conflict was generally triggered by differences in values, beliefs, and work orientation, which in turn emanated from different cultural backgrounds. Outcomes of this type of conflict for the individual group members include turnover and turnover intentions, absenteeism, poor time management, stress, and even a car accident. Such individual outcomes, when aggregated at the group level, would indicate a reduction in both social and task outcomes.

**Leader Conflict Interventions.** Five out of the six group leaders (83.3 per cent) interviewed were from the mainstream Western culture. Both observation and interview data showed a majority of group leaders (except for B4) used avoidance and sometimes denial as a strategy for managing conflict. Analysis of the data revealed that most (80 per cent) leaders did nothing about the conflict. Interview data showed that team leaders were ignorant of the effect of space interactions on conflict and talked about their helplessness in dealing with conflict during interviews. Observation notes confirmed this. Even when staff approached a middle level manager for help with a conflict, they were often greeted with avoidance. One employee in group A1, for example, reported a conflict in her workgroup to a branch manager who did “not do a whole lot” after the initial promise to counsel the team leader.

Not only did the leaders avoid conflict management, data analysis also revealed that leaders shunned the management of the emotions arising from conflict for 90 per cent of the time. For example, when asked how do you deal with your emotions or was there anybody who managed emotions produced by the conflict, an informant from A1 said, “No, emotions are the hardest thing that I’ve found in this team to deal with. I find that as soon
as somebody shows emotion, management does not know how to deal with it and it is frowned upon . . .”

Other managerial interventions for managing conflict in the participating groups and, in particular, B4 included the use of consulting firms, creating rules and guidelines for conflict management, and helping one of the parties involved in a conflict to turn over. A manager in B4, for example, reported that she wrote a “glowing reference” for the individual perceived to be the cause of the conflict in the group and that the most “positive thing that happened was that this individual left for another job”.

**DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we have presented a unique perspective on the conflict experienced in culturally heterogeneous workgroups (CHWs). Specifically, we have applied the concepts of physical and psychological space to augment explanations of the type, amount, intensity, and frequency of conflict experienced in CHWs. Findings from the field research showed that the different viewpoints regarding the use of space and the inability to retreat from exposure to others are major triggers of conflict in CHWs.

These findings have several important implications for managers. First, managers of CHWs need to be made aware of the effects that space can have on workplace interactions, job satisfaction, and job performance. Second,
managers need to be aware of how territorial dynamics affect workplace satisfaction (Duvall-Early & Benedict, 1992). Third, managers of CHWs should monitor space-related conflict triggers such as inability to personalise space, close interaction distances, inability to retreat from interactions or obtain privacy, and sensitivity toward receiving instructions from persons other than supervisors. In open space environments, it may be useful to have areas that are available for “cooling off” after conflict encounters. Fourth, managers need to be attuned to potential problems arising from shared offices. Fifth, managers should look for ways of increasing workers’ sense of control. For example, using dividers and area rugs to better differentiate territories and encouraging respect of those boundaries, keeping desks appropriately aligned and separated, and letting workers mark their desk or extend their work territory (cf. Wollman et al., 1994). Sixth, managers should be aware that open office designs may enhance cross-cultural conflict because the open space design easily allows for distractions, space and privacy invasions, and makes more apparent the differences in employees’ work orientations.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, space seems to predict the amount, intensity, and frequency of conflict experienced in CHWs. The design and use of physical space was identified as a trigger of conflict. Consequently, space management should be a primary concern of the leaders of CHWs, particularly with a view to space appropriation, self-identity, and territoriality dispositions of group members, competition for resource allocation and the impact of cultural differences on these issues. Additionally, psychological space was identified as playing a key role in conflict in CHWs. Managers therefore need to ensure that employees have the ability to regulate their exposure to others and need to formulate with their groups mutually accepted privacy regulations.

The research also has ramifications for the literature on cross-cultural spatial interactions at work, conflict management, and leadership. For space literature, this study offers an additional perspective that office space in spite of all its advantages may need to be modified for culturally diverse workgroups as their interpretation of the meaning of space and attendant interactions may be in conflict. The paper also enriches the literature on conflict. Space-related conflict, as identified in this study, extends the documented triggers and types of conflict in workgroups beyond the traditional categories of task and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1997). In addition, we add to the literature on leadership behaviors and skills by proposing that leadership behavior for effective management of cross-cultural workgroups should include the ability to diagnose space-related conflict and use space allocation as a conflict control mechanism. The study therefore enlarges
the development of practical guidelines for conflict management training. Overall, our study contributes to the growing diversity literature particularly by furthering the understanding of the intervening processes in the task and social outcomes of culturally diverse workgroups which has, to date, remained largely a black box (Lawrence, 1997).

REFERENCES


