

SOCIAL CUES OF (UN)TRUSTWORTHY GROUP MEMBERS

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Abstract

In 2006 (p. 568), Chapman, Meuter, Toy, and Wright concluded that “self-selected groups do add more value to students’ experiences with group work” so “Fantastic! Let them select their own groups.” A similar conclusion was reached by Seethamraju and Borman (2009, p. 38) who stated, “It is entirely possible that students are best placed to ‘engineer’ their groups since they may have greater insight into the characteristics of potential group members than teaching staff.” However, while gathering data for this study a business student explained that when she is asked to self-select group members for a group assignment she avoids women who wear too much make-up. The student went on to explain that those who do are “not serious,” “not confident,” “place too much value on fashion,” and would likely produce low quality work leading to confrontation and a good deal of stress.

So, does the process of self-selecting groups really add more value to students’ experiences with group work and do students actually have accurate insight into the characteristics of potential group members? A recent study suggests that just the opposite can occur when students are faced with the problem of having too little information about their classmates to make informed decisions during group formation (Neu, 2011). In such situations students may engage in social categorization, a fundamental cognitive activity though which one uses social cues—e.g., behaviors and traits—to segment people and make inferences about them (Schneider, 2004). As such, the purpose of this study was to further investigate the extent to which and way in which students engage in social categorization to help make decisions during group formation.

The discovery-oriented method of grounded theory was used. Data were collected from a sample of 38 business students using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Subjects accumulated images that visually represent classmates they would tend to approach and avoid during group formation, and then each subject participated in a guided conversation (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). All conversations were audio recorded and transcribed, and data were content analyzed following procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This process led to three main conclusions.

First, students do, at times, respond to the problem of too little information during group formation by using a variety of social cues to cognitively categorize their classmates. One category appears to be comprised of those who fit, in appearance and behavior, a business school social norm. Exemplars of the category wear B-school casual clothes, have well-groomed hair, are “middle-aged,” are in moderately good physical shape, have moderate to no visible body art, and have in their possession during class the relevant tools and supplies needed for class. Exemplars also engage in social behaviors in that they smile, interact with classmates before class, and participate during class, and they engage in other relevant classroom behaviors. On the other hand, some classmates are placed in a separate category because they deviate too far from the B-school norm on one or more social cues.

Second, students make a series of inferences about their classmates based on the category in which they are placed. Students infer classmates who are in the B-school norm category to be more trustworthy group members than those who are excluded from the category. In addition, the categories are inferred to differ on a wide range of personality traits, the value placed on education and self, and contributions to a group project in terms of quantity or quality of work. Perhaps most importantly, inferences are made about a number of negative emotional

consequences that may be a main antecedent to approaching some classmates and avoiding others during group formation.

Third, students behave differently toward classmates based on the category in which they are placed. In general, students tend to approach classmates in the B-school norm category and avoid those who are excluded from the category. Very notably, all subjects in this study reported having used social cues to some extent to make decisions about who to approach and avoid during group formation.

References Available upon Request