VI. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Introduction

This study aimed at developing an understanding of multicultural work in five Organisations of the United Nations guided by two main research questions:

- What kind of team and group work in five United Nations Organisations exists?
- Which factors are a trigger, a barrier, and/or an influence on team and group work in this context?

These research questions helped to examine three gaps in current research on multicultural team and group work.

First, whereas intense research on teams and groups in international companies has been conducted, this study focused on international organisations. The context of international organisations differs in many ways from international companies beginning with the legal base, the financial and operational agenda, the cultural impact and also with regards to human resource practices like selection of candidates, training, international placements, career management and remuneration. As a number of critics have noted (e.g. Rousseau & Fried, 2001, Jackson et al., 2003) a rich description of the context is the key for valid interpretations of research.

The second gap that was addressed in this study focused on an evaluation of the types of teams and groups that can be found in international organisations. Management research has produced a plethora of studies on teams and groups in past decades. A clear definition of the underlying concepts was, however, found to be missing. This study not only evaluated research into teams and groups conducted between 1998 and 2007 but also accentuated the need for clear definitions of constructs as being essential for accurate research. Based on 50 interviews a typology of group work in the context of five Organisations of the United Nations was provided. Third, this study provided an integrative view of the reciprocal relationships between organisation, management, group and individual. By looking at the manner in which context affects these relationships, the triggers and barriers for team and group work could be explored. This way, the current study made an important step towards a more integrative view of organisational behaviour.

6.2. Summary of research findings

A qualitative research design was chosen to conduct this study. 25 semi-structured interviews with 50 predominately Austrian staff members of five Organisations of the United Nations in three locations were the basis for this case
study with embedded units of analysis (Yin, 1984). With the help of qualitative data analysis software, namely Atlas.ti Version 5, the interviews were analysed according to constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method proved to be a valid tool to discover patterns and to make sense of a huge amount of interview data.

The results of data analysis and their contextualisation showed a strong influence of organisational structure on multicultural work. Moreover, the strong hierarchy and bureaucracy in the five Organisations of the United Nations that were investigated were found to be the largest barrier for team work. In fact, the structure of these Organisations with prevailing hierarchy and task specialisation conflicts with team work that is characterised by flat hierarchies. The novelty of this study is that data analysis strongly indicated the existence of group work and led to develop a typology comprising task forces, project groups, and collaboration. This typology emerged throughout the analysis of data and whilst discovering triggers and barriers for work in the context of international Organisations.

From a micro-level of analysis this study illuminated the reciprocal relationships between organisation, management, group and individual. By looking at these relationships, individual perceptions could be unfolded and an integrative model of multicultural work could be developed.

Overall, the results provided strong evidence that the hierarchical structure of the Organisations under investigation is the strongest barrier for team work. At the same time boundary breaking and boundary spanning activities on an organisational as well as on an individual level take place to overcome these barriers. Team work could be a remedy for institutional slack and as an individual source of motivation from each of the actor’s point of view.

In the following the two research questions will be addressed in more detail and a summary of the findings will be presented accordingly.

**What kind of team and group work exists in United Nations Organisations?**

To start with it was reviewed how individuals construe team and/or group work in intergovernmental Organisations. Despite the fact that almost all interviewees initially used the word ‘team’ to define their work situation it quickly became clear that the underlying meaning did not refer to the term ‘team’ as per definition. Interviewees then described the position and tasks of their co-workers or superiors. Analysis further showed that around 60 % of all interviewees’ interpretations of teams and group work could be categorised around communication and coordination. Both elements were described to be essential to fulfil individual tasks. In the course of their narratives it became clear to respondents that some elements which are distinctive for team work were missing in their description of the work situation. The missing elements could be grouped around a lack of decision making power of individuals, a lack of collective performance
measurement and most importantly, the prevalence of a very strong hierarchy and bureaucracy.

In a next step the explanations of the respondents with regard to team and group work were compared with theoretical concepts of team and group work in academic literature. The definitions chosen were provided by Katzenbach & Smith (1993) and seemed compelling because of their simple but comprehensive description.

Definition of the term “team”:
A team is a number of 2 or more people who are committed to a common goal which is specific and different from each team member’s individual goals. Team members work collectively to reach this goal. They share leadership roles and follow a collective decision making process. Furthermore, the solution to problems is found in the course of collective discussion. The outcomes of the team work are subject to collective performance measurement.

Definition of the term “group”:
A group is a number of 2 or more people who are committed to a common goal which is similar to the broader organisational goals and each group member’s individual goal. Group members work individually to reach their goals. The leadership role is centralised at one person who is also responsible for the decision making process and who delegates individual tasks. Finally, the outcomes of group work are subject to individual performance measurement.

Based on these clear definitions the following conclusions could be drawn: the hierarchical structure implies task specialisation and as a result, individuals work on individual tasks. Hand in hand with specialisation comes a differentiation by groups of employees comprising different degrees of authority and power. Tasks are delegated in a top down approach and performance is measured individually. All of these characteristics indicate that teams can not exist in the context of the five Organisations of the United Nations under investigation.

A comparison of the interview data with the definitions referred to the following typology of group work including task forces, project groups and collaboration.

A task force operates temporarily in case of non-routine events or emergency events. Once the problem is solved, a task force usually will be dissolved. Conventional hierarchies marginally apply or do not apply to task forces at all.

A project group is established for the duration of a specific project. Project groups typically have an assigned group leader and tasks are assigned according to specialisation.

Collaboration takes place on a regular basis and is not timely limited. The formal hierarchy applies and tasks are executed based on task specialisation. There is no necessary common goal among collaborating individuals.

The characteristics of each of the types are briefly summarised in the table below.
Table 8: Typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task force</td>
<td>temporary</td>
<td>non-routine</td>
<td>suspended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project group</td>
<td>specified period</td>
<td>specified</td>
<td>Group leaders and members are equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>undefined</td>
<td>specialisation</td>
<td>effective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author

This typology covers the explanations of the 50 interviewed staff members in five Organisations of the United Nations, namely IAEA, UNIDO, UNDP, UNOPS, and WIPO.

**Which factors are a trigger, a barrier and/or a factor of influence on team and group work in this context?**

Deriving from interview data analysis the main factors which are a barrier, a trigger and a factor of influence on team and group work could be classified into three categories. These categories are: the organisation, relationships, and individuals. Each of the categories will be summarised briefly in the following and labelled as trigger, barrier or as a factor of influence.

**Organisation**

The organisation and its structure was found to be a strong barrier for team work and an equally strong factor of influence on group work and work in task forces, project groups and collaboration. The structure of the United Nations Organisations under investigation is depicted by hierarchy and bureaucracy. Hierarchy is the formal structure which shows different levels of power, responsibility and authority. It also identifies accountability. The existence of a strong hierarchy was emphasised by 95% of all interviewees. Bureaucracy expressed by rules and regulations and perceived as an instrument of power and control dominated by the top level of a hierarchy, was described as another strong factor of influence on group work and collaboration. According to more than 50% of all interviewees, priority has to be put on understanding and following rules and regulations. The personnel system or Human Resource Management of the United Nations Organisations can be considered as a factor of influence on group work and is also determined by the structure of the organisation. Recruiting processes, contracts, career development, and termination of contracts are equally influenced by hierarchy and bureaucracy. The processes were described as being cumbersome and very lengthy. Recruiting for example is affected by political motives. A plethora of different kinds of contractual arrangements exists. One distinctive contractual feature is the so called job rotation principle which is applicable for predominately high ranking jobs. Rotation is motivated by political issues but
also a strategy to spread knowledge in a learning organisation. Whilst a change in leadership every three years can be seen as a source for fresh ideas, it also hinders stability because of changing practices and additional rules and regulations.

Career development is also restricted by hierarchical structures and influenced by political actions. Performance measurement is practised on an individual level and as a consequence, individuals try to shed light on individual efforts before putting energy and resources in group work. Moreover, this style of performance measurement does not induce group spirit and cohesion.

Despite strong hierarchies and strict bureaucracy, the Organisation as well as individuals are actively breaking down these boundaries and spanning new ones. On an organisational level boundary spanning activities emphasise knowledge transfer beyond hierarchies and more direct communication neglecting hierarchies. The transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge as a source of organisational learning and building up of organisational memory is regarded as being vital for a well functioning organisation. On an individual level boundary spanning activities take place for several reasons: to reduce a deficit in information, to work more efficient beyond hierarchy, or to gather information faster. A parallel system and network to the formal hierarchy evolves due to boundary activities and helps individuals to fulfil their tasks more efficiently.

Lastly, the culture of the organisation has also been described as being dominated by hierarchy. Symbols like the number of windows in an office or the size of an office manifest organisational culture. Pattern of communication in the form of jargon and terminology as well as the expression of power by hierarchy depict the organisational culture on a visible level. Held values, beliefs, assumptions and attitudes that underlie behaviour characterise the invisible level of organisational culture which was made visible by looking at relationships between individuals.

Relationships

Two types of relationships were analysed as being crucial when it comes to explaining triggers and barriers for task forces, group work and collaboration. First, the relationship between employee and management, and second the relationship between employee and co-worker. Each of them will be summarised briefly in the following.

Employee – Management Relationship

Management as perceived by individuals is the major link between employees and the organisation. Consequently, individuals’ trust and confidence in management is crucial for successful performance. This trust was explained to be spoiled by politically appointed managers and hampered because of frequent
rotation of managers. Interviewees believe that a manager who builds up trust, and motivates and empowers individuals is the key to successful group work. The manager is also seen in a position of power to set the stage for team work and to trigger group spirit.

Employee – Co-worker relationship

The relationship between employees and co-workers is depicted by diversity: national and cultural diversity, stereotypes, gender differences, language and resulting faultlines, respectively subgroups. The facets of diversity mentioned by interviewees will be summarised below.

By its very nature, the United Nations Organisation is a multicultural work place and subsequently national and cultural diversity are facts of life of daily work. Interviewees see each other as part of a community in which nationality should not matter - just like it is stipulated in the UN Charter. In the course of daily work life distinctive characteristics of national culture become salient and influence work. Data analysis showed that the salience of diversity differs depending on the work environment. Interviewees working in the headquarters elaborated on cultural differences such as religion and cultural traditions or food. These differences were described as being interesting and as factors which make work in United Nations Organisations special and exciting. Staff working in the field reported differently. Stereotypes and cultural differences were perceived as a barrier for effective work. Depending on the country in which interviewees gained their field experience, they reported of stronger hierarchies and lines of authority as compared to the headquarters, less decision making power for individuals, different feeling for time and little effort of individuals to take responsibility. The interviewees reported two possible strategies to cope with these differences: maintenance of their own cultural identity or building up of relationships with other groups. Both acculturation strategies were equally implied among interviewees.

Gender issues such as under representation of females in top level positions and an over representation of women in administrative jobs was reported despite the fact that the United Nations staffing policies aim at an equal participation and representation of gender across all hierarchies.

Lastly, language diversity was noted to have a considerable impact on work. English as the major language of communication can be a barrier for group work from the point of view of non-native English speakers. The individuals’ proficiency of English determines whether meetings are dominated by native speakers or not and whether comments of non-native speakers are regarded as competent or not.

Austrian interviewees see language as a barrier for communication and exchange of information and as a result as a factor of influence on group work. To overcome this barrier, interviewees reported of two possibilities: the use of tech-
technical language as an element of professional culture, and the use of simple language to ensure that the content of communication becomes clear.

All of the facets of diversity described above lead to the emergence of faultlines, respectively subgroups. Faultlines as defined by Lau & Murnighan (1998) are ‘hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on one or more attributes.’ Data analysis strongly supported the existence of subgroups because of gender, race, age and functional diversity. A single attribute can be a trigger for the creation of a faultline. In a group context, these dividing lines cause individuals to see other group members either as part of their in-group or as part of an out-group. Research suggests (e.g. Early & Mosakowski, 2000) that groups with maximum diversity experience less dividing lines and the propensity of an emergence of in- and out-groups is smaller. The United Nations Organisation as a hierarchical organisation especially faces faultlines because of strict lines of power and decision.

A moderating factor of influence on all of the relationships is the individual characterised by personal background, personality and motivation. The personal background of individuals in this study comprises experience in an international context such as growing up in multicultural families and foreign countries. It also comprises education and/ or work experience in foreign countries.

The personality of each individual is a relevant issue when it comes to group work. Empirical analysis showed that personality may be supportive for group work and collaboration while it may also be a barrier.

Individual motivation derives from intrinsic motives such as intellectual stimulation or trust that work has an impact while extrinsic motivation is induced by remuneration and benefits.

A conceptual model of group work in five Organisations of the United Nations Organisation graphically illustrates the interplay of all the categories described in the section above (Figure 11).

6.3. Managerial implications

The following section develops practical advice for management in the United Nations Organisations. Based on the empirical findings of this study, which showed that management is the crucial link between the organisation and the individuals, the managerial implications were developed around two main questions:

- How to manage hierarchy and bureaucracy?
- How to manage relationships?

This section will conclude in managerial guidelines derived from empirical analysis and based on the propositions developed. The guidelines aim at devel-
opposing how group and team work in a hierarchical and diverse intergovernmental organisation can be put into practise.

**How to manage hierarchy and bureaucracy?**

Working for a United Nations Organisation can be a rewarding and fulfilling job given the opportunities the United Nations System offers all over the globe. The international context characterised by diversity in all aspects of work life, and organisational goals that really aim at changing the world seem compelling. When working for the United Nations one must not forget, however, that this organisation has become very large over the past 61 years and as a consequence, hierarchy and bureaucracy became very strong. The latter are a fact of daily work life in a world organisation such as the United Nations and mainly aim at assuring accountability and clear lines of responsibility and decision making power. At the same time hierarchy and bureaucracy were found to be the main sources of dissatisfaction. Both were identified as a barrier for team work and a major influence on group work and collaboration. 90% of interviewees reported perceiving hierarchy and too many rules and regulations as a nuisance in fulfilling their individual tasks. Without any doubt, hierarchy and bureaucracy will always be a major characteristic of huge organisations. However, a systematic questioning of some of the rules and regulations might show that over the years incremental rules and regulations have been introduced without being necessary. Management can be seen as central and in a position to reduce rules and regulations to the necessary minimum within the scope of a manager’s responsibility. Furthermore, management is in a position of power to create a work environment beyond rules and regulations. Managers may share information equally among group members and introduce a culture of discussion and mutual exchange. By involving individual staff in the decision making process and by valuing individual’s opinions and suggestions, a manager not only shares some of his/her responsibilities with the group but also increases individual motivation and as a result, performance.

A real remedy for strong hierarchies and institutional slack is the implementation of teams comprising individuals who work collectively to reach a common goal, who share leadership roles and collectively make decisions. Subsequently, they should be subject to collective performance measurement.

Management is in a position to raise team awareness by offering training to individual staff and by actively breaking down institutional boundaries. Interviewees in management positions have reported that all of this is possible and depends on the individual manager’s possibilities and effort.

**How to manage relationships?**

Relationships in the United Nations Organisations are depicted by diversity in various facets. National and cultural diversity most strongly influence relation-
ships. Management has to be aware of the fact that diversity is not only an asset but also a barrier. Therefore, a manager of a diverse group has to be sensitive towards different norms of behaviour and attitudes. It is suggested not to underestimate the effect of the emergence of subgroups. Therefore, management is advised to establish group norms by clearly defining communication styles, discussion culture and mutual considerateness. By offering intercultural training to individual group members, cultural awareness and mutual understanding can be raised and trained. As a consequence, a better understanding of each other would lead to improved communication and task fulfilment and to increased motivation. Moreover, knowledge and information would not be seen as a means of power but as a means to build up collective and shared knowledge.

When it comes to managing employee-co-worker relationships, management has to be aware of personality traits of individuals. For instance, some individuals are more extroverted or more assertive as compared to others. Management should be able to assess personality traits and to assign roles within a group or team according to the decisive characteristics of each personality. Together with collectively established team and group norms, a fit of individuals in team and group roles can be seen as a pathway to effective performance by satisfied and motivated individuals.

**Five managerial implications to make group and team work in a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure work: creating a hybrid culture**

The clue to successful group work and a future implementation of team work structures in the five UN organisations lies in the strategic use of hierarchy, bureaucracy and in assigning the right management. The major challenge is to design a culture in which both hierarchy and team work can co-exist without turning the established organisational structure upside down, namely a hybrid culture.

The following section lists and subsequently describes five normative practices that lead to a hybrid culture.

1. Analyse hierarchical (boundary activities) and bureaucratic (HRM) processes.
2. Reduce processes to the minimum needed which still assures authority, accountability and credibility but gives the individual in charge responsibility.
3. Span boundaries to enable team work.
4. Design HRM practices supporting a hybrid culture
5. Ensure the requisite skills of managers.
The structures which hierarchy offers should be used for routine tasks which have to be executed on a regular basis and according to the defined rules and regulations. By using hierarchy and established bureaucracy to fulfil these tasks, their smooth and fast accomplishment can be guaranteed. However, it is advised to question existing hierarchies and bureaucracies in order to reduce redundancy and to guarantee clear lines of authority. This process is advised to be done in the light of boundary spanning activities and with regards to Human Resource Practices. Both will be explained as follows:

For non-routine tasks it is suggested to span boundaries by opening the hierarchy to team structures. Team structures with dedicated roles and responsibilities do not necessarily conflict with the organisational premises of accountability and credibility. Yet, team structures may at the same time increase creativity, motivation, and subsequently performance. Research has shown that performance improves when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined and well understood (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Hence, individuals feel that they can work independently within the hierarchical structure while they have at the same time the possibility to cooperate across boundaries.

A hybrid culture needs Human Resource practices which are team orientated rather than individually orientated. These practices provide collective decision making, shared leadership roles, collective discussion and solution of problems as well as collective performance measurement. The practices also foster training in skill related and collaborative behaviour.

Human Resource Management practices should emphasise a selection of managers who possess the skills and abilities to manage teams. Therefore, career development should also consider skills which are especially important when it comes to lead and guide teams. Hence, managers should possess of political, economic and social skills. Effective teams and groups need managers who are both task- and relationship orientated. Moreover, these managers need to be able to switch between the two orientations during team and group work in order not to hinder the performance of such teams in the long run. Managers who possess these skills may become designers of successful teams and groups. By demonstrating collaborative behaviour themselves, managers act as a role model for their subordinates and employees. By mentoring and coaching, managers also create a collaborating atmosphere which will positively enhance group and team work on an individual level.

The five implications are summarised in the figure 12 below:
Figure 12: Five managerial implications

Source: data analysis
6.4. Limitations and directions for future research

The findings of this study should be viewed in light of several limitations. These limitations will be addressed in the following and suggestions for future research will be provided.

Firstly, the generalisability of the results to the whole UN system is limited by sample restrictions. This study aggregated an Austrian perspective on multicultural work in the United Nations Organisations. The reason for the restriction to an Austrian and German speaking sample originates in a trade off. To avoid a cross-cultural bias when conducting interviews in a foreign language, the decision was made to only interview native German speakers from Austria and from Germany.

Therefore, an interesting avenue for future research would be to conduct interviews in different languages with different nationalities and cultures.

Secondly, the study is limited to five individual Organisations of the United Nations System. This reason for this restriction was twofold: on the one hand, one single researcher can not possibly cover the huge body of the United Nations System because of time and resource limitations. A selection had to be made and it paid attention to covering different types of units of the United Nations System, namely agencies, programmes and organisations. On the other hand, those units were chosen were the majority of German speaking staff could be identified.

Future research should aim at investigating other units to get a broader view of the organisational context.

Thirdly, this study is completely qualitative. The data collection method using semi-structured interviews is qualitative, the data analysis using constant comparison method is qualitative and the method being a case study is qualitative. Qualitative research is criticised as being biased by the researcher. Because of smaller sample size it is limited to a specific context which therefore has to be richly described. A quantitative research design may help to make results more generalisable in future research.

Finally, the model presented covers a small slice of the vast domain of multicultural work and intergovernmental organisations. A longitudinal study comprising researchers from different research fields would help to widen the scope and broaden the understanding of multicultural work in this specific context.