Chapter 13

Commentary: Research Needed on Cross-Cultural Generational Knowledge Flows

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ABSTRACT

The primary concern for this commentary is to examine and assess the current state of the research performed in the domain of knowledge flow theory and the relationship between these activities and the ways they are affected within different cultures and generations. We observe little research on the relationship between knowledge flow, cross-cultural factors, and stage of life. We feel that more research is needed in order to deal with cross-cultural generational knowledge flows in organizations.

DEFINITIONS

In the last decade, knowledge flow has been defined in various ways in the knowledge management literature. Newman and Conrad (1999) characterize it as “processes, events and activities through which data, information, knowledge and meta-knowledge are transformed from one state to another”. Further, they define a knowledge model framework that organizes knowledge flow into four primary activity areas: knowledge creation, retention, transfer and utilization. Nissen and Levitt (2002) elaborate on the concept by drawing formalized parallels between the knowledge flows and computational theory by developing “dynamic” knowledge flow models.

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METHODS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Hofstede, Bond, and Luk (1993) provide a comprehensive overview about the levels of analysis employed in quantitative comparisons among cultural entities. They distinguish four types of analysis based on the work of Leung and Bond (1989).

The first method is evaluation of group means, either in simple, descriptive form or through more formal procedures using tests of significance. The majority of comparative quantitative studies of cultural units examine mean scores of groups of individual scores based on numerical responses to questionnaires.

The second method used is correlation—between two variables taking all individual observations regardless of the cultural unit to which the observation belongs. Dow (2008) examines the extent of autocorrelation at both global and regional levels within a single data set. He employs metrics that go beyond geography to include proximity in "social space" (i.e., social/economic distance).

The third method is dimensional—extracting cross-cultural properties or factors and is based on some form of statistical procedure, such as factor analysis or multidimensional scaling.

The fourth level analysis uses leadership theory. Dickson, Hartog, and Mitchelson (2003) conclude that there are no universally agreed leadership definitions among scholars. They provide an extensive overview on the leadership theory from a cross-cultural perspective. Portugal and Yukl (1994) emphasize that the leadership definitions vary in terms of a leader abilities, personality traits, and influence relationships. They position the analysis in different levels—cognitive versus emotional orientation, individual versus group orientation, and appeal to self-versus collective interest.

Cultural studies, according to Eliot (1948), is not a unified theory but a diverse field of study encompassing many different approaches, methods, and academic perspectives.

THE THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE CREATION IN LIGHT OF CROSS-CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT - CRITIQUES

Major contributions to the theory of organizational knowledge creation are made by Nonaka and his colleagues—Nonaka, (1994), Nonaka et al. (1994), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). This representation is often referred to as the SECI (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization) model.

Glisby and Holden (2003) argue that the SECI model should be applied with caution because it is a product of the environment from which it emerged—Japan—and therefore there are complications in its relevancy.

Holden (2001) goes further and suggests that the separation of knowledge into tacit and explicit has limited applicability when the knowledge is transferred across cultures. He points out that the fundamental nature of the cross-cultural knowledge transfer is not about what to learn from each other, but how to learn. Holden and Von Kortzfleisch (2004) provide interesting analogies between translation theory and knowledge transfer processes. They apply a knowledge management perspective in terms of the four modes of knowledge transfer developed by Nonaka.

Brewer (2008) draws conclusions that there is a knowledge transfer anomaly about the impact of cultural differences on the effectiveness of that transfer. He provides evidence that there are barriers to knowledge flows between different cultural groups and they adversely affect teaching outcomes when the teacher and his/her students are of significantly different cultures.

Gelfand, Erez, and Aycan (2007) provide a literature review on works to cross-cultural organizational behavior, work motivation, and the factors that energize, direct, and sustain efforts across cultures.