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.

1. 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 parallel between the knowledge flows and computational theory by developing "dynamic" knowledge flow models.

2. 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. Dicksona, Hartogb and Mitchelsona (2003) conclude that there are no consensually agreed leadership definitions among scholars. They provide extensive overview on the leadership theory from cross-cultural prospective. Portugal and Yukl (1994) emphasize that the leadership definitions vary in terms of leader abilities, personality traits, influence relationships and 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.

3. The theory of organizational knowledge creation in the light of cross-cultural knowledge management - critiques

Major contributions to the theory of organizational knowledge creation model 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.

Ghisby 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.

Within their extensive review paper, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001) cite over one hundred studies that have observed homophily (the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with similar others) in some form or another. These include age, gender, class, organizational role, and so forth.
4. Cross-cultural issues in knowledge transfer

According to Edgar Schein (2004), cultural analysis is particularly important for dealing with characteristics of organizations that seem unfounded, frustrating, and stubborn. He emphasizes that culture is to a group what personality is to an individual and examines deep into the origins and evolution of culture within an organization and provides a functional approach to culture management.

Schein’s work provides a valuable tool in understanding and dealing with cultural change and the importance of leadership in cross-cultural integration. His study demonstrates how leaders create culture and how culture defines and establishes leaders.

Kanungo (2006) highlights the advantageous conjunction where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The work emphasizes the combination of acquiring effective strategic options in knowledge, helping to perform tasks successfully, and cultural attempts to reconcile disparate or contradictory beliefs as an expression of more global interdependence in cross-cultural knowledge management. Kidd (2001) discusses and shows way of determining inter-cultural processes, attaining awareness and understanding cultural differences in multinational enterprises (MNE). He discusses some models and systematic ways of developing organizational awareness in knowledge transfer. He emphasizes that consciousness and efficiency of cross-cultural knowledge transfer could be achieved if MNE are viewed as a differentiated entity loosely pulling towards some form of comprehensive goal.

The areas of knowledge flow transfer in international service firms who experience rapid growth development is accentuated by Lindsay et al. (2003). They point out the lack of studies in this area. The research provides a literature review on the internalization of services and the role of relationships. The work offers a theoretical model that integrates the individual as a key element of the knowledge transfer.

Self-efficacy is the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner to attain certain goals (Luthans and Avolio, 2006). It is a principle that one has the capabilities to execute the courses of actions required to manage prospective situations. The study examines and provides answers whether general self-efficacy is related to employees’ work attitudes across countries with a different cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism. The main conclusion is that the efficacy has a significant positive relationship with organizational commitment and a significant negative relationship with intention to turnover.

5. Strategic mandate

Michailova and Nielsen (2006) propose a link between types of multinational corporations (MNCs) and knowledge management strategies applied by them. They view the MNC as a knowledge network. Their definition emphasis on strategic approach as integration of dispersed resources. The work highlights that a major challenge for these types of organizations is ensuring that the knowledge sharing management and practices fit the structural configurations and communication patterns.

Pablos (2004) offers a theoretical model for analysis of knowledge transfer at an international level. The work explores human management models. It accounts and exploits factors that influence the transferability of the knowledge based on international organizational and national cultures. Pablos (2004) coins the concept of “governing
knowledge processes” (Pablos, p. 107) by choosing governance structures (e.g. markets, hybrids, hierarchies) and coordination mechanisms (e.g., contracts, directives, reward schemes, incentives, trust, management styles, organizational culture, etc.), for the purpose of influencing processes of transferring, sharing, and creating knowledge across cultures in these entities.

6. Issues

Hutchings and Michailova (2004) introduce the term “knowledge sharing hostility”. When they investigated knowledge sharing and transfer processes in Russia and China, they discovered that the success of knowledge sharing is due to the behavior of knowledge transmitters, receivers, and their shared understanding about the content of that knowledge.

Minbaeva and Michailova (2004) further suggest the theory that multinational corporations may apply different mechanisms for knowledge flow transfer. The methods depend on whether they want to develop the expatriates’ ability or willingness to transfer knowledge. The work explores expatriation as a method of knowledge flow management and analyzes existing approaches in multinational corporations to transfer knowledge across cultures, especially those rooted in technology transfer, node communication and knowledge process theories.

7. Ability to engage in knowledge transfer

Riege (2005) points out that even the choice of communication medium can have cultural overtones. He provides an example where advanced industrialized nations rely heavily on electronic technology and emphasize written messages over oral or face-to-face communication. The United States, Canada, and Germany exemplify this trend. But the Japanese, who have access to the latest technologies, still rely more on face-to-face communications than on written messages. Riege argues that the determining factor for choice of communication may not be the degree of industrialization. He does a comprehensive literature review and collects a list of actions that point to the limitation of knowledge transfer and removing knowledge transfer barriers. Through extensive literature review and questionnaires, the author concludes that there is no explicit evidence to which actions may be appropriate or most effective knowledge transfer ways in multinational corporations. Riege (2007) stipulates that there is a need for empirical evidence to substantiate the suitability of actions in adding richness to the discussion of effective knowledge transfer in such entities.

8. Note on the issue in the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) sector – focus on the training.

Several works indicate that the cross-cultural issues and knowledge flow management are taken into consideration by DoD and the Army. The U.S. Army doctrine has been focused on warfighting and leadership at all levels. Orly, Wortinger and Hannah (2008) describe the cross-cultural factors in preparing military officers for negotiations with non-
combatants. Seiler (2007) concludes that in the intercultural dilemma training is a promising way to increase a leader's ability to act effectively.

9. Cross-culture and generation

Ralston et al. (2005) conclude that life stage is as important as culture, and possibly more important than culture, in explaining the ethical perceptions of upward influence behavior. The work stipulates that there is no relative consistency in behavior within a culture. Life stage, geographic region, gender, group culture and economic development factors must be taken into account.

Watkins, Mortazavi and Trofimova (2000) investigate the self-satisfaction with the independent and interdependent self and test age, gender, and culture differences in the nature of self-conception. They state that they could not prove that younger generations tend to be more individualistic than older generations and different generations within a culture tend to have different self-conception tendencies.

Mujtaba and Thomas (2005) discuss the employee satisfaction and motivation concepts and their importance in successful international management. The authors state that the reward and recognition system could be used as appropriate strategies to motivate employees and in other cultures bonuses are the main motivational device. Motivational strategies can differ based on different generations of employees in each culture.

10. Sacrificing

Suzuki and Greenfield (2002) discuss the tendency in sacrificing concerning a variety of domains and between the individualistic culture in the United States and the collectivistic culture in Asia. The studied domains are money, dating, and schoolwork. Zakaria and Stanton (2003) raise interesting question about critical attributes and the correlation of communication applications and characteristics of their user's culture. Their main conclusions are that establishing certain levels of communications in high context societies such as the Arabic countries is interdependent on the level of trust. This confidence enables those cultures to share sensitive information.

11. Conclusion

The literature overview on the field of cross-cultural generational knowledge flows revealed very few references under that specific topic, as previously cited. The examined studies have considered cultural dimensions in their analysis and they have employed empirical data to test their hypotheses. However, few researchers have studied the generational or life stage factors with notion to different cultures and the ways they exchange or manage knowledge.

The main factors of knowledge management, which lead to successful knowledge management and ensure long-term competitive advantage, are organizational structure, culture, strategy, systems and IT infrastructure, effectual and systematic processes and their assessments (Liebowitz, 2005). Culture may be considered as an essential factor, which not only guarantees a successful knowledge management, but also influences an
effective knowledge transfer. Liebowitz et al. (2007) and Liebowitz and Ivanov (2008) conclude that codified or personalized approaches between various generations to sharing knowledge must be implemented in organizations in order to enhance knowledge sharing. Further studies are needed on appropriate formation of organizational structure, assurance of transfer channels, introduction of systems and technologies that result in effective knowledge transfer. Since knowledge is transferred by people and so often called the "soft" part, culture assumes a special importance and significance. Future research is needed to examine cross-cultural generational knowledge flows to help organizations in achieving continuous success and efficient knowledge transfer.
References


