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Cross-cultural influences on organizational learning in MNCS: The case of Japanese companies in China

Jacky F.L. Hong^{a,*}, Robin Stanley Snell^{b,1}, Mark Easterby-Smith^{c,2}

^a Faculty of Business Administration, University of Macau, P.O. Box 3001, Macau, China

^b Department of Management, Lingnan University, 8, Castle Peak Road, Tuen Mun, New Territories, Hong Kong, China

^c Department of Management Learning, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YX, UK

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Abstract

This paper draws on the social construction perspective and on social learning theory to examine the cross-cultural influences on organizational learning in MNCs. Social learning theory suggests that constructive engagement and member solidarity are key constituents of organization-based collective learning. Literature suggests, however, that cross-cultural differences in assumptions about social participation by organization members may impair organizational learning. The paper also reports a qualitative study, conducted at five Japanese-invested manufacturing companies in the Pearl River Delta, China. The research found that managers perceived Chinese frontline workers as lacking constructive engagement and member solidarity as compared with their Japanese counterparts, thus limiting organizational learning, and attributed these perceived differences to deep-seated cultural values. Attempts in two of the companies to ‘Japanize’ the workforces were reported to have had some impact, but appeared not to have substantially changed this picture. Urging caution regarding cross-cultural stereotyping and home country bias, we consider the implications for organizations with international manufacturing operations.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +853 3974754; fax: +853 838320.

E-mail addresses: fbaflh@umac.mo (J.F.L. Hong), robin@ln.edu.hk (R.S. Snell), m.easterby-smith@lancaster.ac.uk (M. Easterby-Smith).

¹ Tel.: +852 2616 8326; fax: +852 2467 0982.

² Tel.: +44 1524 594012.

1. Introduction

Schon (1983: 114) argued that the concept of organizational learning would become ‘an idea in good currency’. Since then, we have witnessed sustained interest both in academic circles and among business practitioners in pursuing the question, ‘how does an organization learn?’ (Tsang, 1997: 74). Much empirical material has been generated (Crossan and Guatto, 1996; Easterby-Smith, 1997), and some studies have examined the application of organizational learning theories to multinational corporations (MNCs) (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Kogut and Zander, 1993).

The idea that MNCs are social communities, specialized in the acquisition and transfer of organizational knowledge (Kogut and Zander, 1993), has given rise to several studies of how MNCs manage their knowledge flows and learning processes (Martin and Salomon, 2003; Minbaeva et al., 2003). Most of these studies adopt a cognitive/technical perspective on organizational learning (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999; Huber, 1991), focusing on the facilitating mechanisms and potential barriers involved in knowledge transfer processes between the source and recipient units within the MNC network (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Jensen and Szulanski, 2004; Mudambi and Navarra, 2004; Szulanski, 1996).

The cognitive/technical perspective represents organizational learning in MNCs as the acquisition, interpretation, integration and distribution of knowledge flow between the headquarters and its subsidiaries (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Jensen and Szulanski, 2004) or among the subsidiaries themselves (Björkman et al., 2004; Mudambi and Navarra, 2004). This emphasis, however, neglects the role of cultural assumptions. Previous studies show that national cultures have developed different social expectations and norms regarding organization-based collective learning (Carmona and Gronlund, 1998; Hedlund and Nonaka, 1993). However, knowledge of the impact of culture on organizational learning (Cook and Yanow, 1993) remains limited, and very few studies have investigated how culture influences organizational learning in MNCs.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by applying a social construction perspective (Cook and Yanow, 1993; Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999; Gherardi et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Leonard-Barton, 1992; Yanow, 2000) to understand the nature and impact of cross-cultural differences in organizational learning. We will report a study of organization-based collective learning among Chinese frontline workers in the manufacturing plants of five Japanese MNCs in the Pearl River Delta of China. The rationale for choosing the intersection between Japanese and Chinese settings is that while the two countries have cultural similarities, there are also important differences which are not clearly understood (Fukuyama, 1995; Hall and Xu, 1990; White and Nakamura, 2002). The two countries are also worthy of study in their own right because China is now a major economic player, increasingly important to the world economy, while Japanese manufacturing companies remain leading players in terms of international inward investment, and retain a reputation for operational-level organizational learning capabilities and systems (Fruin, 1997; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

The main contribution of the paper is to indicate the potential influence on organization-based collective learning of cultural differences in expectations about the nature and depth of organizational participation and inclusion. The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. Section 2 compares the cognitive, knowledge-oriented perspective with the socio-cultural, learning-oriented perspective, and outlines the knowledge types and learning processes associated with these two perspectives. In Section 3, we adopt a definition of national culture, review the literatures on cross-cultural value differences, with special reference to Japan and China, and identify the

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