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Are there cultural differences in learning style?

Simy Joy*, David A. Kolb

Department of Organizational Behavior, Case Western Reserve University, 10900 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44106, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role that culture plays in the way individuals learn. Experiential learning theory is used to describe the learning process and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory is used to assess differences in how individuals learn. Using the framework for categorizing cultural differences from the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) study, national cultures are examined by cultural clusters and individual cultural dimensions. The first part of the study assesses the relative influence of culture in comparison to gender, age, level of education and area of specialization of 533 respondents born in and currently residing in 7 nations. We found that a significant portion of the variance in the preference for abstract conceptualization was explained by culture, gender, level of education and area of specialization. The variability in preference for active experimentation over reflective observation was accounted for by age and area of specialization. The impact of culture was only marginally significant. In the second part of the study where we examined the influence of individual culture dimensions in shaping the learning style preferences, we discovered that individuals tend to have a more abstract learning style in countries that are high in in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation and gender egalitarianism. Individuals may have a more reflective learning style in countries that are high in in-group collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and assertiveness.

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1. Introduction

In the “flat” world of the twenty-first century (Friedman, 2006) educators are finding their classrooms filled with students from many cultures. Many observe that these cultural differences among students have a significant impact on the learning process. For example, students from high power distance cultures often seem uncomfortable with professors who want to be called by their first name and Asian students appear quiet and reflective in the extroverted, high participation American classroom. Similarly in organizations, workers from different cultures appear to exhibit different styles of work and problem solving. For instance, it is believed that individuals from high uncertainty avoidance cultures can appear cautious and systematic in their approach to problems while those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures seem more comfortable with risk and trial and error problem solving. Are these perceived cultural influences on the learning/problem solving process empirically verifiable or are these perceptions just cultural stereotypes?

In the study we present in this paper, we address these questions by examining how individuals from different cultures vary in their approaches to learning. Using the framework for categorizing cultural differences from the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), cultures are examined by

* Corresponding author at: # 252, 4th Main 4th Cross, HAL 3rd Stage, Bangalore 560075, India. Tel.: +91 94495 44780.
E-mail address: simy.joy@case.edu (S. Joy).

regional culture clusters and individual cultural dimensions. Experiential learning theory (ELT, Kolb, 1984) is used to describe the learning process and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLSI, Kolb, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) is used to assess differences in how individuals learn. ELT has been used by many researchers to examine the learning process in cross-cultural adaptation (Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson (2004); Yamazaki, 2004; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004) and the Kolb Learning Inventory has been used in many studies to examine cultural patterns in learning styles, many of which are summarized in Yamazaki's (2005) review published in this journal. Using a general linear model (GLM), we examine differences in learning style of people from countries belonging to different cultural clusters controlling for gender, age, level of education and educational specialization, variables that previous research (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) has shown to have an influence on learning style. In the end, we examine the potential role that various dimensions of culture might be playing in developing various learning style preferences.

2. Characterizing cultural differences

Research on culture spans many disciplines such as Anthropology (Benedict, 1946; Hall, 1976; Kluckhohn, 1962), Psychology (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1994) and Management (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). Irrespective of the discipline, the scholars have come to more or less a common ground with respect to defining culture. Culture can be conceptualized as 'shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations' (House et al., 2004, p. 15).

This common understanding notwithstanding, the units of analysis chosen by culture researchers vary. The earlier researchers on culture, especially in the field of Anthropology, studied societies or communities. For example, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) studied five communities in America discovering differences in their value orientations. There have been studies that focused on countries like Benedict's (1946) research on the Japanese culture. Research in the latter half of the 20th century increasingly focused on country differences in culture, perhaps resulting from the development of nation states that defines boundaries for governing structures, law and social institutions that paved the way for increased cultural homogeneity within nations. Hofstede's (2001) research on differentiating between the cultures of around 40 countries reinforced the use of country names as the surrogates to represent culture. The more recent Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (House et al., 2004) followed suit. There have also been scholars who looked at the historical evolution of different regions of the world and suggested the possibility for cultural clusters that transcend national boundaries. Huntington's (1996) classification of the world cultures into Western, Latin America, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese is an example. The GLOBE study empirically arrives at ten cultural clusters – Anglo, Latin Europe, Nordic Europe, Germanic Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Southern Asia and Confucian Asia – wherein the countries within a cluster are more similar to each other while being significantly different from countries in other clusters.

Culture researchers have endeavored to build in-depth understanding of the customs and practices within certain cultures and also to develop meaningful ways to enable comparison between cultures. This has resulted in a number of cultural typologies based on the salient features identified by the researcher. Some examples include high context and low context cultures (Hall, 1976) based on the amount of dependence on the context used in determining the meaning of messages, low trust and high trust cultures (Fukuyama, 1995) based on the relationship between trust and social structures, independent and interdependent self cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) based on the extent to which definition of self is in relation to the larger society, and shame and guilt cultures (Benedict, 1946) based on whether the standards for behavior are internal or external to the individual. These typologies tend to be dichotomous in nature. Hofstede (2001) introduced the concept of continuous cultural dimensions as the basis for comparison. Dimensions are various categories into which the salient features of the cultures are grouped. Hofstede identified power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism–collectivism and masculinity–femininity (later long versus short term orientations) as the major aspects on which cultures differ. The GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) refined Hofstede's work suggesting nine dimensions: in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, performance orientation, humane orientation, assertiveness and gender egalitarianism. The proponents of the cultural dimensions approach introduced the practice of calculating scores on each dimension for each culture enabling relative ranking among them. These typologies and dimensions are especially useful in providing explanations when we encounter differences in outcomes that seem to originate from the differences in cultural values and practices. Researchers in variety of fields that range from education to epidemiology have explored the potential impact of cultural variables on outcomes that vary from educational accomplishments to depression.

3. Experiential learning theory and learning style

Experiential learning theory draws on the work of prominent 20th century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development – notably John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others – to develop a holistic model of the experiential learning process and a multi-linear model of adult development (Kolb, 1984). ELT defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984: 41). The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience – concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualization (AC) – and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience—reflective observation

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