



TQM across multiple countries: *Convergence Hypothesis* versus *National Specificity* arguments

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Abstract

We provide conceptual clarity and new empirical findings for the question of whether or not TQM is universal in its applicability. At the conceptual level, we reposition and reframe the “universality of TQM” question in light of two conflicting theoretical perspectives in the international business literature – one that supports the universal applicability of TQM (i.e., the *Convergence Hypothesis* argument) and another that questions the universal applicability of TQM (i.e., the *National Specificity* argument). We do so to provide a stronger theoretical basis for the “universality of TQM” question and to motivate and initiate a “strong inference” epistemological approach [Platt, J.R., 1964. Strong inference. *Science* 146 (364), 347–353] to examine, at the empirical level, the applicability of TQM across multiple countries. For this empirical assessment, we compare both the adoption levels of the Deming-based TQM constructs and the patterns of Deming-based TQM relationships among German, Italian, Japanese, and USA plants, using secondary data from 143 plants in Round Two of the World-Class Manufacturing project. After assessing measurement quality (i.e., reliability and validity) and measurement equivalence (i.e., translation, calibration, and metric), MANOVA analysis and regression analysis were deployed to derive relevant empirical results – empirical results that have implications not only for the question of whether or not TQM is universal in its applicability but also for the theoretical tension between the *Convergence Hypothesis* argument and the *National Specificity* argument.

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1. Introduction

Much of the prescriptive and popular literature on Total Quality Management or TQM (e.g., Deming, 1986; Crosby, 1979; Juran, 1986) subscribes to the

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perspective that TQM is “universal” in its applicability (Dawson, 1994). This perspective appears to underlie not only the institutionalization of numerous quality awards at the international and national levels (e.g., European Quality Award, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award) but also the continuing emphasis on certification schemes (e.g., QS 9000, IS 9000) that mirror one another in both content and process (Uzumeri, 1997).

Perpetuating and supporting this perspective have been several streams of related research, including documentations of successful organizational adoptions of TQM globally (e.g., Birch and Pooley, 1995; Jenner et al., 1998; Mitki and Shani, 1995; Sohal et al., 1989), cross-national comparative studies concluding in favor of mimicking TQM practices across countries (e.g., Dahlgaard et al., 1998; Ebrahimpour, 1985; Yavas, 1995), and writings encouraging firms in developing countries to adopt TQM (e.g., Lahke and Mohanty, 1994; Lee et al., 1992). Mitki and Shani (1995, p. 169), for example, concluded that TQM contains “a universal set of management practices and principles that goes beyond cultural boundaries”.

Yet, not everyone adheres to this “universality of TQM” perspective. These scholars question the “one size fits all” presumption of TQM (Newman and Nollen, 1996, p. 753) and argue that differences in sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors should and would inhibit the cross-cultural transferability and applicability of TQM concepts, principles, and practices (Goonatilake, 1998; Mersha, 1997; Roney, 1997; Rungtusanatham et al., 1998; Yoshida, 1989). Roney (1997), for example, documented the cultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic barriers that impeded the smooth transfer of TQM from a USA-based company to its facility in Poland.

However, because many of these studies tend to be single-organization case studies (e.g., Roney, 1997), single-country exploratory investigations (e.g., Rungtusanatham et al., 1998), or multiple-country comparative studies of a descriptive, as opposed to theory-testing, nature (e.g., Ebrahimpour, 1985), conclusions from these studies, while insightful, are not as strong as they can be. In fact, to better understand the “universality of TQM” question, theory-driven empirical research that compares and contrasts TQM adoption across multiple countries in a simultaneous manner would be beneficial.

In this paper, we respond to this challenge by providing both conceptual clarity and new empirical findings for the “universality of TQM” question. At a *conceptual* level, we seek to clarify the issue on hand by repositioning and reframing the “universality of TQM” question in light of two conflicting theoretical perspectives in the international business literature – one that supports the universal applicability of TQM (i.e., the *Convergence Hypothesis* argument) and another that questions the universal applicability of TQM (i.e., the *National Specificity* argument) (Child and Kieser, 1979). Briefly, the *Convergence Hypothesis* argument posits that the complexity of modern technology leaves little for managerial discretion in terms of structuring work and practices. Consequently, as technology evolves and spreads, organizations would need to structure their operations in similar ways if they are to be efficient and effective. The *National Specificity* argument, on the contrary, views technology and its implementation as embedded in the social context of the nation. As such, any organizational practice must, therefore, be adapted to the social context to maximize its effectiveness resulting, in turn, in the observed divergence of practices across nations. Therefore, whereas the *Convergence Hypothesis* argument could explain how and why organizations adopting TQM should converge across different cultures, the *National Specificity* argument could explain how and why cross-national differences would impede the applicability of TQM within organizations.

Through this repositioning and reframing, we provide a stronger theoretical grounding for the “universality of TQM” question. Moreover, by doing so, we have an opportunity to initiate a “strong inference” epistemological approach (Platt, 1964) to examine, at the *empirical* level, the levels of adoption of various TQM practices, as well as the degree to which existing theory linking these practices, appear to be substantiated across multiple countries. Because the “strong inference” epistemological approach encourages the a priori specification and the subsequent evaluation of multiple, often competing, hypotheses, this approach can intensify the progress of science (O’Donohue and Buchanan, 2001, p. 4; Platt, 1964, p. 347; Shugan, 2002, p. 224). Examples of research in both business and non-business disciplines adopting such an approach include Aquinis

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