

## Culture Matters: A Perspective Advancing Cross-Cultural and Indigenous Research

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### INTRODUCTION

This special issue is devoted to celebrating and extending the scholarship of Kwok Leung, who passed away on May 25, 2015. *Management and Organization Review* is grateful to Michael W. Morris, Zhen Xiong (George) Chen, Lorna Doucet, and Yaping Gong for their thoughtful, instrumental effort in the publication of this special issue.

To *Management and Organization Review* (MOR), Kwok is not just one of the most respected thought leaders in cross-cultural research, psychology, and management. He is an icon of MOR's grand vision.

In a conversation with Zhijun Yao (IACMR Executive Director), Anne Tsui (MOR Founding Editor) recalled that in the late 1990s, AMJ was reluctant to have a special issue on China. She became more aware than ever that despite the heuristic value of studying management theories and practices in new cultural contexts, the field did not have an outlet dedicated to culturally contextualized research (Tsui, 2014). In 2005, Anne Tsui launched MOR.

Kwok is to MOR what the flag post is to a ship. As Anne Tsui (2014) puts it, MOR aspires to be 'the leading edge journal for advancing management and organization research with a contextual focus on China and all other transforming economies'. Kwok has contributed to this mission by publishing two special issues, one on indigenous management research in China (with Peter Ping Li, Chao C. Chen, and Jar-Der Luo) and one on culture and creativity (with Michael W. Morris). He has also authored a few MOR articles. Some titles of his MOR articles are: 'Never the twain shall meet?; Integrating Chinese and Western management research' (Leung, 2009); 'Globalization of Chinese firms: What happens to culture' (Leung, 2014); 'Indigenous Chinese management research: Like it or not, we need it' (Leung, 2012); 'Creativity East and West: Perspectives and parallels'

(Morris & Leung, 2010); and ‘Perceived fairness of pay: The importance of task versus maintenance inputs in Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong’ (Kim, Weber, Leung, & Muramoto, 2010). *Culture* is the common thread that runs through these contributions. A recurrent theme in Kwok’s writing is: *Culture matters*.

In their introduction to the special issue, the guest editors have reviewed many of Kwok’s theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions. Perhaps what can be emphasized more is Kwok’s contributions to debates on the foundational issues of cross-cultural research. For example, in his MOR articles, he asked provocative questions: Is culture still relevant in globalized economies (Leung, 2014)? How much does indigenous cultural knowledge inspire new theoretical insights and make global contributions to knowledge (Leung, 2012)? Relatedly, how can knowledge from different indigenous traditions be integrated to confer nuanced understanding of behaviors in context?

Therefore, it seems very fitting to put together a special collection of MOR articles on cross-cultural research to complement the publication of the current special issue. This collection consists of ten articles (see Appendix I) and aims to highlight the embodiment of Kwok’s research legacy in MOR and to witness the flourishing of MOR’s cross-cultural research that Kwok shepherded.

## CROSS-CULTURAL COLLECTION

Kwok often said good scientists ask bold questions, give considered answers, and do not run away from challenges. To honor Kwok’s research legacy, I have organized the MOR cross-cultural selection by important theoretical and empirical issues or challenges in cross-cultural research.

### Issue 1: What is Culture?

To understand how cultural context affects behavior, scientists must agree on what culture is. However, culture is an elusive concept. When societal effects on behavior are found (people from different societies exhibit different behaviors), how can researchers confidently attribute the behavioral differences to culture instead of institutions? More importantly, should culture be treated as a subset of institutions, or should it be separated from institutions? In his article entitled ‘Separating culture from institutions: The use of semantic spaces as a conceptual domain and the case of China’, Gordon Redding (2008) attempted to explain societal effects on behavior in terms of the influence of culture on institutions. Inspired by Kwok’s work on social axioms, Redding defines culture as coherently organized domain-specific meanings. The idea that culture impacts behaviors through institutions has become a major perspective to culture (Yamagishi & Suzuki, 2009; see also Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010).

## Issue 2: Where Does the Culture of a Society Reside?

Cross-cultural researchers have debated how culture affects behaviors (see Leung & Morris, 2014). One view is that culture affects behaviors through internalized values. That is, people are socialized to accept and identify with their society's mainstream values and beliefs. Hence, they tend to exhibit value-consistent behaviors. Huang, Vliert, and Veg (2005) have obtained evidence for this view. In societies that value egalitarianism (small power distance societies), formalized employee involvement and participative climate had an additive effect on breaking the silence culture in organizations; both strategies can reduce organizational silence. In contrast, in societies that prioritize social hierarchy, employee involvement and participative climate had an interactive effect on organizational silence; employee involvement reduces organizational silence only in organizations with a strong participative climate.

Another view is that the structure and pattern of social interaction in a society constrain an individual's life space and hence their choices of behavioral strategy. Because the structures and patterns of social interaction are different across cultures, people in different societies have different behavioral preferences. For example, Batjargal (2007) compared the social network and interpersonal trust of software entrepreneurs in China and Russia and found that compared to their Russian peers, Chinese entrepreneurs had smaller and denser social networks, as well as stronger interpersonal trust. These societal differences in social networks may explain the more extensive use of social capital in Chinese entrepreneurial activities.

A third view is that people acquire knowledge of behavioral norms in their society and are incentivized to follow these forms. In the special issue on culture and creativity that Kwok and Michael Morris edited, several researchers have independently pointed out that when evaluating the creativity of a product or idea, Western social norms prioritize novelty, whereas Eastern norms prioritize usefulness (Chiu & Kwan, 2010; Erez & Nouri, 2010). Cultural differences in creative performance (higher novelty and lower usefulness among Westerners than Easterners) would arise only in contexts that activate social norms (Morris & Leung, 2010).

## Issue 3: How Big is the Effect Size of Country?

Culture matters, but to what extent? The publication of *Personality and Assessment* (Mischel, 1968) has caused a crisis in the field of personality. The evidence presented in this volume shows that personality traits are poor predictors of behavior. If personality accounts for very little variance in behavior, is personality psychology a worthwhile discipline?

In his 2009 article, Gerhart posed an equally devastating question to cross-cultural researchers. He concluded from a comprehensive review of the existing

evidence that ‘most of the variance in organizational cultures is not explained by country; of the variance that is explained by country, only a minority is due to national cultural differences’ (2009: 241). In personality research, Mischel’s criticism came close to destroying the field. However, instead of destroying the field, his criticism engaged critical reflections on what personality is. Instead of treating personality as fixed traits, newer generations of personality psychologists have focused on the interaction of personal preferences and situational influence. Likewise, Gerhart has invited researchers to discover under what circumstances country and national culture effects will be larger or smaller.

Perhaps another lesson can be learned from the ‘personality crisis’. Researchers can choose not to pit country variance against individual variance. Moreover, instead of trying to discover when cultural traits can explain more variance in behaviors, researchers should aim to analyze how culture, situation, and the individual interact to influence behaviors (Leung & Cohen, 2011). This goal is attainable by applying multi-level models to analyze cross-level interactions of organizational behaviors. Again, Kwok is a pioneer in cross-level analysis. For example, in a cross-level study (Lu, Leung, & Koch, 2006), he showed that individuals’ greed reduces and self-efficacy increases information sharing in organizations (effects of individual factors). Moreover, coworker collegiality (interpersonal factor) lowers greed and raises self-efficacy and has an indirect positive effect on information sharing. Finally, organizational support (organizational factor) enhances knowledge sharing through facilitation of communication.

#### **Issue 4: Does Globalization Lead to Cultural Convergence?**

Will globalization lead to cultural convergence? Globalization has increased the opportunities for intercultural interactions. However, Kwok (Leung, 2014) contended that learning from and adapting to other cultures depends on a host of cultural factors, including cultural distance, intercultural competence, and intergroup dynamics.

There is good evidence for this dynamic view of globalization and cultural change. Ralston, Pounder, and Lo (2006) tracked the changes in managerial values in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and the US between 1989 and 2001. During this period, both Hong Kong and Mainland China had undergone rapid social and economic changes. The values of Hong Kong and Mainland China became more similar, while the values of these two regions became more different from those of the US. In short, globalization may increase or decrease cross-cultural learning, depending on a number of factors, and an emergent perspective of polycultural research (Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015), which examines the diverse behavioral consequences of intercultural interactions, has gained much research attention.

### Issue 5: Do We Need Indigenous Research?

A heated debate in cross-cultural management and organization research is about the value of indigenous research. The goal of indigenous research is to establish local systems of knowledge rooted in indigenous cultural traditions. A common practice in indigenous research is to identify indigenous concepts in a local cultural heritage and use them to offer culturally grounded understanding of behaviors in the local contexts and beyond.

A central issue in this debate concerns what the most fruitful approach to developing Chinese management research is. Advocates for indigenous research argue that psychological knowledge is culture-bound. Therefore, research and theories have questionable generality beyond their country of origin. For example, trait dimensions such as agreeableness and extraversion assessed by US-made personality tests predicted lower economic gain in distributive bargaining among Americans but not Chinese. Likewise, personal attributes such as *renqing* and face assessed by a Hong Kong-made personality measure predicted lower economic gain among Chinese but not Americans (Liu, Friedman, & Chi, 2005).

In 2012, Kwok edited a MOR special issue on indigenous research. In his editorial, he acknowledged the value of indigenous research. Indeed, many articles published in MOR have provided compelling evidence for the theoretical and empirical utility of indigenous theorization. Construction of indigenous management theories requires nuanced understanding of local culture, the preparedness to draw on indigenous thoughts in theory development and the use of culture-sensitive research methods. For example, to develop a taxonomic theory of organizational cultures in China, researchers need to recognize that there are distinct types of business ownership in China: state-owned, private domestic, and foreign-invested. Organizational culture may differ across business types. Nonetheless, using a bottom-up data-driven approach, Tsui, Wang, and Xin (2006) have identified five common organizational culture dimensions across all three types of business ownership in China. These researchers have also identified four types of organizational culture that involve different configurations of the five organizational culture dimensions. Furthermore, the investigators were able to link the four organizational culture types to perceived firm performance and middle manager attitudes in China.

To Kwok, indigenous research that generates local knowledge can contribute to the construction of a coherent body of culture-general knowledge. First, indigenous researchers can develop novel ideas and theories that are applicable to both local and many other foreign cultures. Second, a creative hybrid theory can be developed through integration of elements from different cultures. This synergetic approach can eventually lead to innovative, culture-general knowledge (Leung, 2009).

However, the success of this approach depends to a large extent on the availability of a platform that would facilitate dynamic interplay of management research carried out in multiple, dissimilar cultures. To provide such a platform,

MOR has expanded its early China focus to cover other transforming economies. The expanded coverage will hopefully allow generation of more synergistic insights through global knowledge transmission and transfer (Lewin, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Tory Higgins (2006) has compared theory development to parenting. A good theory developer is like a good parent. Good parents do not make assumptions about what the child is; they observe how the child behaves. Likewise, good scientists do not make assumptions about what their theory is; they listen to the data. Good parents do not spoil, neglect, or abuse their child; they nurture and support the child. Similarly, good scientists do not spoil, neglect, or abuse their theory; they nurture and support it. Good parents do not abandon their child who sometimes misbehaves. Good scientists also do not abandon their theory prematurely; they allow it to grow and mature. Good parents are patient with the child; they never push the child too hard or too fast. Good scientists are also patient with their theory; they develop its potential gradually. Good parents do not over-protect; they let others support and nurture their child. Good scientists will not over-protect their theory; they welcome other scientists to develop and nurture it.

Theory development is indeed a family affair, and so is the development of a field. Yumi Inoue, Kwok's wife, remembers Kwok as a fantastic father. Together with Yumi, Kwok has supported and nurtured two great children. Kwok has also nurtured his field. MOR is fortunate to be a home Kwok had chosen to nurture the flourishing field of cross-cultural management and organization research. Kwok has done everything good parents would do to raise his children, nurture his theories, and develop the field he grows up with. May this special issue and the cross-cultural collection be the witnesses of how MOR and Kwok Leung have promoted each other's legacy!

## APPENDIX I

### The MOR Cross-Cultural Research Collection

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