Chapter II

Beyond Models of National Culture in Information Systems Research

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ABSTRACT

Many IS scholars argue that global organizations need to understand cultural differences if they are to successfully deploy information technology. We agree that an understanding of cultural differences is important, but suggest that the concept of "national culture" that has tended to dominate the IS research literature is too simplistic. In this article, we challenge information systems researchers to go beyond models of national culture. We propose that IS researchers should adopt a more dynamic view of culture – one that sees culture as contested, temporal and emergent.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in the IS research literature in the impact of cultural differences on the development and use of information and communications technologies. Since many companies are now doing business beyond their national

boundaries – and these global activities are facilitated and supported to a large extent by current communications and information technologies – it is important to understand the impact of cultural differences on these activities (Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1991; Shore & Venkatachalam, 1995; Tractinsky & Jarvenpaa, 1995). Many have argued that transnational organizations need to understand cultural differences if they are to successfully deploy IT throughout the world (Applegate, McFarlan, & McKenney, 1999; Harris & Davison, 1999; Tan, Watson, & Wei, 1995).

While we agree that an understanding of cultural differences is important, we believe that attempting to understand these cultural differences in terms of "national culture" is overly simplistic. By far the majority of studies concerned with various cultural aspects of the development, implementation, use and management of IT have relied on Hofstede's (1980; 1991) model of national culture (e.g., Keil et al., 2000; Straub, 1994; Tan et al., 1995; Watson, Ho, & Raman, 1994). But Hofstede's concept of national culture – which assumes that cultural differences are in some way aligned with the territorial boundaries of the nation state–is problematic. It glosses over the fact that ethnic and cultural groups can exist across many nations, just as it glosses over the existence of cultural and ethnic differences *within* nations (Harris & Davison, 1999; Huo & Randall, 1991; Peppas, 2001). Our argument is that the concept of national culture is theoretically weak and ignores some of the facts of history.

We suggest that IS researchers should move beyond the concept of "national culture" to one that recognizes the emergent and dynamic nature of culture. If there is such a thing as "national culture," then it is something that is invented and re-invented and always in a state of flux.

This article is organized as follows. We begin with a review of the IS literature on national culture. Here we show that many IS researchers have taken the concept of national culture as given. We then provide an overview of the concept of national culture and consider its various definitions and dimensions. In the ensuing section, we critique the concept of national culture and argue that it ignores the facts of history and has little explanatory power. In the next section, we propose that IS researchers interested in conducting research on culture and globalisation should adopt a more dynamic view of culture – one that sees culture as contested, temporal and emergent. The final section is the conclusion.

INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH AND NATIONAL CULTURE

In this first section we provide a brief review of the IS literature on national culture. Here we show that many IS researchers have taken the concept of national culture for granted.

In a recent survey of global IT research, Gallupe and Tan (1999) found that a wide variety of IS issues have been studied from a national culture perspective. Much of the IS research using the concept of national culture is summarised in Table 1.

From Table 1 it can be seen that most of the IS research into the effects of national culture has relied on Hofstede's (1980, 1991) dimensions to test and validate propositions relating to a variety of IS issues. Of the 36 studies listed, 24 used some or all of Hofstede's dimensions. It would appear that most IS researchers have taken the concept of national culture as given (although a small number also recognise the limitations of Hofstede's model).

Generally, these studies agree that culture is important and an understanding of culture and its impact can lead to successful IT deployment in a global setting. For instance, the results

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