



Chapter II

Levels of Culture and Individual Behavior: An Integrative Perspective

Elena Karahanna, University of Georgia, USA

J. Roberto Evaristo, University of Illinois, USA

Mark Srite, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, USA

ABSTRACT

In an organizational setting, national culture is not the only type of culture that influences managerial and work behavior. Rather, behavior is influenced by different levels of culture ranging from the supranational (regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic) level through the national, professional, and organizational levels to the group level. The objective of this study is to integrate these different levels of culture by explicitly recognizing that individuals' workplace behavior is a function of all different cultures simultaneously. It is theorized that the relative influence of the different levels of culture on individual behavior varies depending on the nature of the behavior under investigation. Thus, for behaviors that include a strong social component or include terminal and moral values, supranational and national cultures might have a predominant effect. For behaviors with a strong task component or for those involving

competence values or practices, organizational and professional cultures may dominate. These propositions are illustrated with examples from the IS field. This paper is a conceptual study and therefore extends theory and the current understanding of how culture is examined by not only explicitly recognizing that behaviors are simultaneously influenced by multiple levels of culture but by also specifying conditions under which certain levels of culture dominate. Such an approach has the potential to inform researchers and practitioners about the generalizability or universality of theories and techniques across national, organizational, and professional borders.

INTRODUCTION

The significant changes in the work environment of the past two decades have highlighted the importance of cross-cultural variables in management theories. These changes include the globalization of the market, the emergence of the virtual organization whose members do not meet face-to-face but are linked through computer technology, the increased focus on teamwork, the emergence of high technology telecommunication systems, increased immigration, and unification and separatism in the political arena. As a result, cultural differences have become a focus of attention and their effect on work behavior is becoming increasingly evident (Erez & Earley, 1993). Theories developed in one country have met with limited success when applied to other settings (Hofstede, 1993). Thus, a major question that cross-cultural research in business attempts to answer is: "Why are successful managerial theories and techniques not found to be uniformly effective across cultural borders?" To understand why managerial practices and techniques differ in multiple cultures and why the transfer of certain techniques across cultures is not always effective, we should learn more about the role that culture plays in our theories of work behavior. Toward this end, some research has focused on examining the impact of national culture on work behaviors.

Clearly, however, in an organizational setting, national culture is not the only culture that influences managerial and work behavior. Culture can be defined on different levels of analysis ranging from the national level through the professional and organizational levels to the group level (Hofstede, 1991). Thus, research has focused on these other levels of analysis. For example, organizational culture can have a strong effect on beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of individuals within the organizational boundaries (Martin, 1992; Schein, 1985; Schein, 1990). Furthermore, since within one nation or within one organization there can be many subcultures (e.g., professional associations, political parties, ethnic groups), individuals' work behavior may also be influenced by the norms and values of these subcultures (Schein, 1990; Triandis, 1972). Recent research (Straub et al., 2002) based on Social Identity Theory (SIT) has proposed that these levels interact. They propose that different layers of culture can influence an individual's behavior and that each individual is influenced more by certain layers and less by other layers depending on the situation and their own personal values.

Additionally, a recent issue of *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* focused on cultural issues. Of the eight articles, three (Ford, Connelly, & Meister, 2003; Loch, Straub, & Kamel, 2003; Rose, Evaristo, & Straub, 2003) focused on national culture, while three (Doherty & Doig, 2003; Huang, Newall, Galliers, & Pan, 2003; Ngwenyama & Nielsen, 2003) focused on organizational culture. However, the remaining two articles

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