Chapter III

Inquiry into Definitions of Culture in IT Studies

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ABSTRACT

In reviewing the history of the conceptualization and measurement of “culture,” one quickly realizes that there is wide-ranging and contradictory scholarly opinion about which values, norms, and beliefs should be measured to represent the concept of “culture.” We explore an alternate theory-based view of culture via social identity theory (SIT), which suggests that each individual is influenced by a plethora of cultures and sub-cultures – some ethnic, some national, and some organizational. In information system (IS) research, the culture of subjects and respondents is problematic because it is typically an overly simplistic categorization. IS research nearly always assumes that an individual living in a particular place and time belongs to a single “culture,” e.g., someone living in Egypt is automatically classified as being a member of the Egyptian culture, or, more broadly, the Arab culture. This
dearth of clear concepts and measures for “culture” may explain why cross-cultural
research has been so exceedingly difficult to conduct. It may also explain why it has been
hard to develop and refine theories. Moreover, it may give insight into why reasonable,
explained variance in predictive models has not been higher. Finally, it is very possible that
much cross-cultural business research could be rightly accused of advancing an “ecological
fallacy” by not recognizing the individual makeup of persons with respect to culture. Using
SIT (or other theory bases) as grounding for cultural research programs implies the use of
certain methodological approaches. Each study would have to establish the salient
“cultures” in each individual’s background and include these different “cultures” as
independent variables in positivist research. In qualitative research, there would need to
be an equally rigorous assessment of the cultural identifiers of each individual.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization of business highlights the need to understand the management of
organizations that span different nations and cultures. In modern multinational and/or
transnational organizations, information technology (IT) must be utilized to achieve efficien-
cies, coordination, and communication. Clearly, though, cultural differences between coun-
tries impact the effectiveness and efficiency of this IT deployment. A study of cultural
conflicts, therefore, is of paramount importance for modern organizations and for IT scholars.

Despite its universally recognized importance, the effect of cultural factors on IT
outcomes has received limited attention from information systems (IS) researchers. As a result
cross-cultural information systems research, in general, remains in a state of infancy. Although
several important research endeavors have been recently published in the top-ranked,
established IS journals, the overall number of cross-cultural articles is fairly low, considering
the number of practical and theoretical critical questions that remain unanswered (Gallupe &
Tan, 1999). This disparity can be partly explained by methodological and resource difficulties
inherent in cross-cultural research and the long time horizon required to complete/conduct
these types of studies. It may also be explained by the lack of unanimity about the underlying
meaning and definition of the underlying construct, “culture.” In this chapter, therefore, we
explore the meaning of “culture” and consider new ways of conceptualizing and measuring
it for global information management research.

In reviewing the history of definitions of “culture,” one quickly realizes that there is wide-
ranging and contradictory scholarly opinion about what constitutes “the” set or even a
reasonable set of values, norms, and beliefs for “culture.” We explore an alternate theory-
based view of culture via social identity theory (SIT), which suggests that each individual is
influenced by a plethora of cultures and sub-cultures – some ethnic, some national, and some
organizational. In IS research, the culture of subjects and respondents is problematic because
it is typically an overly simplistic categorization. IS research nearly always assumes that an
individual living in a particular place and time belongs to a single “culture,” e.g., someone living
in Egypt is automatically classified as being a member of the national Egyptian culture, or, more
broadly, the ethnic Arab culture.

This dearth of clear concepts and measures for “culture” may explain why cross-cultural
research has been so exceedingly difficult to conduct. Rather, we suggest that an individual’s
social identity represents that amalgamation of cultures across boundaries (national, organi-
zational, professional, etc.), which fuse together to create one’s overall culture. The
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