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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 efficiencies, coordination, and communication. Clearly, though, cultural differences between countries 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, organizational, professional, etc.), which fuse together to create one's overall culture. The