



AN ANALYSIS OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL  
TRANSFERABILITY OF WESTERN  
MOTIVATION THEORIES TO THE  
DEVELOPING EASTERN, CHINA REGION

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing globalisation of complex organisations, the need to understand cross-cultural issues and the gap between theory and practice is crucial to organisational effectiveness. This research examines the question of the extent to which western motivation theories can be successfully transferred to other regions, and the extent to which the relevance and organisational utility of management education is constrained by cultural variables.

The majority of academic theories about organisational effectiveness have their findings based on empirical data from U.S. and European cultures, usually during the last fifty years. In contrast, significant practical management and organisational activity now occurs in Asian, Chinese cultures. Changing both the historical and geographic assumptions and interactions of research may negate the value of accepted management theories.

More specifically, academics and researchers have attempted to provide the relevant data for management theories about the relationships between organisational strategy, structure and behaviour, and between structure and culture: essentially stating that "alignment" is essential for improving organisational effectiveness.

Data obtained from over thirty organisations in the sample demonstrates that these general theories concerning the alignment of structure and culture cannot be applied universally. Essentially, this negates the academic basis of the currently espoused management theories and restricts their general applicability.

The conclusions from this research are supported by other researchers (Adler 1986; and Steers and Porter 1991), who agree that management theories, including motivation and leadership theories, are "culture bound". Organisational culture is strongly influenced by environmental factors and constraints; the cross-cultural transferability of these and other management concepts and theories is related to the degree of similarity and relative importance of these variables.

The vital question for practicing managers is the extent to which these espoused management principles can be cross-culturally transferred to China. This research reviews the fundamental environmental constraints and variables from both an empirical and experience perspective. The paper concludes that management and organisational theories should be conveyed in terms subject to these constraining variables, not used as simplistic universal solutions.

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSFERABILITY OF WESTERN MOTIVATION THEORIES TO THE DEVELOPING EASTERN, CHINA REGION

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps arrogance has been the greatest impediment to successful international management. There is certainly no doubt that the failure of many western organisations to operate effectively in foreign countries reflects an inability to adapt to the local environment and, at the very least, the adoption of a narrow focus to management principles and the rigid application of those principles regardless of local conditions.

Contributing to this narrow focus and lack of flexibility is the fact that management literature and practice has, for many years, been dominated by the Anglo-Saxon world, and in particular, the United States. As a result, it is laden with theories, practices and modes of operation that reflect U.S. cultural assumptions. Hence, many of the supposedly "universal" concepts and principles that are established may, in fact, be irrelevant to a large part of the world.

With the global economy becoming more integrated in recent years, these issues of cross-cultural relevance and transferability have become increasingly urgent. It is no longer viable for western managers or academics to simply assume that U.S. management theories and practices will apply in other countries, or be consistent with the cultures of those countries. Indeed, the sheer arrogance of westerners who make these assumptions in Asian countries such as China may seem extraordinary to local managers for whom the inconsistencies between the practices and techniques of western management, and the constraints imposed by local cultures and conditions, would seem far more obvious.

Hence, a vital question for practicing managers concerns the extent to which espoused management principles can be cross-culturally transferred. This is related to the degree of similarity of the fundamental environmental constraints and variables. Cross-cultural research has identified that the motivation theories of Maslow (1964), Herzberg (1968) and McClelland (1953) are not cross-culturally transferable or universal (Steers and Porter 1991, p. 324). The only motivation theory considered to be transferable is Vroom's (1973) expectancy theory.

It is therefore not surprising to establish from this research that management theories related to motivation culture such as contingency theories of structure and culture are not directly transferable to countries in transition. The conclusions (Adler 1986, pp. 127 - 133; and Steers and Porter 1991, pp. 320 - 325) indicate that management theories are 'culture bound'. Culture is related to environmental factors and constraints. The cross-cultural transferability of management theories is therefore related to the degree of similarity and relative importance of these variables. Management and other organisational theories should therefore be discussed and conveyed in terms subject to these assumptions and constraints.

This paper argues that management theories are not universal in applicability and is consistent with views expressed by experienced industrialists and academics who argue that improving organisation effectiveness appears to derive from the achievement of higher motivation levels through the development and maintenance of an appropriate supporting environment. These views are consistent

with the definition of motivation concerning energising, direction and support (Steers and Porter 1991, p. 6).

Contingency Theory of Organisation Structure and Culture has established that in the search for explanations of organisational success, the concept of *fit* is a key factor in many organisation and management research findings (Miles and Snow 1984). These findings indicate that successful organisations are not only closely aligned with the opportunities and constraints in their external environment (Chandler 1962), but they also support their strategies with internal configurations in organisational design and management systems that are highly congruent and synergistic (Townsend 1993 and Collins 1987, p.7).

These configurations comprise congruent patterns in the organisation's strategy, structure, technology, culture, size and dispersion, products and services, management systems, and workforce characteristics. None of these features by themselves can be used to explain success. Rather, organisational success is a function of careful design of each element and the integration of these elements into functional configurations. The implication of the concept of fit is that there are only a limited number of compatible patterns between the elements that can produce tight fit within the system options.

These findings all support a viewpoint that successful organisations will have an appropriate match of culture and structure; a strategic fit hypothesis. This is also expressed in the definition of Human Resource Management (Armstrong, 1977 p. 5). They propose that strategies of organisations, the type of people in power, and the organisation structure reflect the organisational culture. They stress that effective organisations have a high degree of alignment between strategy, structure and culture. This concept of no one universal strategy but the importance of "fit" and alignment is also supported by other researchers. Chorn (1990) and Kotter and Heskett (1992) also note that a fit today is a misalignment tomorrow. Adaptive cultures are therefore relevant.

This concept of "fit" and its importance to organisational effectiveness creates a major decision area for present day managers. Those people reading the most recent publications on Chaos Theory will have been advised to adopt flatter structures of management and to "bash bureaucracy". Other key words are "decentralisation" and "self-managed teams"; a positive, informal culture, within bureaucracies? Without this form of research, disharmony and dysfunction will develop.

This theoretical concept therefore requires statistical data to identify the relative significance of the inter relations between human resource effectiveness, structure and motivation culture. This research is relevant to HRM decision making and implementation for organisational effectiveness.

Evaluation of the relevance of cross-cultural research exposes the significant question of the relevance of literature and statistics from data obtained from sources different to that of the contingent situation. Berrien (1966) offered several examples of the fact that issues studied in one culture may be of such trivial consequence in another culture as to be meaningless.

One of the most blatant problems of the research is sampling. Instances of more than one organisation per culture are rarely found; it might be advantageous to sample cultures systematically, or at least people or organisations within any single culture. This is rarely done, and although it is a difficult task, it is not impossible (Naroll 1962). Culture consists of many factors and variables of attitudes, values and beliefs.

Motivation is fundamental, with other variables, to performance. Several theories of standard academic reference often taken as "true". In order to further clarify the point, consider Maslow's (1964) famous theory of human motivation and the hierarchy of human needs. This states that new human needs take priority whenever former needs are reasonably satisfied. In other words, people are motivated more by what they are seeking, than by what they already have.

However in underdeveloped countries most employees are still seeking basic physiological and security needs; and even some of the more sophisticated and elaborate motivational devices of modern industrial management may not be appropriate in these countries. For these people, work must be interpreted in terms of their immediate needs rather than waiting for indirect results through a complex economic system.

Complicating the issue even more is the group orientation which characterises many Asian cultures, particularly the Chinese culture. The typical western approach, consistent with the Hawthorne effect, of increasing an individual's level of motivation by making that individual feel in some way special and different from the rest of the group, is unlikely to work in China. In fact, it is more likely to have a negative impact making the individual feel embarrassed rather than motivated.

The view towards change in a particular country may have considerable relevance for international business management. Where locally recruited personnel in a given country are generally inclined to resist change and certain cultural conditions are largely responsible for such behaviour, then management would be in a much better position to promote change by introducing a manager from a different culture. An example of this strategy is the recruitment of American CEO's within Australian organisations such as Telecom.

People employed in organisations throughout the world often resist changes that affect them and for a variety of economic and personal reasons. There are some indications suggesting that purely cultural factors tend to result in significantly greater opposition to change in some countries than in others. For example, it is likely that human resistance to change in India tends to be significantly greater than in the US, largely for cultural reasons. This can also apply to the Latrobe Valley.

A substantial amount of work remains to be done in the cultural sphere of inter-state and international business management, however, there appears to be no conceptual reason why considerable progress cannot be made. Many in the field of management contend that in the long run, there will be a convergence of cultures, as well as applicable management principles and practices, throughout the industrial world. However, this type of convergence is likely to take decades, generations, and even centuries in some extreme cases. In the interim it seems apparent that cultural constraints will continue to have varying, and often major, impacts on managerial performance and the achievement of corporate objectives in international business firms, throughout much or most of the world.

The peoples of the world share a great common force - their human nature. Whatever the varied forms the pursuit of wants takes, we all share certain needs. As soon as one need is relatively satisfied, a new one emerges. The hierarchical model of these human needs implies motivational dynamism. Some of the more basic societies have not yet started to climb this ladder, but eventually they too will set out on what is a never-ending quest. This concept is particularly relevant to this research; the factor of motivation culture.

In summarising for comparative research, there are a number of identified cultural variables having a significant impact on the management process. These include **Sociological Constraints** - view towards business managers, authority, labour unions, view of achievement, wealth and material gain, risk-taking, and towards change; and **Educational Constraints** which include literacy level education possibilities, specialised vocational and technical training and special management training programmes. These constraints are often overlooked as assumptions in the practical application of international research to local management problems.

## RESEARCH RATIONALE

A vital question for competitive business management seems to be *to what extent can international management principles, practices and general know-how be transferred effectively to other countries, at what cost, and to what degree and extent is the overall process and effectiveness of management constrained by cultural variables?* (Richman 1965, p. 18).

The term 'effective' is meant to imply the achievement of corporate objectives which usually means short term profitability, productivity, and long term survival. This research assumes this is achieved by people, rather than technology ie Human Resource Management Effectiveness.

To answer the vital question stated above it is necessary to determine how we can tell when a certain aspect of management is in fact constrained by cultural variables, and in what way. It is also necessary to consider carefully what the critical cultural variables and their underlying conditions may be, how they can be identified and measured, and how they are inter-related with managerial performance in terms of their effects.

There is a lack of 'developmental research' which would attempt to answer the question: if a hypothesis about a particular cultural variable is generally true in principle, how does it find expression in the operational context of the real management world? That is, what effect does this have on the process and performance of management, and how is this related to other organisational variables?

The specific idea for the research was developed at a Melbourne conference concerning organisation change. Specifically, it became apparent that respected practitioners were involved in cultural change, not knowing the present culture or the effect of change programs to a mythical desired culture. Assumptions were made concerning the corporate value of strong culture, as opposed to flexible or appropriate cultures. At this conference no expert practitioners appeared to have the required, academically respectable, answers to these "hard" questions concerning definitions and applications. In addition, behaviour and culture are often confused.

The fundamental question is: Can Organisation Culture be managed? Therefore, is Cultural Engineering possible on a cost-effective basis to match Structural Engineering?

In addition, comparatively little research data was available for countries in transition.

The data that did exist contained inappropriate assumptions and flaws of measurement. Specifically, this was usually in use of a single value, usually share value, for organisation effectiveness and psychologically unacceptable measures of culture.

Specifically, the question of whether the international research concerning the Aligning Organisational Strategy and Structure and Motivation Culture is relevant to this region requires answering.

At this stage, a relevant research model describing the factors related to culture, structure and Human Resource Effectiveness was therefore developed.

Specifically:

### **Human Resource Effectiveness**

(Measured by questionnaire including comparison of financial and social factors)

#### **Culture**

("Informal Organisation")  
( Measured by Moos W.E.S. questionnaire)

#### **Structure**

("Formal Organisation")  
(Measured by Robbins and Barnwell structure questionnaire)

#### **Statistically**

Dependent Variable	Human Resource Effectiveness (Balanced Measure)
Independent Variables	Organisation Culture (Motivation Level) Organisation Structure (Mechanistic to organismic)

This model is used because of the generally accepted view that the achievement of a successful strategic plan, organisation effectiveness, is only possible if the culture of the organisation (informal) facilitates its structural implementation (formal) are in alignment (Miles and Snow 1978; Chorn 1990)

## **RESEARCH PLAN AND RESULTS**

### **Objectives**

- a. To establish whether the theoretical concepts established in the literature review are relevant to environments in transition.  
Specifically to test the hypothesis.

### **THE HYPOTHESIS**

The degree of fit between organisation structure and motivation culture will be more significant as a predictor of Human Resource Performance than either structure or culture separately.

- b. To establish the factors relevant to Human Resource Effectiveness.

Specifically to identify those factors or combination of factors demonstrating significant correlations to H.R.E.

### **Results**

Thirty Three (33) organisations were personally surveyed in the sample, which had the characteristic of organisations being in transitional situation. Care was taken to ensure a balance of private and public organisations, and also that the sample data for independent variables was relevant to the HR

Effectiveness dependant variable. SPSS was the program utilised for correlation and multiple regression.

**VARIABLE**

Correlation to Independent Variables to Dependent Variable.

	<b><u>HRE</u></b> <b><u>Financial</u></b>	<b><u>HRE</u></b> <b><u>Total</u></b>
Standardised Formalisation	-0.153	-0.150
Standardised Complexity	0.44	0.073
Standardised Centralisation	0.18	0.437
<b>Total Structure Organisity</b>	-0.78	0.145
Involvement	0.186	0.174
Peer Cohesion	0.312	0.387
Supervisor Support	0.061	0.234
Autonomy	0.354	0.449
Task Orientation	0.104	0.249
Work Pressure	0.180	0.442
Clarity	-0.140	0.125
Control	-0.139	-0.372
Innovation	0.376	0.304
Physical Comfort	0.148	0.476
Relationship	0.223	0.312
Growth	0.120	0.495
Maintenance	0.025	-0.169
<b>Total Culture Motivation</b>	0.218	0.404
Alignment	0.193	0.152

In summary the relationship is:

$$\text{HRE} = .404 (\text{Motivation Cult}) + 0.145 (\text{Org Structure}) + 39.60$$

**Analysis of Statistical Results**

The initial hypothesis is essentially disproven; the theories of the significance of fit of Organisation Structure and Organisational Motivation Culture alignment do not correlate significantly to effectiveness.

The significant correlation is that of motivation culture to effectiveness. This applies to the different sample and industry sectors; public, private, more/less effective. However a comparison of private to public bodies supports the basic hypothesis, but only in general terms.

This particular hypothesis, based on a combination of accepted management theories is not cross-culturally transferable..

More detailed analysis of the data reveals that those organisations with planning and control systems including 'mis' and appraisal systems, and financial incentives are more effective.

Significantly, mechanistic, bureaucratic organisations have the advantage of tight control systems, as well as those of 'private' organisations, but not necessarily related to individual performance or organisational objectives; combining culture and structure to effectiveness.

This combination of motivation culture and appropriate expectancy valance motivation process systems(Vroom) produces the expected high performance results; this part of the theory may be cross-culturally transferable.

## CONCLUSION

This research supports the view that management theories are in fact, 'culture bound', that US management theories cannot be directly transferred to other cultures, and that these US theories, and hence the vast majority of theories about organisational effectiveness and the management of organisations, may in fact be of limited value to the real concerns and issues associated with the management of enterprises in other countries and other cultures. In view of the increasing globalisation of modern organisations, the current and potential expansion of economic activity in the Asian region, and the need to effectively manage operations in Asian countries such as China, this lack of cross-cultural transferability and relevance of espoused management theories and principles is a major concern for management academics and practitioners.

Within any society, the style of management and the nature and role of organisations is determined within its particular cultural, historical and institutional context. Hence, management practices that are not supported by, or are even at variance with, underlying cultural values and beliefs, are unlikely to be effective.

Clearly, the failure of many foreign investment enterprises in China can be traced back to narrowly focused organisational practices, a lack of flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions, the rigid application of accepted management principles imported from the west, and an inability to adapt management practices to local needs and the local environment. For example, intercultural conflict has been widely reported in many US-Chinese joint ventures primarily due to cultural differences which had a far more fundamental impact than anticipated (Weldon and Jehn 1996, p. 98). Hence, US managers often complain that the Chinese, amongst other things, fail to recognise the importance of deadlines and schedules, are not pro-active and avoid taking risks. The Chinese, on the other hand, often complain that US managers make little effort to understand the Chinese, overemphasis the importance of formal rules and regulations, and adopt a management style that is too abrupt and too direct (Weldon and Jehn 1996, p. 98).

The differences which underpin these problems and exist as an on-going source of conflict, are inextricably tied to deeper cultural, social and religious beliefs, philosophies and ideologies. The contrast in attitudes between the US and the Chinese to the importance of formal rules and regulations, as well as the contrast in attitudes towards participative management processes in organisations, can for example, be traced back to more fundamental differences in political and legal ideologies and basic differences in Chinese and Western political and legal traditions (Carver 1996, pp. 18-19). There is in fact, a close link, reflected in most western democracies, between the growth and development of a democratic political system, the development of a legal system, and the development of formal organisational rules and procedures.

A formal and relatively complex set of rules is required to take the place of other forms of authority, and that rule of law needs to apply consistently to all individuals as well as the government (Campbell and Wiles 1979, pp. 51-73). Without this rule of law it is difficult to envisage how a democracy could operate in a stable and sustainable manner. Yet, in almost 5,000 years of recorded history, China has never been a democracy. This fact alone goes a long way towards explaining major differences in Chinese and Western thinking with regard to requirements for, and the application of, a formal legal system, widely different perceptions about the need for formal rules, procedures and guidelines to regulate organisational activity and business practices, and diverging views regarding the need for the development and operation of participative management process in organisations.

This preference for informality, as well as a number of other cultural differences including preferred approaches to the management and resolution of conflict, and an orientation towards the group rather than the individual, is reinforced by the influence of Confucianism, which stresses the virtue of yielding and compromise to avoid friction (Folsom and Minan 1989, pp. 3-6) and essentially, revolves around the belief that harmony and desirable behaviours can be obtained, not by strict regulation, but by the rule of good men, whose virtuous examples are the most effective form of persuasion (Folsom and Minan 1989, p. 3). Western motivation theories which focus on the individual rather than the group appear to be at odds with many basic beliefs and ideologies which typify Chinese thinking.

Despite problems already alluded to, and despite the obvious problems associated with the twin barriers of language and culture, China has over recent years, attracted a tidal wave of foreign investment. In fact, the number of foreign joint ventures in 1992 exceeded that of all previous years and eclipsed all other developing countries in their quest to attract foreign dollars (Shenkar 1995, pp. 1-6). To take advantage of these developments, gain a better understanding of the real determinants of organisational effectiveness in Asian countries such as China, and more effectively manage overseas operations, a more complete understanding of relevant cultural differences and their impact on international management practices is required. Specifically the cross-cultural transferability of western motivation theories and job designs to the eastern China region.

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