

Chapter 2

Cross-Cultural Knowledge Management: Insights from Major Social Science Discipline

2.1 Introduction

We need to deepen our understanding of different types of “group” epistemology, which is a shared discipline of knowledge creation within a group.

While, traditionally, philosophers have been working on individual epistemology, knowledge-based theorists from management fields have introduced the concept of corporate epistemology.

The concept has helped us understand the diversification of different management styles among successful firms. This “group” can be an organization, community, region, city, or nation, as well as a corporation.

As traditional social science fields, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics have been working on these units, insights from such fields would be helpful in enhancing our understanding of different levels of “group” epistemology.

2.2 Culture, Individual and Learning Process in Groups: Psychological Perspectives

Individuals and groups form social structures known as organizations. According to the definition by Guzzo and Shea (1992), a group can be described as a social system considered as an entity by its members and by those who, despite not being internal, have a degree of familiarity with it; its members are bound by interdependent relationships and everyone has a role and duties to fulfill. Groups are fundamental for organizations, and their importance is growing nowadays, because they often carry out tasks that were previously completed by individuals. In large companies,

high level management teams, rather than single top managers, are increasingly making strategic decisions, because they can rely upon all the information that is not usually held by a single person, yet by a group of people. Therefore, the importance of work groups within organizations points out that individuals accomplish a fundamental task in the process of knowledge acquisition, but this component of organizational learning, although essential, is inadequate, if regarded on its own.

As suggested by the new socio-cognitive approaches,¹ the processes of encoding, storing, and retrieving information can be viewed and evaluated at both individual and group levels. For instance, it is fair to make a qualitative comparison between the information-processing by decision-making groups and the cognitive performance by individuals who are fulfilling the identical tasks. This analysis is effective in assessing if and how the work-group in its entirety can use the information acquired by an individual in order to make the right decision.

At the group level, encoding is related to recognizing and understanding substantial information. Group members are united by a group culture, which can be variously defined, although a common point can be identified: it is based on sharing a set of thoughts among members. These thoughts include knowledge regarding the group, such as group norms; knowledge about group members, such as expected skills; and knowledge regarding the work of the group, such as work goals. Thus, group members can expedite or hinder recognition of important information or possible difficulties. When the cognitive processing of information is started, the entire group has to discover which information is significant, so it can be assimilated by the knowledge structure of the group and become available.

If cohesion is considered a valuable asset within the group's culture, the group is inclined to avoid open discussions, because they may lead to troubles that could trigger disputes among the members. On the contrary, if groups are bound by group norms to continuously innovate and achieve better results, they may orientate their members toward expressing diverse opinions and contrasting information. This way the group may better comprehend its duties and its members may profit by a concrete advantage arising from the information shared among them.

¹Social cognitive theory provides a framework for understanding, predicting, and changing human behavior. The theory identifies human behavior as an interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment. In the model, the interaction between the person and behavior involves the influences of a person's thoughts and actions. The interaction between the person and the environment involves human beliefs and cognitive competencies that are developed and modified by social influences and structures within the environment. The third interaction, between the environment and behavior, involves a person's behavior determining the aspects of their environment and in turn their behavior is modified by that environment. In conclusion, social cognitive theory is helpful for understanding and predicting both individual and group behavior, and identifying methods in which behavior can be modified or changed (Bandura 1977, 1986, 1989, 2001; Jones 1989).

Groups seem to have a greater ability to store knowledge rather than individuals. Such superiority has been defined by Wegner (1987) as transactive memory² within a group, consisting in the common storage of shared knowledge among several group members, while everyone is completely conscious of what knowledge is stored by every single person. Single members are often specialized in particular areas of knowledge and the other members possess different levels of understanding of such specialization. Every specialist takes the responsibility for the information regarding a specific field of knowledge and every member transfers relevant information to the single specialist. At this point, if every member knows exactly what information is stored by whom, the entire group can take advantage of this decentralized system of storing knowledge. Liang et al. (1995) pointed out that, if group members are trained together, the creation of a transactive memory system determines a superior performance compared to the one achieved by those groups whose members have been trained separately. As proved by Henry (1993) and Littlepage et al. (1997), the groups' ability to make better decisions is directly linked to their capacity to identify their members' expertise.

The benefits of group retrieval of information often explain why group memory is superior to individual memory. The capacity to recall information by single members may be stimulated by the group, so members can correct one another while they gather the information. Another reason that explains the superiority of group

²Transactive memory theory is based on the idea that individual members can serve as external memory aids to each other (Wegner 1987). Members are able to benefit from each other's knowledge and expertise if they develop a good, shared understanding of who knows what in the group/unit. A transactive memory system is built on the distinction between internal and external memory encoding. Often, individuals encode new knowledge internally, in their own memory. However, even more often individuals encode or use knowledge encoded externally (in diaries, in books, or even in other people's memory). In these cases, the individual internally encodes the label (subject) of the knowledge as well as its location, but not the knowledge itself. Transactive memory systems are built on this view of individuals playing the role of external memory for other individuals who—in turn—encode meta-memories (i.e., memories about the memories of others). Wegner (1995) proposed that two types of meta-memories are maintained in people's minds—information about the subjects of knowledge of each member (i.e., areas of expertise) and information about the locations of the knowledge. Knowledge is encoded, stored, and retrieved from the collective memory through various transactions between individuals, based on their meta-memories. Findings of both field and laboratory research indicate that transactive memory can serve as a facilitator of group performance, where groups whose members are aware of the knowledge, and expertise of other group members perform better than groups whose members do not possess such knowledge. Transactive memory systems enable groups to better utilize the knowledge that their members possess, and to reach higher levels of performance than they would have reached without such a system (for a review, see Moreland and Argote 2003). Members of small groups, who are colocated, can initially use surface information to infer rough estimates of "who knows what" (Wegner 1986), and can then reach greater accuracy in the attribution of expertise to other group members through common experiences (Moreland et al. 1998), such as group training (Liang et al. 1995) and group discussion.

recall is that the retrieval of information is made easier by the ability of the group members to prompt each other while completing the task.

If it is true that the groups' ability to store and retrieve information is superior, this does not necessarily mean that the information is better utilized. As proved many times, a process of loss can occur within group work, so the group's performance cannot reach the highest level because of inadequate coordination among members. This explains why the sum of the results of a number of similar individuals working on the same tasks is higher than the achievement of the group as a whole. In particular, as discussed by Stasser (1988), regarding the retrieval and use of information, it is more probable that a group discussion is triggered off involving the information shared by all the members rather than the information held only by a single member. If a hidden profile is generated by the distribution of information within the group, the decision-making process can be definitely hindered by the unbalanced sampling of information. When a hidden profile is present, every single member cannot possess a clear and complete view of the information, because parts of it differ from one member to another. Optimal decisions can be made only if every single member equally looks upon the information in its entirety.

Several studies have proved that groups do not possess the best abilities to collect from their members all the information that is needed to allow an optimal group decision process. This occurs also within work teams that have to make diagnostic day-by-day decisions by grouping information together. In this type of group debates, managers often hold the position of neutralizing the inclination of the group by continuously supplying information not yet shared by all the group members.

2.3 The Sociological Foundations: Learning as Social and Cultural Approach

Gherardi and Nicolini (2001) term a *microinteractionist tradition* in the organizational learning literature. The distinctive features are its constructionist epistemology and the role of language as the medium of such social construction (Gherardi and Nicolini 2001, pp. 42–43).

The microinteractionist tradition has received two inputs from philosophy: the first derives from Peirce's pragmatism (1931–1935), while the second issues from Schutz's (1971) phenomenology. Peirce studied the science of signs, known as semiotics, arguing that signs are mediators through which individuals can discern reality and express their thoughts about the world. Thus, there is always an interdependent connection between the sign, the object, and the thought, that is the internal referent. This way, Pierce's contribution to the studies on the mind of the individual appears to be innovative, because he introduced thought, which is a social element explicated within a community, since truth and objectivity are here based only on usual traditions, on the habitual practice of doing. According to Pierce, in fact, people can be considered as the total of their thoughts, the progressive build-up of their social experiences.

Later, the social theory of the mind received an interesting contribution by Cooley (1964), who asserted that society is the mind of all individuals and thought is nothing but a fictional conversation with the self. Therefore, ideas are related to one another forming society, and sociology is the discipline that analyzes the ways in which individuals picture each other in their own minds.

However, a more prominent contribution was offered by Mead (1934), who stated that society is based on reflectivity that is the faculty of the self to reflect upon itself. The concept of self is relative: the self is not unique, every person has many selves, and thought occurs when individuals converse with themselves.

Moreover, Blumer (1969) and the symbolic interactionist approach were deeply influenced by Mead's social theory of the mind, after being enlightened by Dewey (1922) and his critical view of the rational man theory.

Garfinkel (1967), Goffman (1967) and the ethnomethodological movement were instead influenced by Schutz's (1971) phenomenology. In symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, society is considered as a process, not as a structure. According to the various situations, individuals continuously create their roles and do not play preconceived parts. Only because people get in touch with one another and act together, social institutions have a reason to exist.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), every individual visualizes a future projection of a different social "me," giving birth to social action: at this point, everyone plays the part of the "other," anticipates the possible effects and consequently shapes his actions. By continuously negotiating, individuals give "definitions of the situation" and build the social construction of reality.

The expression "definition of the situation" was coined by Thomas (1928), who believed that, if a person considers a situation real, then it is so in all its consequences. Social life has a special inclination: it becomes as people think it is. Reality is not rigid, but flexible, and can rapidly change: if the definition of a given situation is altered, also the induced behavior changes.

The theory of organizational learning as the transmission of knowledge within occupational communities³ was born within the microinteractionist approach. Starting point is the hypothesis that people who work negotiate forms of interaction that are called occupations or professions. Members of an occupational community do not produce only work, but also social relationships and images of themselves. In their activities, they tend to conceal the nasty sides of their work, so they can shape the way they appear in public and extend their negotiating power.⁴ Many scholars,

³Boland and Tenkasi (1995) used the phrase "communities of knowing," Bechky (2003) preferred "occupational communities" while Grant (1996) and Carlile (2002) discussed "expert knowledge" primarily in terms of business functions.

⁴Organizations consist of a "mosaic of groups structured by functional tasks" (Greenwood and Hinings 1996: 1033), such as legal, human resources, and marketing departments. Individuals within an organization's functional departments interact with constituents of the organization's market and nonmarket environments through *occupational communities*, that is, groups of individuals across organizations that share a common set of assumptions, language, and perspectives (Schein 1996; van Maanen and Barley 1984).

from Suchman (1987), Brown and Duguid (1991), to Boland and Tenkasi (1995), analyzing the noncanonical practices in occupations and professions, offer a plain view of the supposedly clear transmission of knowledge.

It is the ethnomethodological approach that gave a cue to these type of studies; in fact, according to the definition by Flynn (1991), the use of the term “ethnomethodology” points out that this approach analyzes social reality by observing it, as ethnographers do, and that those who follow this line aim at unveiling the methods used by individuals to make their experiences significant, which gives account for the methodological aspect. Thus, learning is always located in the area of social interaction; in fact, it is directly connected to participation and community membership, since social relationships are fundamental for knowledge transmission, the compilation of a well-set curriculum, and the social growth of identity.⁵

Hence, the remark that learning is characterized by a social dimension leads to the belief that a group mind exists in terms of cognitive interdependence based on mnemonic processes. Members of a working community create a global transactive memory system,⁶ in which everyone is variously responsible for recalling every single experience. Within an organization every person behaves in a way that may be instinctively enabled and individual unsolicited behaviors are consequently joined together in order to give life to an intelligent action. According to Tsoukas (1992), knowledge distribution is the base of the network of social behaviors that defines social learning.

The analysis of the social aspect of learning within the microinteractionist tradition has also been brought forward by studies on communities of practice, such as the one by Lave and Wenger (1991), known as the situated learning theory. A community of practice can be generally understood as a set of relations among people, occupations, and the world which develop in the course of time and are connected to other adjacent communities of practice. Knowledge would not exist away from an occupational community. Working, learning, and innovating cannot be regarded as separate activities; instead, they are strictly tied to one another in a social practice and its culture.

Also, studies of organizational cultures have focused on the concept of occupational community. At the center of analysis are the development of local cultures,

⁵“Occupational identities themselves are often complex. Notably, individuals tend to identify both with their professions and with the firms (or other organizations) where they are employed, but occupational identities may also be linked to work groups, functional departments, or geographical sites. In interaction with others, individuals situationally select the frame of reference appropriate to the group and structural context at hand, while reconciling their actions with other such frames which are also part of their personal history and identity” (Håkanson 2010: 1811).

⁶Transactive memory is the shared division of cognitive labor in relationships involving the encoding, storage, retrieval, and communication of information from different content domains (Wegner 1987). The central idea is that group members often develop an implicit plan for dividing knowledge responsibilities and assigning tasks based on their shared conception of one another’s expertise. Each individual becomes a specialist in some domains but not others, and individuals rely on one another to access information across domains. Transactive memory systems are most likely to develop when group members are interdependent and have convergent expectations about who will learn what (Hollingshead 2001).

the way the members of a community interact with one another and the type of organization that arises from intracommunity negotiations and from bargaining between inside and outside. These concepts recall Weber's (1978) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, that is evident in the idea of community, but they diverge in the importance assigned to practice and occupation.

The microinteractionist tradition is characterized by its constructionist epistemology, according to which society is made of the interpretative practices of people, and the observation that language is the way such social construction is created, it is not a simple display of social relations. Speech acts are not descriptive, but are made of practice, that combines language and action.

According to Alvesson and Deetz (1996), this emphasizes the importance of the so-called "linguistic turn" within the organizational studies, which is related to the idea that language does not express or depict reality, but it is the artificer of reality.

This way, organizational learning can be considered as a label that generates a socially constructed reality and, at the same time, is generated by it. A whole community of researchers and scholars, who discuss about organizational learning, take part in conferences and write reviews, are identified by such label.

The entire social process of coining this specific label for managerial purposes is a real sociological phenomenon; the social creation of a new subjectivity can be witnessed, the appearance of firms which call themselves "learning organizations"; and a platoon of social researchers marches along with the aim of investigating and analyzing such organizations, trying to figure out and measure their properties.

The social constructionist approach adopts the traditional scheme based on contingency, negotiation, breakdown, discontinuity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation. Thus, organizational learning is considered as situated; knowledge arises from negotiations, breakdowns and discontinuities, while heterogeneity and fragmentation affect knowing. Only placing the process of learning in the areas of knowledge, language, and interpretation can lead to its full comprehension, which cannot be found in action and its consequences.

These peculiar features openly contrast the conventional psychological models of learning, founded on the stimulus–response theory, that are exported to the study of organizational learning without a critical vision.

2.4 The Treatment of Culture in Management Science

The cultural perspective is based on the interpretation of the way individuals behave within a community and focuses on the concept that members of organizations socially construct reality, giving birth to a set of intersubjective meanings expressed and transmitted by metaphors, symbols, myths, and rituals cemented by beliefs, values, and feelings. Organizational learning within the cultural perspective has been viewed by scholars as a transformation of internal defensive practices, as the expansion of an organizational learning culture, or as both. Basically, it can be stated that culture is the publicly shared produce of learning. According to Cook and

Yanow (1993), the cultural perspective cannot replace the cognitive perspective, rather it is complementary to it: the two scholars pointed out that the cultural perspective is centered on the collective level, while the cognitive perspective is only able to catch learning at the individual level. Thus, organizational learning can only be explained as the process that occurs when the members of an organization gain the knowledge needed to perform their common activities. This perspective is very close to the epistemological approaches, given the definition of culture as a set of beliefs, values and emotions, and all their means of expression, such as metaphors, symbols, myths, and ceremonies, which are generated and shared within a group and characterize it, differentiating it from the other groups. Hence, the fundamental role of culture and social construction of reality can be clearly understood.

The cultural aspect has been analyzed by various authors, who have been able to reduce the distance between the individual and the collective ideas of learning.

Sackmann (1991), for instance, expresses a particular idea of cultural knowledge within organizations, based on the conceptualization of culture as the collective construction of social reality. According to Sackmann, cultural knowledge can be divided into four classes, which in turn can be classified into various categories. Class 1 is represented by dictionary knowledge that describes organizational reality regarded as relevant by members of a certain cultural setting. By using “what?” when formulating a question, dictionary knowledge can be deduced. In Class 2 directory knowledge can be found: it is made of theories of action shared within the community that embody causal-analytical attributions. This type of knowledge can be obtained asking questions starting with “how?”. Recipe knowledge resides in Class 3 and is represented by normative prescriptions or causal-normative attributions. Questions to elicit recipe knowledge begin with “what should be?”. Finally, Class 4 is the place for axiomatic knowledge that is formed by causes, assumptions, and beliefs. In this case, the question starter is “why are things done the way they are?”.

The approach under discussion enables the creation of a connection between cultural changes and the process of organizational learning. Changes in dictionary knowledge can be considered as an organizational learning process partially triggered by the change of organizational control mechanisms. In fact, dictionary knowledge is strongly linked to functional areas, meaning that it most likely changes through variations in incentive and reward mechanisms. Recipe knowledge can change depending on the level of autonomy present within an organization and the mechanisms of selection. Ultimately, axiomatic knowledge is strictly linked to the learning of top management teams.

As pointed out by Argyris (1964, 1978, 1990, 1996), the organizational learning process can be hindered by internal defense mechanisms that are culturally and emotionally active in organizations.

In particular, he classified two different types of organizational culture, named Model I Theory-in-Use and Model II Theory-in-Use. The first is conceived to generate defensive routines so it demands defensive reasoning; in fact, this model teaches people to try to be winners, to be in total control, and not cause trouble to anyone. Model II Theory-in-Use is based on specific values, such as reliable information, a highly knowledgeable choice, and responsibility to control the implementation

of such choice. As mentioned above, the fundamental values in Model I, such as total control, victory, imperturbability, determine intraorganizational defensive mechanisms. For instance, if an event that causes strong embarrassment, or threat occurs, individuals behave in order to overcome the embarrassment or threat the best way possible, and this requires a cover-up. Though, the emotional side of common culture has also to be taken into account when analyzing organizational learning as cultural change. This implies that knowledge systems within organizations have also to be understood as common constructions of meaning with emotional implications, not only as mere social constructions of reality. If the cultural perspective is regarded as the emotional side of common knowledge systems, several approaches connected to the above discussed cognitive perspective reveal themselves under the so-called management of meaning.

2.5 Anthropologists' World View: "Cultures" Rather than "Organizations"

In an anthropological perspective, the question "how do ideas travel?" is generally answered resorting to the mechanism of diffusion. Initially, the concept of diffusion was explained in a literal sense, meaning that cultural artifacts were spread from a culture where they were present in great number to another where they did not exist. Later, the concept was rather expressed in a metaphorical way: according to Redfield et al. (1936), diffusion often occurs without the ordinary kinds of social contact among people. Levitt and March (1988) and Rogers (1962), pointed out that in the version preferred in management theory via marketing, major importance was still assigned to artifacts, but as innovation was extended, ideas and also ideologies began to propagate more. This fact is of high interest in the entire matter of organizational learning.

The problem is now to understand if diffusion can be considered a convenient metaphor. It is also certain that ideas are spread through physical objects, such as books and documents, but it is the method by which they travel that is still uncertain. The scientist Ludwig Fleck most likely inspired the attempts to modify the metaphor from physical to biological, when talking, for instance, in terms of "catching" or "infecting," but these efforts were not decisive for the solution of the issue. As pointed out by Douglas, similarities to nature may be useful for an easier acceptance of the process, but not for its comprehension. How can it be possible to "catch" an idea or how can the "diffusion" of an innovation occur?

The use of the term "diffusion" involves the idea of a physical process that leads to the use of a number of physical metaphors, such as "saturation" or "resistance." This shows how scientific metaphors can have success as they become common in practice, but when they are retrieved for subsequent analysis they can be deceptive. Ideas are generally imagined by people as if they were real objects that have a space and time dimension and are moved by their peculiar features. Diffusion is economically valuable, because, as it is true for all types of metaphors, it makes the less

intelligible clearer, it offers a concrete visualization of the immaterial; but the use of metaphor for analytical reasons causes a standstill. It could be conceivable to assert that ideas travel from more satiated to less satiated settings, but this reasoning leads to the observation that as physical objects are subject to the law of inertia, the ideas also have to obey such law.

This reading is not very persuasive, above all if the so-called brain drain phenomenon is taken into account. For this reason, it is better to follow the opposite direction, visualizing ideas that move from less satiated to more satiated settings, so a new physical metaphor is required: critical mass. Rather than defending the old physical metaphors and introducing new ones, it is preferable to search for a distinct type of metaphor borrowed from anthropology.

According to Latour (1993), well known for his program of symmetrical anthropology, the model of diffusion can be at odds with the model of translation.⁷ This model is based on the idea that people are the masters of temporal and spatial diffusion of anything and people's actions vary, causing alterations and diversions.

The translation model responds to the issue regarding the energy required for the movement of ideas or objects. People themselves, irrespective of being considered creators or users, give energy to an idea every time translation occurs for anyone's use. Viewing a process of translation means observing ideas that move around and this does not involve a process of acceptance or refusal.

Nevertheless, in this setting, the term "translation" should be understood in a way that bypasses its linguistic meaning, since it consists in inventing, shifting, transferring, or creating a completely new bond between two agents, the translator and the object of translation. This concept of translation together with the program of asymmetrical anthropology was useful to dissolve the standstill in which contemporary anthropology had stranded itself. Now symmetrical anthropology does not need to complain about the loss of native culture or the erroneous utilization of modern elements, but can give account of the evolution of postmodern cultures in which old and new are translated into local inventions in a creative manner.

Thus, translation becomes a fundamental concept to comprehend organizational change. Its significance beyond the literal meaning recalls connections with the ideas of movement and change, it includes what is created and what already exists, and also the link between individuals and ideas, ideas and objects, individuals and objects. For this reason, translation could be effectively taken into consideration within the studies of organizational learning.

⁷The concept of translation can be viewed as an alternative to the model of diffusion. Bruno Latour (1986) uses the term translation instead of knowledge transfer to depict a process where diffusion is in the hands of people. He contends that every person throughout a translation process acts in different ways—they modify, adapt, add on, etc. An idea, a text, or an object is thus transformed in the process. The fundamental differences are that ideas do not spread on their own (diffusion), but external energy (translation) is needed for an idea to spread (Latour 1987). Translation answers the question of energy that is needed for the process. It is thus people, both as creators and applicants, who transform an idea, whether they apply it for their own purpose or for someone else (Latour 1992). When knowledge is transferred from one context to another it is thus being translated (Latour 1991).

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