

Indigenous Management Research

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Abstract:

- While the last years have witnessed a tremendous economic boom in many emerging markets around the world, the knowledge of management practices in these countries lags behind their growing relevance in the world economy. One reason for this is that concepts, such as *guanxi*, *jugaad*, *ubuntu*, and *blat*, are not adequately reflected by traditional Western management theories.
- We call for more context-specific research and for drawing on indigenous thought in developing new theories that do not only help to better understand management practices in emerging markets, but contribute to global management knowledge as well.
- Examples of indigenous management concepts are illustrated and adequate context-sensitive research methods, such as locally-meaningful constructs and measures, participatory research, storytelling, and visual ethnography, are discussed. Moreover, we provide an overview of current research and conclude with major implications for indigenous management research.

Keywords: Indigenous management · Cross-cultural management · Emerging markets · Research methods

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Introduction

The last years have witnessed a tremendous development in many emerging markets around the world. According to a study of Goldman Sachs, China will become the largest economy in the world by 2040 (Wilson and Purushothaman 2003). India, Russia, and Brazil are expected to grow at considerably higher rates than Western industrialized countries as well. As a result, the accumulated GNP of the four BRIC countries Brazil, Russia, India, and China is likely to exceed that of the G7 countries USA, Japan, Germany, France, UK, Italy, and Canada within the next 20 years.

The unprecedented economic growth of emerging markets is accompanied by a sharp increase of foreign direct investment (FDI). Not only have large multinational corporations (MNCs) established foreign subsidiaries in emerging markets, but also many small- and medium-sized companies have too. However, the BRIC countries have not only become very attractive locations for inward FDI, but are also successfully investing abroad. In 2011, they accounted for nearly 10% of global outward FDI (UNCTAD 2012). This often takes place in the form of mergers & acquisitions, such as the overtaking of Jaguar and Land Rover by Tata Motors, of IBM's personal computer division by Lenovo, or of the energy provider Envacom by Gazprom.

Similarly impressive is the growing number of managers from emerging markets who have been appointed as CEOs and board members of firms in industrialized countries. In particular, many Indian managers have made it to top positions in Fortune Global 500 firms. Prominent examples include Anshu Jain (Co-CEO of Deutsche Bank), Indra Nooyi (Chairman and CEO of PepsiCo), or Vikram Pandit (ex-CEO of Citigroup).

Despite the large success of many firms and managers from emerging markets, the knowledge about management practices in these economies is still limited and the academic literature is still dominated by Western concepts. However, as Marsden (1991, p. 32) argued already more than 20 years ago, "strategies based on European scientific techniques ignore the rich resources, both practical and intellectual, which exist in non-Western societies (...). 'Local', 'traditional' or 'folk' knowledge is no longer the irrelevant vestige of 'backward' people who have not yet made the transition to modernity, but the vital well-spring and resource bank from which alternative futures might be built."

While scholars have called for the consideration of local concepts for many years (e.g., Gopinath 1998; Meyer 2006; Panda and Gupta 2007; Banerjee and Prasad 2008; Zheng and Lamond 2009), this aspect has only recently been recognized in international management research. For example, in a study of the indigenous conceptual dimensions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in China, Xu and Yang (2009) reveal that several widely accepted CSR dimensions in the Western world have no embodiments in China. Das (2010) shows how the Indian view of good management practices is deeply rooted in ancient Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Additionally, Jackson et al. (2008) demonstrate how the success of firms in Africa is affected by the use of local management techniques that have evolved over several centuries. Thus, in order to understand the success of emerging market firms it becomes essential to analyze indigenous management concepts such as *ubuntu* (South Africa), *jugaad* (India), *guanxi* (China), or *blat* (Russia) and their impact on management behavior and outcome in these countries.

Moreover, studying indigenous management concepts can also be useful for understanding the implicit assumptions of Western theories of management and thus contribute to global management knowledge as well (Welge and Holtbrügge 1999; Tsui 2004). Consequently, the analysis of management concepts originating from non-Western countries may improve seemingly universal theories of corporate strategy, innovation management, or leadership (Cappelli et al. 2010; Leung 2012). “As countries such as India and China aspire to play an increasingly important role in the world economy and indigenous managers attempt to build and lead world-class companies, possibilities of the emergence of a richer model for managers need to be explored (...). The choice is clearly for not only the indigenous management to tap into its deep-rooted ethos, but also to contribute the contemporary concepts and practices of governance in developing a true globally relevant cross-verging managerial frame to emerge” (Chatterjee 2009, p. 138).

Examples of Indigenous Management Concepts

One of the few indigenous management concepts that has been extensively discussed in the academic literature is the phenomenon of *guanxi* in China (e.g., Luo 1997; Lovett et al. 1999; Park and Luo 2001; Fan 2002). *Guanxi* refers to the concept of drawing on a web of personal relations to secure favors in personal and organizational relations. The network of connections with members of the extended family and individuals of the same birthplace, educational institution, or workplace contains implicit mutual obligations, assurances, and understanding, and governs attitudes toward long-term social and personal relationships. The practice of *guanxi* originates in Confucianism and has been pervasive for centuries in every aspect of Chinese society and economy.

Empirical studies reveal that *guanxi* affects several aspects of management, such as firm growth (Park and Luo 2001), competitive advantages (Tsang 1998), organizational trust (Chen et al. 2004), human resource management (Law et al. 2000), and the performance of local (Luo et al. 2012) and foreign-invested enterprises operating in China (Luo 1997). Thus, it is critical for all businesses in China and for those cooperating with Chinese firms from abroad to understand and properly utilize this indigenous management concept in order to be successful.

The recent success of many Indian firms has attracted a growing number of studies on how they develop innovative products and services. Central to this is the principle of *jugaad*, frugal innovations born from ingenuity and resourcefulness (Radjou et al. 2012). The Hindi term *jugaad* describes creative adaptation instead of weary resignation under extreme resource constraints (Cappelli et al. 2010). A prominent example of improvising technological and business solutions using simple means is the Tata Nano (Chacko et al. 2010; Holtbrügge and Schuster 2011). By the use of local materials and knowledge, reducing all features to basic customer needs, and applying a radical design-to-cost principle, Tata was able to develop the cheapest car in the world. The construction kit principle allows a high value added by local dealers and the creation of jobs at the bottom of the economic and social pyramid (Pralhad 2004). All without compromising on quality which is guaranteed by collaboration with many world-class component suppliers such as Bosch, Continental, Delphi, or Mahle that adapted the *jugaad* principle for this project.

Another example of *jugaad* innovations in India is the Vortex ATM machine which has been developed in cooperation with the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, UNDP, the Ministry of Rural Development, and a few banks. It is easy to use for the largely illiterate rural population by providing biometric identification, i.e., a high-tech feature which can be rarely found in industrialized countries. Vortex's ATM can be run by solar energy and is able to cope with high temperatures of up to 50 °CC without air conditioning. It only costs 2,900€ and is thus more than 50% cheaper than conventional ATMs (Tiwari and Herstatt 2012).

Management in South Africa is often influenced by the concept of *ubuntu*. The Bantu word *ubuntu* can be translated into 'people's relations with each other'. Central to this concept, that was at the heart of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in South Africa after Apartheid, is the recognition that people are inextricably bound in each other's humanity. According to Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999, p. 38), "a person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, based from a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."

Ubuntu emphasizes the spirit of community and solidarity, and the role of emotions, in decision-making. It includes the voices of all participants in an organization and the building of consensus (Mbigi and Maree 1995; Karsten and Illa 2005). As Mangaliso (2001) argues, *ubuntu* can be a source of competitive advantage as it emphasizes social well-being, favors solutions that are preferred by a wider group of stakeholders, and has a long-term perspective. Like many other indigenous management concepts, *ubuntu* is not limited to the region which it originates from, but may influence global management knowledge as well (Broodryk 2005). For example, Bernard Bass acknowledged that his idea for the concept of transformational leadership arose after talking with a group of South African managers when he visited the country in the 1980s (Hooijberg and Choi 2000; Nkomo 2011).

Another example of indigenous management concepts is *blat* in Russia. Originating in the former Soviet Union, *blat* refers to the use of informal agreements and connections to achieve results or get ahead (Ledeneva 1998; Michailova and Worm 2003; Puffer et al. 2010). From a Western perspective, this is often associated with undermining formal rules and laws, the misuse of public office for private advantage, or even corruption. In Russia, however, *blat* is often seen as a legitimate circumvention of inefficient and rigid formal rules and procedures. Accordingly, Ledeneva (2009, p. 258) describes *blat* as a way of "corrupting the corrupt regime". Although the nature of *blat* has changed after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, it is still an important phenomenon that is relevant for studying various areas of management, such as social capital, consumption, labor markets, entrepreneurship, trust, or barter trade (Ledeneva 2009).

The example of *blat* illustrates that the evaluation of indigenous management concepts depends essentially on the perspective of the researcher. What may seem ineffective, inappropriate, or even illegal from a Western perspective may be regarded as efficient, suitable, and tolerable from a local standpoint. Thus, adequate research methods are needed that reflect the diversity and multiplicity of perspectives and that avoid both, ethical imperialism and ethical relativism.

Methods of Indigenous Management Research

As illustrated above, indigenous management concepts are often not well reflected by universal theories and research methods. In particular, they often do not pay enough attention to the local context and the conditions under which they are applied. Therefore, the development of adequate methods of indigenous management research is required where “the context is explicitly modelled in the study, either as an independent variable or as a moderator variable... (It) involves scientific studies of local phenomena using local language, local subjects, and locally meaningful constructs” (Tsui 2004, p. 501).

The need for contextualizing research methods has been revealed, for example, in a recent study of Pan et al. (2012). Based on the analysis of five major Chinese schools of thought—Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Legalism, and the Art of War—an indigenous model of Chinese cultural traditions was developed. The four-factor Structure of Chinese Cultural Traditions (SCCT) model includes context-specific items such as harmony, reciprocity, non-fight, mercy, concealing weakness, or strategy-attacking. After empirically testing the model, the results were compared with the ten dimensions of the Schwartz Value System (SVS) that is based on generic measures of culture (Schwartz 1992). The results show that the SVS domains explain no more than 16% of the variance in any of the four SCCT factors, i.e., Chinese cultural values cannot be reduced to generic concepts of culture but need to be explored by etic concepts that are able to consider the historical and philosophical context in which they evolved.

Beyond the application of locally meaningful constructs and measures, indigenous management research involves further context-sensitive research methods (Denzin et al. 2008; Chilisa 2011). For example, Smith (2012) emphasizes the need for critical re-reading and deconstruction of stereotypes and ethnocentrism. This implies that scholars avoid simple binary oppositions of Western and indigenous concepts. As Nkomo (2011, p. 378) argues with regard to Africa: “Juxtaposing African culture and Western culture or the past greatness/present backwardness dichotomy reinforces the very binary which colonial and imperial discourse uses to keep the marginalized in subjection.”

Moreover, research should acknowledge that indigenous concepts rarely exist in pure and uniform modes. Emerging markets, such as China, India, or South Africa, are not only characterized by vast intra-cultural differences (e.g., Thomas and Bendixen 2000; Singh and Sharma 2009), but increasingly influenced by other cultures in the course of globalization. For example there is evidence that *guanxi* in China is far more relevant in state-owned firms than in private and foreign-invested enterprises (Su et al. 2003), more salient in Mainland than in overseas China (Gu et al. 2008), and more important for older than for younger individuals (Farh et al. 1998).

One way to avoid over-simplified notions of indigenous management concepts is to include the participants in empirical studies not only in the process of data collection, i.e., as survey respondents, but also in framing research questions, interpreting results, and deriving theoretical and practical conclusions. This kind of participatory research requires that “researcher and participants co-create *what* is said and *how* things are said” (Jackson 2013, p. 18) and means that participants have a high degree of control over the collected data and their interpretation.

This may include more descriptive than prescriptive research (Nkomo 2011) and the use of storytelling (Gabriel 2000; Boje 2008). Stories can be a very powerful way to represent and convey complex ideas and phenomena. In particular, they enable participants to share knowledge with rich tacit dimensions. Since stories are contextually embedded, storytelling allows for consideration of the local context under which management practices are applied. Storytelling is not reduced to naïve sequences of quotations, but adheres to the “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of local phenomena. Geertz’s concept of thick description is based on the position “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (...). Culture (is) those webs, and the analysis of it (is) not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973, p.5). This inevitably implies the inclusion of local voices and their idiosyncratic perspectives.

Finally, indigenous management research may revert to non-verbal methods such as visual ethnography (Pink 2007). Visual ethnography involves an approach that engages with pictures, videos, and other audio-visual media throughout the process of research, analysis, and representation. It is essentially collaborative and participatory, and strongly emphasizes the context of research. Visual ethnography de-centers the written word as the primary source of knowledge and understanding, and proceeds from the belief that culture is also manifested through visible symbols embedded in gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts. It is particularly useful for representing phenomena that are otherwise challenging to articulate, such as feelings, emotions, and unconscious expressions (Stanczak 2007). Moreover, visual media may be applied in high-context cultures where large parts of the information are likely to be lost in the process of translation (Holtbrügge et al. 2013).

Challenges of Indigenous Management Research

One of the greatest challenges of indigenous management research is the lack of well-developed research methods. While the techniques of empirical research and data analysis in international management studies have been tremendously improved in the last years, the majority of these methods do not explicitly emphasize the great variety and idiosyncrasies of research contexts (Leung 2012). As a consequence, researchers conducting indigenous management research have to struggle with content and methods simultaneously.

Related to this is the challenge that widely accepted evaluation criteria of indigenous management research are still missing. As explained above, established criteria of international management research, such as representativeness, cross-cultural validity, etc. may not apply because indigenous research is often interested in analyzing unique, exceptional, and context-specific phenomena. While this leaves much room for innovative research approaches, it should also be kept in mind that not everything that is local is interesting and relevant. As Briggs (2005, p. 107) argues, “there exists a real danger of over-valorising and over-romanticising indigenous knowledge in practice (...). The difficulty then is that indigenous knowledge tends not to be problematised, but is seen as a ‘given’, almost a benign and consensual knowledge, simply waiting to be tapped into.”

Finally, the dominant logic of leading management journals makes it difficult to publish indigenous management research. Editors and reviewers are often reluctant to consider studies that are ‘only’ relevant in a particular context (Leung 2012). Thus, scholars who conduct indigenous management research may find it easier to publish their work in specialized journals edited by researchers from and focusing on emerging markets, such as *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, *International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management*, *Journal of African Business*, *Journal of Indian Business Research*, *Management and Organization Review*, or *Rossiiskij Zhurnal Menedzhmenta* (*Russian Management Journal*). It is important to note, however, that indigenous research is no less relevant than the study of seemingly universal phenomena. On the contrary, Li and Tsui (2002) observed in a literature review of 226 articles on management and organization in the Greater China region published in 20 leading English language academic journals that most of the influential research is of indigenous nature. “In other words, it is the high quality (measured by citations) contextualized research, not the simple replications or studies that test Western models or findings, that have the potential to contribute to global management knowledge” (Tsui 2004, p. 494).

About this Focused Issue

This focused issue of MIR aims to give an overview of the current state of indigenous management research. Out of 40 submissions, six articles were accepted by the guest editors that are spread over a broad range of countries, concepts, and research methods.

The article of *Terence Jackson* focuses on indigenous management concepts in sub-Saharan Africa and examines how these concepts have been shaped by global dynamics. Based on an in-depth analysis of what constitutes indigenous knowledge and values, he develops a research agenda, critical methodology, and research tools for undertaking indigenous research within international and cross-cultural management studies. Jackson calls for a more systematic re-examination of indigenous knowledge and the application of concepts and methodologies from the wider social sciences.

The study of *Jie Wu* analyzes the impact of the institutional environment in emerging markets on firm performance. In particular, the relevance of institutional distance (the degree of dissimilarity between the institutional environment of a firm’s home country and an economy into which it expands) and institutional diversity (the variety of all the institutional environments to which a firm is exposed) is explored. Based on an empirical study among 917 Chinese manufacturing firms in multiple industries the author finds a positive relationship between institutional distance and product innovation success, and an inverted U-shaped relationship between institutional diversity and product innovation success.

Tim Andrews and *Nartnalin Chompusri* examine how, to what extent, and with what effect the indigenous cultural concept of *kreng jai* influences organizational practices (e-communication, performance appraisal, and empowerment) in the Thai subsidiaries of European MNCs. Based on a qualitative methodology, their study shows that generic concepts of culture such as those developed by Hall, Hofstede, or Trompenaars are not able to cover the unique feelings and attitudes which characterize *kreng jai* in an appro-

appropriate way. The authors conclude that foreign companies failing to address the subtle but pervasive facets of indigenous management constructs such as *kreng jai* may find it difficult to develop their business across cultural borders.

Jiatao Li and *Yi Tang* investigate the social influence of executive hubris among peer executives in two different cultural contexts, namely China and the US. Using a large set of survey and archive data the authors find that the relevance of executive hubris is stronger in the Chinese context than in the US. Among Chinese managers, this relationship tends to be moderated by factors indigenous to the Chinese context, i.e., executives in state-owned firms or those who were politically appointed are more strongly influenced by each other than those managing private firms. Based on this result the authors call for more indigenous research on the role of contextual factors in affecting the adoption of socially illegitimate beliefs in organizations.

The exploratory study of *Dana Minbaeva* and *Maral Muratbekova-Touron* analyzes the determinants and characteristics of clanism as an indigenous management concept in Central Asia and its effect on human resource management in Kazakhstan. Interviews with Kazakh, Russian, and Ukrainian managers indicate that the effect of clanism is strong in state-owned and moderate in privately held companies, while it is weak in foreign subsidiaries. Furthermore, the influx of western MNCs influences human resource management in Kazakhstan in general. The authors conclude that the study of indigenous management concepts should not only focus on national culture, but take into account other macro-level factors, such as the pace of transition, the presence of FDI, the history of colonialism, and demographic composition.

The last article, of *Florian Becker-Ritterspach* and *Tico Raaijman*, focuses on management practices in India which are often described as a blend of traditional Indian concepts and selected global approaches. Based on a case study of the German car maker Daimler in India, the authors complement the prevalent contemporary hybridization perspective of Indian management with a historical hybridity heuristic which is informed by postcolonial theory. They argue that a historical hybridity perspective offers a richer understanding of local mismatches and outcomes of global practice transfers by extending simple indigenous-Western or indigenous-global dichotomies.

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