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The Influence of Collectivism in Society and its Implications for Research on Information Systems and National Culture

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Abstract

This paper argues that the nature of IS research that deals with indigenous culture must be informed as much by context as it is by culture models, which has been the focus of such research in the past. This is considered important because it better reflects the meaning of the data collected for the researcher. To appreciate the importance of context this papers also argues that research subjects from designated individualist societies will inform the researcher in different ways from those subjects located in collectivist societies. To illustrate the practical implications of this argument the paper reports three separate case studies in IS research where the researchers reflect on the impact that a collectivist view has had on the research findings. The paper suggests that (1) similar ethnicity and appearance are significant in gaining the trust of subjects in a collectivist society; that is the researcher is part of the in-group as they belong to the same culture or ethnic group; that (2) who introduced the researcher to the subject is significant in that trust is best reflected when a member of the group/collective plays an important role in the research process itself; and that (3) an ability to (a) communicate in the natural language and (b) understand the implicit body language and (c) cultural codes is important in gaining significant and more meaningful research outcomes. This is enabled via the implicit meanings embedded in members of the collectivist society.

Keywords

Collectivism, National Culture, IS Research, Relationships and Trust in a Collective Society

Introduction

This paper will highlight the research methodological, paradigmatic issues surrounding information systems research in collectivist societies. This is important because research aims to identify similarity and differences as we develop theories. This recognizes the dilemma raised by Osgood et al. (1957) that it is important to realise that a given word, object or expression means different things to different people. In some cases there may be a shared
same meaning between two or more people, and in other cases there may be a completely different meaning.

Interest in the impact of national culture is increasingly becoming a feature in Information Systems literatures. Culture research in information systems has been researched by many authors including significant work by Corbitt and Thanasankit and has expanded into many areas such as e-commerce (Corbitt and Thanasankit, 2001; Peszynski and Thanasankit, 2002), requirements engineering (Thanasankit, 2002; Thanasankit and Corbitt, 2000), group support systems (Tan et. al. 1998), management of information systems and technology (Chieochan et. al. 2002), and IT and IS policy (Corbitt and Thanasankit, 2002). Dominating the analyses in each of these papers is Hofstede’s (1991) assertions about cultural behavior. In addition each of these papers invariably is a systematic application of one or more of the dimensions, which constitute that model. These dimensions are power distance, femininity versus masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism versus individualism, and time – long-term versus short-term orientation.

This paper is concerned with the over-emphasis of research on one of those dimensions, individualism and how that emphasis represents a distortion of the reality because some cultures are better seen as collective rather than individual in their behavior. This begs a view that the research methods used to collect data in those cultures should address that situation. Such an alternative representation has not been used in IS research so far. Individuals researchers either survey individuals within a cultural setting about an IS issue or undertake interviews one-on-one. This ignores natural settings in collectivist societies where people actually work and make decisions in a collectivist way, informed by group norms, group practices, social norms and social practice. Each person expresses the values of that collective, and speaks as a collective. Collectivist societies are also about the collectives rather than the ‘I’ of individualism.

This paper also argues for an approach to the study of cultural impact which goes some way to address the criticism of IS culture research proposed by Myers and Tan (2002). They suggest that “IS researchers interested in conducting research on culture and global information systems should adopt a more dynamic view of culture – one that see cultures as contested, temporal and emergent” (Myers and Tan 2002: 24). To be able to contest and explore culture research in information systems at a deeper level, researchers also need to implement a suitable technique of gathering research data.

**Collectivist Society**

Collectivism is concerned with group interest rather than individual interest (individualism) (Hofstede, 1991). Collectivist societies usually support structures where people are born and live in extended families (Hofstede, 1991). The concept of community in a collective society is based on collective strength, which includes sharing, nurturing, supporting and empowering of interdependent groups. Relationships between subordinates and superiors are perceived in moral terms, like family links. Decision-making, management and promotions are based on group performance (Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars, 1993). In order to understand the impact of collectivism, researchers who work in such societies:

- should pay attention to every group member and notice the behaviour which takes place;
- should develop long term relationships with collectivists;
- should not criticise collectivists in public making them lose face; and
• should take note of collectivists status hierarchies (Seelye and Seelye-James, 1996).

In researching collective society information systems, it is important for the researcher to be aware of and understand the nature of the culture and society that they are studying. It could also be suggested that the researcher immerse themselves in the context and culture they are studying. However, immersion or concentration in a society involves a clear understanding of what is happening, understanding the culture norms and the relationships which are both explicit and implicit in that society. Developing theory in information systems research in a collectivist society will then be informed by different sets of understandings from those more normally drawn from individualist society studies, the most common output in the IS literature. This then suggests we need to examine the research paradigms we use and modify them to gain a clearer and richer level of research outcome and theory development. Although one cannot expect a researcher to completely modify their cultural orientation, it may be sufficient to make their research perspectives or paradigms explicitly known.

Information systems research has flexible approaches in selecting research methods. The discipline itself now has accepted both quantitative and qualitative methods as valid research methods for IS research when implemented and selected properly (Gable, 1994; Galliers, 1992; Kaplan and Duchon, 1988; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). Selecting a research method is dependent on the nature of the research and its suitability for the subject that researchers want to study (Yin, 1994). However, we would argue that the nature of the research paradigm must also reflect the nature of the society that is being studied. The research methodology appropriate in an individualist society like the US may be inappropriate and will have to be modified to meet the demands of the same study in a collectivist society. Whilst the information systems might have an apparent similarity at one level, understanding what informs it, how it operates and, most importantly, how it is used, will be informed by different sets of cultural understandings and social relationships, according not only to specific national culture, but also the way that culture and the people in it operate. The relationships within groups and between groups in a collectivist society will inform the research in different ways. How will this be different from individual informants?

We would suggest that behaviours in collectivist societies are more explicit, more rehearsed and performed ritually, such as powhiri (Māori welcoming chants, songs and dances) and haka (Māori war dances). In an individualist society individuals accept behaviours as implied. This is similar to Giddens’ (1984) classification of discursive behaviours (behaviours that can be defined as to what to do and when it is appropriate to do it), and practical behaviours (behaviours that are just “done”). For example group relationships, a stronger group is formed not just in common interest but also extended into friendship for life. Measuring group performance by quantitative methods may not give a rich picture as to how these relationships are created and what affect they may have on an output.

This paper suggests an alternative research method for studies of IS and national culture, where the subject/s belong to a collectivist society, particularly where relationships between researchers and the subjects play an important role in gaining valid and insight information as they meld into the research process.

Developing Relationships and Trust in a Collectivist Society

The following three case studies/vignettes represent an analysis of research in collectivist societies, and are reflection by the researchers of how they were able to deal with the collectivist nature of those societies. The first case study investigates Thai culture and
requirements engineering and was completed by a Thai researcher (classified as a member of a collective society). The second case study looks at Maori culture and factors that either hinder or aid the Maori Internet use to shop online and was completed by a New Zealand European researcher (classified as a member of an individualist society). The third case study explores success factors in information exchanges in development projects, and was completed by an Australian researcher (also classified as a member of an individualist society). Further information on the case studies can be found below and in the appropriate references.

**Case study 1 – Investigation of the requirements elicitation process in Thai software houses**

This research aimed to explore the influence of Thai culture on the process of requirements elicitation (Thanasankit and Corbitt, 1999; Thanasankit 2002). The methodology employed in this research was an ethnographic study. Contact was made with the participants by the researcher networking with friends and their connections. After obtaining the list of possible participants, the researcher was required to approach the CEO of each of the organisation for permission to conduct the research. The approval of the project from the CEO was the most critical part. The commitment from the CEO with the research can then be passed down and become an instruction to, or part of, the employee’s duty to be part of this research. The head of the software development section assigned project groups for the researcher to be part of and invited the researcher to join their teams for this investigation. Most of the CEOs approached by the researcher were enthusiastic about the research, especially where the researcher was introduced to the CEO by the Head of Department or by the CEO’s family or friends. The influence of immediate family and friends of the CEO was important as it increased the trust of the CEO’s towards the research, indicating that the research was genuinely academic and significant. The researcher also approached some software houses directly without knowing any insiders. Normally, the requests were not answered or declined. The data was gathering by interviewing the Thai systems analysts.

The study also found that as a Thai researcher, becoming part of the team was much easier as there was no language barrier. The groups also took the researcher to be part of their team as they trusted the researcher’s ability to do the research. The Head of their department and the CEO also recommended the researcher to them.

The importance of this research was to investigate the role of Thai culture in requirements elicitation for information systems development. However, it was obviously demonstrated that a Thai person would be well suited for this task. The cultural difference dimensions identified by Hofstede (1991) were also used to identify the characteristics of a collective culture (power distance, femininity vs. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism vs. individualism and time). There are also many unique Thai values and behaviours that would be very difficult to explain and describe in words. However, by employing a Thai researcher for this research, the researcher not only explored the requirements elicitation processes but also identified some Thai cultural values that influenced the processes investigated. Those unique values were interpreted by the Thai researcher from the participant’s behaviour and words used during the discussion and interview.

Thai culture is identified as a collectivist society. Becoming part of the project team was important in gaining trust from the members. Trusting the researcher provided him with not only in-depth information, but also richer information because of the researcher’s cultural understanding of word use and implicit behaviours. Trust also provided the researcher with better quality of data by gaining real information rather the participants telling the researcher
what they thought he wanted to hear. It was difficult to justify this argument, however, as many times the participants often used the following phrases:

- “You know as you are Thai and I am Thai we know what we are talking about, right?”
- “I trust you as you are Thai and you know what I mean.”

Thais normally show their feelings through their body language, especially the way a Thai smiles. There is a well known phrase saying that Thais have more than 100 meanings when they smile, such as a smile representing happy, a smile representing frustration, and a smile representing ‘I don’t know’. Researchers who do not understand Thai culture and body language would normally overlook these smiles. Therefore, the real meaning of the participants’ response may be misinterpreted by researchers who do not have a genuine understanding of the Thai culture, values and language.

As Thailand is best described as a collectivist society it was important that the researcher become part of the research group/collective. I found that as a Thai I did become part of all the project teams that I studied because I am Thai and there were no barriers between the participants and myself. I also received a very high level of trust from the participants and was able to gain a very insight data for the research. I would doubt that a foreign researcher would be able to gather the same quality of data, where many implicit messages were sent through different modes such specific word and phases, slangs, facial expressions and gestures. In essence as a researcher I became part of the research group not only through an understanding of implicit behaviour, but also through being introduced into the group, creating the necessary levels of trust to better collect and interpret data.

Case Study 2 – B2C eCommerce and the Māori Internet shopper

The Māori community (in New Zealand) is classed as a collectivist society, that is, they depend heavily on their relationships with immediate family members (whanau) and tribal (iwi) elders (Gregory, 2001). The primary purpose of the study (Peszynski and Thanasankit, 2002) was to understand how the current literature concerning trust and Internet shopping applies to the Māori Internet shopper. The study also aimed to uncover some understanding of the associated factors that either help or inhibit Māori from shopping on the Internet. A qualitative, interpretive approach was adopted for this study as the researcher was interested in participants’ perception of trust and Internet shopping. Eight one-on-one, face-to-face interviews were required with Māori that had purchased online at least once in order to identify these perceptions. Further information on the methodology employed can be found in Peszynski and Thanasanki (2002). It was found that trust and respect is earned through the status of the individual in relation to their whanau (family), iwi (tribe) or hapu (sub-tribe). The study confirmed that Māori carry the norms of collective societies and are likely to help and trust people in their in-group, as opposed to someone outside of their family and tribe structure.

Although there are some obvious limitations to the Peszynski and Thanasankit (2002) study, there are also other not-so-obvious limitations in terms of credibility and validity. As the primary researcher in the case study, one of the major limitations was being non-Māori. Having a strong European name and having different looks (skin tones, facial appearances) can create apprehension in terms of the interviewer-interviewee relationship. That is, as the researcher, am I hearing what the interviewee thinks I want to hear? Or am I hearing the truth? This is not an easy question to answer and there are many variables that affect this relationship.
However, even though I have a European name, I was born and raised in New Zealand. Throughout my education (primary, secondary and tertiary) we were taught various Māori values, traditions, customs and language. As a result, I do have some understanding of the Māori culture. This gives me an upper hand compared to an overseas researcher interacting with Māori for the first time. I tried to use this to my advantage in the interviewing process – for example, I tried to incorporate Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) where I felt it was appropriate, without being patronising. I also used the guidelines established by OPRA Limited (1998:18) – that the interviewer can increase the respect and interest with the Māori interviewee by “facing the interviewee when sitting and maintaining good eye contact by way of spontaneous glances to express interest”. Interviews were also performed face-to-face, which, according to Light (1999), is the preferred medium for Māori as it creates a trusting relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Even though I do not share the same feeling of Māori nationalism, we do share a slightly different commonality, New Zealand nationalism.

As stated earlier, I am not identified as Māori. Therefore, I do not have the “connections” that is a feature of the Māori culture. According to Patterson (2000:232), “in Māori eyes a person without family is scarcely a person at all, and the mana of any member of a family extends to all members". Mana is a (supernatural) power that can be present in a person, place, object, or spirit. It is commonly understood as prestige, power, or authority. The connections are about relationships to people and to place (Patterson, 2000; Light, 1999).

If I were Māori, then I would belong to a Whanau (family). However, this is just a primary level of connections. If you are a member of a family, then you will also belong to a hapu, or sub-tribe/extended family. A third level of connection incorporates the tribe (iwi) that family belongs to. New Zealand has been divided into different tribal zones (Rohe, which include: Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Tahu/Kāi Tahu, Waikato, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Tūhoe, Ngāti Maniapoto, Te Atiawa, Ngāti Awa) (Statistics New Zealand, 2002). The fourth level of connections is waka affiliation (the founding canoe), which is the top-level of Māori connections. Not being Māori may have proven to be a problem as I might not have received the same information as a Māori interviewer.

There are disadvantages to studying a culture of which the researcher is not a member. The case study critiqued here was the Peszynski and Thanasankit (2002) study, which looked at shopping issues for the Māori Internet shopper. For better validity, perhaps the study needs to be replicated, this time, carried out by a Māori researcher.

**Case Study 3 – Information in Development projects in NE Thailand**

In an investigation of critical success factors in information exchanges in development projects in Issan (North East Thailand) (Corbitt and Thanasankit, 1996, Corbitt, 1996a and 1996b) the research method adopted accepted two elements. Firstly there was a need to accept that the research process was to be informed substantially not only by the nature of Thai culture, but by the influence of the ethnicity of the Issan region where Khmer and Lao speakers also occur, usually aggregated in specific villages. So whilst one of the researchers was Thai, there was also a need to include additional speakers of Lao and Khmer into the research process. Secondly, the communal (collective) nature of the villages and the region meant that the researchers themselves were not able to just go and collect the data. Being a sponsored project the researchers had to work initially through the office of the sponsoring agency, PDA, which was Thai. In addition the researchers had to get permission from each of the pu yai, village headmen and then from each interviewee.
However this process had to be facilitated by someone who was an insider in the collective. This was an employee of the sponsor organisation and it was only through her contacts as a member of one of the villages that access was obtained. It became apparent in the research process that the collection of data, and thus its validity also, relied on the position of this person in that collective society. It was the inherent trust given to her by the villagers that enabled the researchers to conduct the interviews. In a sense, the interviews became part of the collective ritual. The researchers, the intermediary and the interviewees engaged in the discussion/interview process in the fields sitting around a communal location, engaged in as much ‘social and collective’ activity as ‘collection of data’ activity. Whilst this process was initially never planned for by the researchers, it became an essential component of what had to happen. It became very apparent to the researchers that the villagers saw collective advantage from participation and that they gained some status by participation. Having a collective interview for each interviewee was the accepted way that they saw that they could engage.

This brief vignette is used to illustrate that the collective society engages within, and with itself, and with the outside world, in different ways from the individualist world. As researchers we must seek the truth in the data and information we collect. If that needs to be informed by a collectivist methodology then we should strive to do that. This will not only enrich what we find from the data, it will add additional layers of meaning to the information and make its applicability to those researched more useful.

Discussion

The three case studies/vignettes above highlighted the issues of the impact of cultural differences on research data collection faced by the researchers. These issues arose within the context that one of the researchers was Thai, studying Thai, another was Western studying Māori, and the third was Western studying Thai. In each case, the culture of the researcher was reflected not only in the interview, but also in the interpretation of the data. The informing of meaning created in this context was implicit in the collectivist nature of each of the societies examined. For example, the 100 meanings of Thai smiles, and the ability for the participant to state: “You know as you are Thai and I am Thai we know what we are talking about, right?” and “I trust you as you are Thai and you know what I mean.” No explicit mention of meaning was necessary between the Thai participant and the Thai researcher, as they both belonged to the same collectivist society. As a result, each researcher was cognisant of the impact of the collectivist influence on each of the research subjects. This is reflected in the discussion above.

The issues that emerged were, firstly, that similar ethnicity and appearance were significant in gaining the trust of the subjects. Secondly, who introduced the researcher to the subject was significant in that trust was best reflected when a member of the group/collective played an important role in the research process itself. Thirdly, an ability to communicate in the natural language and understand the implicit body language and cultural codes was also found to be very important in gaining significant data in each of the studies.

The ability to understand and communicate is enabled via the implicit meanings embedded in members of the collectivist society. That is, although members of collectivist societies are brought up with values, customs and traditions, it is felt that there is no need to communicate these values, particularly when they are communicating with another member of their society. Thais know the difference between a happy smile and an angry smile when they see another Thai smile, they do not explicitly have to state that they are happy or they are angry.
It is this information and meaning individualists lose as they are not part of the collectivist society.

Research then, we would argue, has to be informed by more than context as Yin (1994) suggested and by more than national culture as many other authors have suggested. It also has to be informed by the nature of national culture and the way that people within in that culture form relationships and interact with each other. In a sense we are suggesting that the research paradigm is as much about context and differentiated culture as it is about quantitative versus qualitative methodologies. Future IS research that seeks to reflect upon the role of national culture needs not only to understand culture differences, culture models and research methodology, it also needs to reflect upon the context in which the research is done, that is, whether the respondents in the research are reflecting an individualist or collectivist view. Only in that way, will we better understand the real role of indigenous culture and produce results that inform a richer understanding of the way information systems are developed and used.

References


