Volume 13 Issue 24
Originally issued as A8

Global Journal of Management and Business Research
Administration and Management
Volume 13 Issue 8 Version 1.0 Year 2013
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-4588 & Print ISSN: 0975-5853

The Applicability of Western Management Science in Iran: A Retrospective Critique of a "Culture-Free" Research Study for Today's Management Scholars and Educators

By Hamid Akbari
Northeastern Illinois University, United States

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GJMBR-A Classification : *JEL Code: P36*

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The Applicability of Western Management Science in Iran: A Retrospective Critique of a "Culture-Free" Research Study for Today's Management Scholars and Educators

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Abstract - This paper presents a retrospective critique of my own survey research conducted more than three decades ago in Tehran, Iran. The main finding of the research was that the managers of small companies in Iran had failed to implement the principles of western scientific management in their companies. A summary of the research and its results are presented. A social constructionist critique of the research and its approach is made as a cautionary note to those who continue to advance western theories of management and organizations as universal, "culture-free" and objective facts in non-western countries.

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I. Introduction

About three decades ago, when I was an undergraduate management major student at the College of Mass Communication Sciences in Tehran, Iran, I conducted a survey research to answer the following question: "Why are the principles of western scientific management not implemented in Iranian business firms?" Basically, by confirming my hypotheses, I found that scientific management principles are not implemented because: 1) most of the managers lack any or a sufficient formal education in western oriented management and economics; 2) since small companies - due to Iran's oil-based economy and unrestricted flow of oil revenues into her economy - obtain sufficient or excessive profits, their managers lack any motivation to implement the principles of scientific management.

Obviously, given that I was only an undergraduate student at that time, confirming my hypotheses, or rather failing to reject them as the scientific method calls for it, was personally a satisfying conclusion. However, since then, both historical developments in Iran– most notably the Iranian revolution of 1979, and my personal exposure to alternative perspectives on studying organizations and management as social phenomena (e.g., Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Hirsch and Boal, 2000; Bowring, 2000), have often made me to reflect upon the way I was educated to think about the applicability of western management science in Iran as exemplified by my research then. This retrospective reflection continues to preoccupy me three decades later as I continue to see research articles, especially in the realm of quantitative methods, which attempt to advance the "universality" and "culture free" application of western management theories and models in other countries, including Iran (e.g., Walton, 2005). Thus, I hope this article will serve as an academic cautionary note to the researchers, especially the young researchers from non-western countries, who may begin or continue to believe in the applicability of western management science in their countries.

a) Organization and Management as "Culture-Free" and "Universal"

The main reason for undertaking this critique is the persistence of including culture free studies of Iranian organization and their management in mainstream research on management topics, including organizational structure and leadership. In a number of studies in the 1980s (Conaty, Mahmoudi, and Miller, 1983; Miller and Mahmoudi, 1986), Miller and his associates applied the "culture-free" argument advanced by the proponents of the Aston studies of organization structure (Pugh et. al., 1968; McMillan et. al., 1973; Pugh and Hickson, 1976) and Miller himself (Miller, 1987) to Iranian organizations. They concluded: "The results of this research indicate that organizational theory, which had its conceptual and empirical base in the West, can be effectively generalized to non-Western nations. Theoretical models of organizational structure are clearly relevant to the Third World, and the remarkable similarity of the causal estimates obtained herein suggests that the theory and research concerned with organizational characteristics may well be supernational. The pattern of relationships subsumed under the culture free hypothesis looks much the same in industrialized and developing nations (Conaty et. al., pp. 122-123)." In 2005, Walton undertook a meta-analysis of Weber's model of bureaucratic control, including Miller's studies on Iranian organizations and other non-western countries and concluded that Weber's model has withstood the test of time and changing conditions and remains a valid "culture-free"

Author : Northeastern Illinois University. E-mail : hakbari@neiu.edu

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model across societies. Miller and Sharda (2000) take a critical look back at Miller and Mahmoudi's (1986) "culture-free" study of Iranian organizations. While Miller and Sharda conclude that the cases of Iran and Jordan show that some aspects of organization structure are "culture bound," they continue to maintain that their research results "indicate that theoretical models of organization structure are clearly relevant to societies other than the United States (p. 326)."

More recently, Javidan and Carl (2004) undertake an apparently similar culture-free cross-cultural study of leadership in Iran. Their study finds that Iranian and Canadian samples list the same features for a charismatic leader, including vision, tenacity, self-sacrifice and eloquence. In a different study, Javidan and Carl (2005) find a common set of terms used by Canadian and Taiwanese managers to describe their immediate supervisors. Indeed, it is extra-ordinary to find these commonalities in samples between a western and two non-western countries. Yet, it is equally extra-ordinary to note that Tsui and her associates (2007, p. 441) report of these two studies and observe: "Neither studies measured culture." In these studies, we see "culture-free" universal applications of management models and theories developed in the West in Iran and other non-western countries.

In this article, I provide a retrospective critique of my research in order to add my voice to that of others who reject the idea of universal and culture free applicability of western management models to countries such as Iran. The premise of my critique is that organizations are to be studied as socially constructed phenomena (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1966), which, as such, are not "culture-free." From this, I will question the practical validity of the claims to the applicability of western models of management and organizations to Iran, as an example, and I propose developing native theories of management for Iran and other non-western countries.

Before proceeding to my critique, it should be noted that the following research summary is presented so that the reader has an opportunity to learn more about the research procedure and methodology. However, my critique of the research mainly concerns the rationale and general approach and questions leading to the research and its outcomes. This critique does not address the validity of specific research methods, questions, measures, and results.

II. Research Summary

I undertook the research based on the assumption that in general the principles of scientific management - as specified by Taylor (1947), Fayol (1949), and Weber (1947), and translated in Farsi by Parhizgar (1974)- are not implemented in small companies of Iran. I, then, hypothesized three causes for not having scientific management principles implemented in Iran: 1) lack of formal western based management education and expertise of the managers in small Iranian companies; 2) low level of general education of the managers; 3) ease of generating excessive profits, which served as a disincentive for a need to implement the scientific management principles. A twelve item questionnaire was designed to test the three hypotheses of the study. Questionnaire items were designed to represent the underlying nominal and ordinal measurement scales. The questionnaires were administered to a random sample of 45 managers of small businesses located in an area in central Tehran. The data collected was subjected to frequency and Chi-Square statistical analysis. Results of the analysis and my interpretation of them indicated that the principles of scientific management, i.e., planning, control and supervision, coordination, organizing, and unity of command, were not implemented in the majority of the small companies surveyed. It was also concluded that the two main causes were: a) lack of formal western management education, and b) the existence of excessive profits serving as a disincentive for implementing the principles of scientific management in small Iranian businesses.

III. Critique of the Research

Looking back at my research after three decades, I am convinced that when I undertook the study, I was a firm believer in the applicability of western scientific management principles in Iran. In my research, I treated the principles of scientific management as "culture-free," universally applicable, and desirable. Therefore, I undertook an investigation that was bound to conclude that the scientific principles of management are not implemented in Iranian organizations. In other words, by treating the principles as universal facts and laws and "culture-free," I engaged in a research that was in fact a perfect practice in self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now, for the most part, I have long lost my faith in that belief. Like then, I still maintain that there is an immense degree of academic and educational value in the works done by the western thinkers and researchers of management, and studying their works is essential for advancing the study and practice of management in Iran and elsewhere. However, I do not think that a non-western manager can uncritically apply the western management theories as organizational solutions to her country and accept either the "culture-free" or universal applicability of these theories.

Then, unlike now, I did not subscribe to the notion or paradigmatic belief that all reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). At the time of research, I believed that the nature of social sciences, similar to physical sciences, renders itself to the generation of "general laws" or "social facts," and is, therefore, applicable to most situations everywhere. Indeed, being raised in a culture which generally

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bestows lower status on any educational and occupational field other than that of medicine or engineering, I can retrospectively see how I was engaged in a struggle with myself and others to prove that my chosen field of study (i.e., management) is also "scientific." Thus, as exemplified by my research then, my belief in the objective nature of the social reality let me treat social laws and facts (e.g., the principles of scientific management) as universal, "culture free,' and binding on all organizations everywhere, including Iran. The following brief discussion about the nature of reality should illuminate my point.

IV. Nature of Reality

In the terminology of the philosophy of science, the question of nature of reality is an issue of "ontology" (see Table 1). Thus, individuals (e.g., researchers) may differ from one another with respect to their ontological assumptions. A basic objective vs. subjective view of the nature of reality constitutes a dichotomy of difference between individuals (see Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The adherents of objective ontology believe that the nature of reality is hard, factual, and objective. They believe that these hard and factual realities govern and determine the structure of social relations in society. The objectivists struggle to discover general laws that would explain all human behaviors across settings and countries. These general social laws and facts are advanced as if they are detached from and are above and beyond the reach of the individuals who are constrained by them. Thus, an assumption of objective ontology implies that social facts are given to, and are not made by, the social actors.

The adherents of subjective ontology, on the other hand, believe that the nature of reality is neither objective nor hard, but rather socially constructed. For them, there are no general laws or facts given to the actors in society, and human beings, through their very actions and behaviors, construct all social realities. It is through individuals' actions and interactions that they mutually typify meaning, and thus subjectively construct facts and laws that later become binding on them and others in society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In short, from a subjectivist point of view, the nature of reality is subjective, made up by the social actors and not an objective reality independent of them. Thus, the question of the applicability of western management science in Iran is a matter of one's ontological assumption.

Table 1 : Ontology of Nature of Reality

Objective View of Reality	Subjective View of Reality
Social Facts Are:	Social Fact Are:
Hard and Absolute	Soft and Relative
Given to Actors	Made by Actors
Detached from Actors	Attached to the Actors
Independent from Actors' Actions	Produced by Actors' Actions
Can be Discovered	Are Invented

V. The Question of Applicability

Based on the assumption of an objective reality, my research in 1977, was a reasonable study. Because, if it was known that in an ideal western society, efficient organizations implement the principles of scientific management, then it was logical to study whether the same principles are implemented in Iranian organizations. And since my observation was that these principles are not generally implemented in small Iranian organizations, then it was further logical to set up some hypotheses to explain for this observation. Thus, it was my objective view of reality that led me to treat the principles of scientific management as applicable in Iran, which became the primary guiding force in developing my main research question: "Why are the principles of (western) scientific management not implemented in small Iranian organizations?" Table 2 shows the path from my ontological assumption to my research conclusions.

Retrospectively, a social constructionist perspective, most likely, would not have led me to the same conclusions. From a social constructionist point of view, first I should have made an attempt to find out whether the principles of scientific management and the norm of efficiency have any cultural meaning or sense of reality to the managers in Iranian organizations. If I found out that they bear no cultural meaning to the manager, then I should have attempted to find out whether there are any cultural substitutes for the principles of scientific management in Iranian organizations. For investigating the meanings of socially constructed realities, I should not have used a quantitative approach, like the one I did. I should have used a qualitative approach, such as participant observation, through which I would have had an opportunity to become more familiar with the organizational realities in Iran, and to evaluate whether testing for the existence of the principles of management in Iran is applicable at all.

Table 2 : The Path from my Ontological Assumptions to My Research Conclusions

1) My belief in the objective nature of reality (Ontological Assumption).
2) Believing in the existence of general laws.
3) Treating principles of Scientific Management as universally applicable general laws.
4) Believing that if organizations want to be efficient, they must implement the principles of scientific management.
5) Observing that most Iranian organizations do not implement the principles of scientific management.
6) Hypothesizing that managers fail to implement the principles due to:
a) Lacking formal management education and expertise in western scientific management, which makes them unaware of the general laws of scientific management.
b) The existence of sufficient/excessive profits, which prevents managers from discovering the general laws of scientific management.
7) Testing and proving the hypotheses.

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VI. Implications for Management Education in a Global and Intercultural Context

Globalization is increasingly a prevailing condition of world affairs, including business and management education. The preamble of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2007, p.3) Standards document starts with the recognition of three global and intercultural challenges facing business education:

> Complex demands on management and accountting education mirror the demands on organizations and managers. Challenges come from:
> Strong and growing global economic forces
> Differences in organizational and cultural values
> Cultural diversity among employees and customers

Towards meeting these current challenges, over the past two decades, a considerable ground has been covered in bringing in materials, mainly in the form of examples and cases, related to international business across business and management curriculum. However, from a practical standpoint, the entire terrain of dominant theories of management has not been internationalized in their essence. Currently, as a customary method in business education, the student of business and management is principally taught the traditional western management methods of managing organizations, though also informed about the cultural differences and examples across countries. A typical organizational behavior textbook such as that of Kinikci and Kreitner (2006), while including a considerable coverage of the international and intercultural examples and topics, still presents a western oriented set of theories as the fundamental management approaches.

Indeed, the "culture free" notion of western management theories is quite prevalent (e.g., Redding, 1994; Walton, 2005). This claim is shown by Tsui and her associates (2007) in their thorough review of 93 empirical cross-national and cross-cultural organizational behavior articles published in the leading management journals from 1996 to 2005. To their "astonishment," Tsui and her associates find (p. 460), "The fundamental concept of culture has not been systematically examined, nor has the proliferation of cultural frameworks…" Thus, they make a number of recommendations for involving the inclusion of culture as a group and dynamic phenomenon in the design of future studies.

My research from three decades ago exemplifies the state of affairs as identified by Tsui and her associates. Today's western management educated practitioner learns about the cultural differences. However, she continues to be exposed to the management theories as culture-free. From my research experience and the present state of the field, I propose the main challenge of global and intercultural management education is not a greater coverage of international and intercultural information and knowledge. While this might be an important component, the main challenge is rather to educate international management students and practitioners so that they understand the native cultures and approaches to management in a non-western country how non-western societies construct organizational realities and phenomena in accordance to their native traditions and practices. Such a knowledge and understanding would in turn enable students and practitioners of management to assess the viability and the extent to which western management science is applicable to a particular non-western country.

My research experience as well as the findings and observations of other prominent writers in the field (e.g., Tsui et. al., 2007) point to the necessity of developing indigenous or country-specific management theory building and research studies. The main idea in this area should not be finding out how a given western-originated theory works in different cultures (Ofori-Dankwa & Ricks, 2000). That is the current method of education and research. The main idea should be to develop native and local understanding and theories of management as they are and continue to be socially constructed. This is a major recommendation made by Tsui (2004) and her associates (2007).

As for the educators and scholars who are well versed in the western management theories, they need to relinquish or minimize their commitment to the western theories of management in researching for native ones. In this way, the western educated scholar of management should take on the role of an explorer. And such an exploration cannot be achieved through detached statistical methods. It requires relying on ethnographic and qualitative methodology in general (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) and grounded theory methodology in particular (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). The main objective of Grounded theory methodology is theory generation and refinement.

VII. Summary

In this paper, I have argued that the applicability of western principles of management in Iran and elsewhere is questionable. I used a critique of my own research to illustrate the point of my argument. I concluded that the case for the applicability of western management science In Iran, as a non-western country, begins from the premise that the nature of reality is objective. From this premise, some Iranian scholars subscribe to the notion that all reality can be captured in the form of "culture free" general laws and facts, and can be measured by objective statistical methods.

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I also argued that the case against the applicability of western science of management is premised based on the ontological assumption of the nature of reality as subjective and socially constructed. Based on this premise, an Iranian scholar, exemplifying a non-western researcher, is reminded that the western construction of reality does not necessarily present the absolute reality for studying and practicing management in Iranian organizations.

I highlighted my personal research experience as I observed the continued prevalence of "culture free" application of western management practices and theories. Therefore, I hope this article serves as a cautionary note to young scholars and educators of management from non-western countries against the uncritical and "culture-free" application of western theories and approaches of management to their countries, and as call for allocating more time and effort in developing native or local theories and techniques. However, this should not in any way be construed as questioning the worth of western management theories and practices in terms of their academic value. Neither should their practical value be discounted in a western context. Rather, it is their "culture-free" application that was the main point of contention in this article.

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