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Contents

Cultural Research in the Production and Operations Management Field

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ABSTRACT

We summarize and categorize Operations Management (OM) research on two inter-related types of "culture": exogenous, or national culture and endogenous, or organizational culture. OM cultural research is far less than one percent of total OM research. We posit that of that small amount, much of OM cultural research is based on numerical approaches that have questionable validity. Qualitative work is highlighted. In addition to being a guide for research, this article is meant to provide substantive examples for teaching the importance of culture in OM.

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1

Introduction

"I don't get it. Why should culture matter?"

This question was posed by a tenured professor of Operations Management (OM) at a top 100 world business school. It was not rhetorical. The context is that he truly believed culture simply did not matter in OM. This is not an unusual viewpoint. Our methods and even our basic goals serve to blind OM academics to cultural effects. We believe there are some excellent reasons for OM researchers, at a minimum, to be aware of culture. Better yet, we would like to see faculty develop the passion to pursue the under-researched relationship between culture and OM.

Certainly, theory can be advanced by studying culture and OM. However, the link to practice is particularly strong. Understanding culture is vital to actually implementing OM theory in business practice. All our journals proclaim a main goal of improving practice. In the inaugural issue of *Production and Operations Management* (POM), the editor-in-chief (Singhal, 1992, p. 1) stated "our objective in publishing this journal is to improve practice." "Practice-driven research" remains a key objective for POM (Singhal *et al.*, 2014). The "journal editorial statement" for *Management Science* likewise states that "(a)n

acceptable manuscript must be relevant to the practice of management" (INFORMS, 2017). "The mission of *Journal of Operations Management* is to publish . . . research that demonstrates both academic and practical relevance" (Elsevier, 2017). The editor-in-chief of *Manufacturing & Service Operations Management* wrote an entire article on the need for OM research to be more relevant to practice, decrying our current state and answering the following question (and article section title) negatively: "(i)s OM research relevant to practitioners?" (Tang, 2015, p. 179).

In sum, the OM community states that improving practice is central. Consider the evidence on the centrality of culture to practical application.

In 1994, *Management Science* dedicated a special issue to the question "Is management science international?" The special issue editors concluded that

> (w)e find language, culture and fundamental beliefs are important . . . Truly universal rules are very few . . . Technical, closed models are more universally valid than social, open models; however, the technical closed may not be universally relevant as a normative managerial solution.
>
> (Aharoni and Burton, 1994, pp. 1–2)

A list of 46 potential "barriers to international manufacturing" were sent to a world-wide group of experts by Klassen and Whybark (1994, table 2). The #1 barrier was "culture/language differences." A survey on services offshoring (Lewin and Peeters, 2006, p. 227) found that the most cited "risk of offshoring" was "quality of service," with "lack of cultural fit" second. The practitioner survey of Crane *et al.* (2007) found that "culture problems" were the most cited "major problem" in offshoring service operations. To be blunt, if we believe our math models and precise calculations can be implemented without considering culture, the only people we are fooling are ourselves.

Additionally, businesses now find themselves dealing with cultures outside their own to a greater extent than at any time in history. In 1970, 27% of world GDP involved foreign trade. In 2017 that figure is 72%.

The US in particular is a physically large country with considerable domestic business, which insulates it somewhat from national cultural contact, but foreign trade is 27% of GDP in 2016, up from 11% in 1970 (World Bank, 2019). OM practitioners are coming into contact more and more with suppliers, co-workers, and customers from different national cultures. Putting these two concepts together, cultural issues are important in managing operations across national lines, and such management is now ubiquitous.

The role of culture in teaching OM has also been noted. Starr (1997), Whybark (1997), and Lawrence and Rosenblatt (1992) all concern themselves with teaching international operations, and all conclude that teaching national culture is important. Culture is also an important topic in understanding how our world of work was shaped: in a back and forth discussion Schmenner (2001a,b) and Singhal (2001) argue about the role and importance of national cultural characteristics in shaping which countries benefited and for what reasons from the industrial revolution.

The foregoing examples concern national culture. The OM research community also has recognized the importance of organizational culture, and has made it clear that organizational culture impacts the decision making of operations managers (e.g. Prajogo and McDermott, 2005) and the efficacy of operational practices (e.g. Pagell *et al.*, 2014). Organizational culture is important to practice and a critical explanatory variable in OM research. (The page count in this manuscript is weighted to national culture rather than organizational culture, as Marshall *et al.* (2016) in a sister article focused solely on organizational culture and OM.)

Something as fundamental as the goals of OM research can create a (mistaken) prejudice against engaging with culture. The first sentence of the *Management Science* special issue addressing "is management science international?" stated that, "(I)n management science, as in all of science, a fundamental issue is the generalizability of what we know" (Aharoni and Burton, 1994). This very goal of generalizability can be seen as diametrically opposed to doing cultural research. The goal of a large cache of cultural research in other academic disciplines (e.g., Anthropology) gives the appearance of the antithesis of "generalizability."

The goal is, instead, "specificity," or demonstrating that a specific time and specific place matter. While culturally based, numerical, explanatory variables are used in OM cultural research, much of what cultural understanding brings is explanatory power to what is on the other side of the R-squared. What is "generalizable" about some of this work is similar in nature to this quote from Voss *et al.* (2004, p. 214): "studies conducted in one country may not be generalizable to others because of national culture effects."

OM cultural research can be generalizable, but in a different manner than OM researchers are used to. We are accustomed to content, or topical generalizability (e.g., do these five practices create a successful quality management application?). Cultural research can lead, instead, to *context* generalizability (e.g., given the national culture of country X or the organizational culture of company Y, we predict these three quality management practices will work, those two won't). As a practical matter, we strive to proactively, and with skill, "avoid blindly adopting the same practice everywhere" Weingarten *et al.* (2011, p. 574).

National culture may seem to be truly a contextual variable for operational decision making, yet clearly firms can and do function in national cultures that differ from their own organizational culture, or which are not a good fit for their practices. So, while future OM research may not be able to directly change national culture, it can and should engage with it and understand how operations managers adapt and manage in different national cultures. As an example, Metters (2008) presented a case where traditional quality management principles failed for 15 years due to national cultural issues. Changing the corporate culture caused the revitalization of the quality management initiatives and made them a success (see Section 6.1).

Researchers in other disciplines have explored and uncovered numerous sub-cultures and climates within organizations. For instance, there is an expansive literature on safety culture (Guldenmund, 2000; Zohar, 1980). Yet there is little literature on cultures in the operations function and almost none on the culture of a supply chain. Future OM research can do more than just describe the elements of culture, it should prescribe how to create cultures both internally and across a supply chain.

The methods in which OM faculty are trained and what OM researchers call "evidence" militate against serious study of culture. Math modeling is not the dominant tool used to study culture. It is our thesis that OM researchers suffer from a methodological orthodoxy with roots in modeling that limits the types of cultural research we do and what we can discover. Specifically, cultural studies in OM are often quantitative and use enumerated, separable dimensions of culture (to be discussed later) as independent and fixed variables. That is, there is a bias for quantitative measures and techniques, and even cultural research must be seen to be quantitative. A POMS Fellow once told one of the authors that an article using ethnographic techniques was "a nice story, but not research". The article was subsequently published in *International Journal of Operations and Production Management* (Metters, 2008). Other members of our field offer a different view: Singhal and Singhal (2012a,b) exhort OM to break free of the dominant math modeling paradigm as it has "constrained development of the discipline" (Singhal and Singhal, 2012a, p. 239).

Here, we explore the OM literature in national culture and organizational culture and point the way for increasing the breadth of the OM field by incorporating this perspective.

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