From local to cross-cultural to global, challenges that face UAE nationals in the 21st century. The role of transactional framework of Cultural Intelligence.

Abstract

Extant literature shows that the GCC region as a whole, and mostly so the United Arab Emirates suffer from the scarcity of management studies in general and Cultural Intelligence (CQ) studies specifically. While most of the studies are either US or western based (Jackson, 2005), Tsui et al., (2007) call to conduct indigenous research in indigenous context. In response to this need, we offer an in-depth study on the effect of transaction framework of CQ (Salih & Patel, 2015) on Emirati citizens to help them overcome the dilemma of "losing the absolutes" (Gelfand et al., 2008) when dealing with a globalized environment present locally at their doors and at the same time to help them protect their own national culture from being negatively affected. Thus, our paper offers theoretical contributions to management and CQ literatures by applying this context-free framework in UAE. We end the paper with a discussion of practical and theoretical implications and suggestions for future research.

Key words:

Cultural Intelligence (CQ), national culture, United Arab Emirates, Dubai, Emirati.

Methodology: Qualitative

Introduction & research problem

Since the late 1990s, Dubai and, to a degree, the UAE has emerged as the strongly preferred location for multinational head offices in the Gulf region (Rehman, 2008) where UAE provides the highest standard of living and considered the richest state in the Middle East (Cerimagic, 2010). The population of the Emirates in 2004 was 4.5 million, of which Emiratis comprised 20 per cent, whilst expatriates included other Arabs, south-Eastern, southern Asians, and Europeans and Americans (Al-Ali, 2008). However, the world fact book shows an increase in population and estimates about 5.3 million people in 2012, while, the percentage of Emiratis is maintained the same (Al-Ali, 2013).

The United Arab Emirates appears with the intent on attracting businesses from many parts of the world, now and throughout the twenty-first century (Grant et al., 2007). Dubai specifically has developed into a city of regional importance, with a planned objective of becoming a city of significance within the global urban-economic system. This led to a continuous debate regarding contemporary urban growth by demonstrating the dialectic relationship between the forces of globalisation, (economic, political and cultural), and localisation (e.g. environment, demography, history and ideology), in the production of the urban environment (Smith, 2001; Newman and Thornley, 2005: cited in Pacione, 2005) which represent a major challenge on UAE nationals.

What increases the effect of globalization, UAE was ranked by (CIA factbook, 2010) for the highest migration rate in the world (Cerimagic, 2010) where individuals may have the chance to work with more than 230 nationalities (Barhem, Younies & Smith , 2011). This cosmopolitan

mix of nationalities formed the new face of UAE and especially Dubai. The economic transformation of Dubai over recent decades has been accompanied by major changes in relation to its population structure and pattern of urban development (Pacione, 2005). However, with Dubai's recent win of World Expo 2020, the population percentage gap may be increased and another economic and work leap is expected.

In view of the above, our current research focuses on a central concept that considers Cultural Intelligence (referred to CQ) as a tool to assist UAE nationals overcoming the cultural divide or gap and draw the new shape of globally oriented nation of UAE.

Although the use of the CQ concept has shifted our focus from top-down influences of culture on individuals to how individuals may adapt their behaviors when faced with different cultures (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004), however, one limitation of current CQ literature is that it continues to be limited to geo-ethnic entities in its application. As 'culture' is integral to the concept of CQ, the traditional confinement of the culture concept to geo-ethnic entities has also affected CQ literature. Gelfand, Imai, and Fehr (2008) recently observe that notwithstanding international managers' potential versatility or national citizens exposed to international mix at their homeland, they cannot be expected to master all national cultures with whom they may be called upon to interact- a dilemma these scholars refer to as "losing the absolutes". They argue that if individuals attempt to master more than one national culture, they might end up losing their own original culture (Gelfand et al., 2008). Excessively relying on the geo-ethnic embedding of culture also leads to challenges in offering meaningful cultural training programs to managers. Rosen (2000) on the other hand argue that the new global economy requires new

competencies subsumed as “global literacy” (cited in Søderberg & Holden, 2002) while Jeannet (2000 cited in Søderberg & Holden, 2002) called for a “global mindset” than can be applied anywhere. Søderberg & Holden (2002) call for an alternative approach to leadership thinking in a globalising business context.

In the same sense, UAE nationals nowadays face significant challenge and pressure represented by either attenuating into the global mix that nocked on their doors and already became a fact, how to maintain and protect their culture, heritage and traditions or live in a solitude from the growing unwanted society mix. It is impossible for UAE nationals to master all the 230 nationalities that are present in their country and hence this leads to either increase in the cultural divide and gap or the adoption of one national culture such as the US globally dominating culture. This challenge does not only impact UAE nationals’ values and beliefs but also social life, habits and fashions among other factors.

In response to the above calls, We attempt in our current paper to explore the effect of a multi-disciplinary, transactional framework of CQ on UAE nationals, and examine how by neutralising “national culture” and replacing it with a transactional approach to culture represented by Douglasian Cultural Framework (DCF), would give better understanding no how to bring UAE nationals to not only to act global but to positively respond to the globalization pressure and be global citizens. While doing so, we aim by using transactional framework of CQ to help Emiratis with effective tools to protect their national culture. This is done by shifting the focus from comparing national culture with only five cultures that DCF proposes. We anticipate that our study would give practical enlightenment to scholars and practitioners in other parts of

the world not only to test our framework but to compare the results obtained with the outcomes of our study.

Research questions

We address the following research questions:

RQ-1: How CQ can be used as a learning tool in Emirati's society transformation process?

RQ-2: How national culture can be neutralised?

The remaining part of this extended abstract will present our research questions, theoretical context, methodology proposed followed by presenting the academic and practical contributions. Finally, we end the paper with a conclusion and future recommendations..

Theoretical context

Cultural Intelligence, advances and challenges

CQ was originally defined as an individual's capacity to function effectively in culturally diverse settings or to adapt effectively across cultures (Earley, 2002; Earley & Ang, 2003). More recently, Van Dyne, Ang, Ng, et al. (2012) define CQ as an individual's capability to detect, assimilate, reason, and act appropriately on cultural cues in situations characterized by cultural diversity. CQ can be enhanced by active engagement in international assignments, education, travel, and other international experiences (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). Similarly, Thomas and Inkson (2003: 14-15) define CQ as being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture,

learning more about it from ongoing interactions with it, and gradually reshaping one's thinking and behavior to culturally-diverse others. They compare a culturally intelligent individual to Proteus, the ancient Greek sea-God, capable of changing shape and becoming a fish, lion, tree, or fire at will. Following the same line of thought, Triandis (2006) reiterates that culturally intelligent people are more flexible than average people, and are able to adjust to different organizational environments.

Earley and Ang (2003) described CQ as a three-faceted construct: (1) cognition (knowledge about different cultures), (2) motivation (desire and self-efficacy), and (3) behavior (repertoire of culturally appropriate behaviors). Later, Ang and Van Dyne (2008) added another factor to CQ: metacognition (planning to acquire and develop coping strategies). Metacognition serves as a strategic component controlling the cognitive part and enabling individuals to enhance both their cultural knowledge and their behavioral repertoire during intercultural interactions. Thus metacognition is the dimension that brings the other three CQ dimensions together (Thomas et al., 2008). The four CQ dimensions have further been divided into eleven sub-dimensions (for more details, see Van Dyne et al., 2012).

Since its conception, CQ has been widely used as a training and learning tool that individuals can use when they are sent in assignment across borders. However, it might be the first time that an opposite scenario is followed. CQ can be taught to Emirati citizens so that they can cope with the cultural invasion represented not only by the presence of expats from diverse national backgrounds but also the globalized work circumstances where companies from almost all countries of the world operate in UAE.

Notwithstanding the potential versatility of international individuals, Emiratis cannot be expected to master all national cultures for those with whom they may be called upon to interact- a dilemma scholars refer to as 'losing the absolutes' (Gelfand et al., 2008). If individuals attempt to master too many cultures, they might end up losing their own original culture. This problem is further accentuated by the fact that these days managers are frequently relocated from one country to another and are expected to adapt promptly to each national cultural environment (Earley and Peterson, 2004). Therefore, in our study, We attempt to assist Emiratis to find an effective way to deal those who they deal with on daily basis. By so doing we attempt to answer the first research question from a theoretical point of view while we reckon at the empirical part of this study to confirm that CQ could be a hands on tool for Emiratis to overcome the cultural or identity dilemma.

However, in conventional CQ literature, culturally intelligent individuals are described as possessing sharp business acumen, empathy, and openness with a chameleon-like ability to adapt to every imaginable national cultural context (Earley & Peterson, 2004). There is also some understanding of the different kinds of profiles one may observe among people with high CQ (see Earley and Mosakowski, 2004). Yet, there is little grasp of how cultural intelligence actually manifests itself in daily life. This is because extant CQ literature demonstrates a lack of sufficient empirical evidence of cultural intelligence. As the concept stands today, CQ has no observable exemplars, and a culturally intelligent person remains a mythical figure constructed in response to the perceived needs of international business (Blasco et al., 2012). The empirical examples that extant literature offers are those of cultural unintelligence. For instance, when there is a communication breakdown between collaborating parties (Blasco et al., 2012), it displays a need

for a better understanding of how cultural intelligence is manifested in daily life, or in other words, of how culturally intelligent individuals apply this kind of intelligence in real life. In addressing these important gaps, we build on Salih & Patel (2015) and Patel & Salih (in progress) who have introduced an alternative framework to CQ based on a transactional and dynamic approach by replacing geo-ethnic national culture with the Douglasian Cultural Framework (DCF) which has its roots in the transactional school of anthropology. This framework is multi-disciplinary, in the sense that it considers bringing aspects from the three knowledge disciplines of anthropology, sociology and psychology (Salih & Patel, 2015). We now turn to provide a brief description on DCF from extant literature in order to elucidate the concept.

Douglasian Cultural Framework

The DCF or the Grid Group Typology (GGT) was introduced by British social anthropologist, Mary Douglas, in *Natural Symbols* (Douglas, 1970) and expanded in *Cultural Bias* (Douglas, 1978). DCF was soon adopted and enriched by subsequent scholars. In 1985, Gross and Rayner offered a mathematical model of DCF, while Gerald Mars (1982, 1994) used DCF to plot dock-workers, hotel waiters, and other occupations with regards to their propensity for workplace crime. Applying DCF to public policy, Frank Hendriks (1999) compared citizens' satisfaction regarding city planning and traffic policy in Munich and Birmingham. Since its introduction, DCF has been used in a wide variety of disciplines such as ecology (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983), political science (Thompson et al., 1990; Thompson et al., 1999; Coyle & Ellis, 1994), public administration (Wildavsky, 1987; 6 and Peck, 2004), and business studies

(Patel, 2007a, 2007b; Patel and Rayner, 2012a), and to explore a variety of topics: sports-related hooliganism (Frosdick, 1995), learning and innovation (Patel and Patel, 2008) and many others.

DCF offers two social dimensions along which people (irrespective of their geo-ethnic affiliations) orientate their behaviors: group and grid. On a two-by-two matrix, group represents the horizontal X-axis and grid represents the vertical Y-axis. The group axis represents the extent to which people are restricted in thought and behavior by their commitment to a larger social unit (Gross & Rayner, 1985). When group strength is high (i.e. toward the right end of the X-axis), the boundaries of the group become important and people devote a lot of their available time to interacting with other unit members. This requires long-term commitment among the members. Each individual is expected to act on behalf of the collective whole and the unit is expected to act in the normative interest of its members. Also, when group strength is high, individuals experience a hierarchical way of life (Gross & Rayner, 1985). Everyone knows his/her place in the system, although this place can change with time. When group strength is low (i.e. toward the left end of the X-axis), people negotiate their way of life independently; they are neither constrained by nor reliant upon any significant group. The low group experience is a competitive, entrepreneurial way of life (Gross & Rayner, 1985).

The second social dimension - grid - measures the extent to which an individual's behavior is constrained by role differentiation (Gross & Rayner, 1985). At the top end of the Y-axis i.e. when grid strength is high, we find a high degree of differentiation among people. In a high grid context, rules and classifications regarding gender, age and family govern how people relate to one another, thereby limiting their opportunities in life. As we move toward low grid strength, people are relatively less constrained by rules, regulations and procedures. Distinction

among people is weak, and it does not limit the range of available alternatives (for more details see Salih & Patel, 2015, and Patel & Rayner, 2012a)

We attempt by following the transactional framework of CQ to answer the second research question. Emiratis, first; shall not rely on evaluating expats national cultures in order to deal with them so that they do not to fall in "losing the absolutes" dilemma, and second; Emiratis can further protect their own national culture or heritage by not exposing it to the unlimited comparisons with other cultures operating in the UAE. By neutralising national culture, our study does not attempt by any mean to eliminate its role in individuals development. Rather, national culture can still be an important factor for Emiratis to consider, while, we attempt to bridge the gap between Emiratis and expats and overcome the dilemma of cultural divide among them. This will also encourage UAE national overcome the problem of single culture adaptation when they are influenced by one such as the US worldwide dominating culture.

Methodology

In response to the research questions, the research paradigm adopted in this study follows a post-positivistic ontological approach to knowledge. We adopt constructivist epistemological approach which is then translated into the deployment of qualitative methodology to understand what effects CQ with CT integrated with it have on individuals, this study might be the first of its kind in the UAE due to explore the reasons and mechanisms of society transformation from local global and what role CQ can play in this regard.

As this project still in its initial stages, we intend to conduct 50 to 60 interviews with Emirati nationals from different organizations and different levels. Thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2006) will be followed. The analysis will start with open coding and followed by axial analysis (Flick, 2002) to find out how the transactional framework of CQ as a learning tool can help UAE nationals to overcome obstacles that they face when they deal with diversified expats.

We anticipate that data collection and analysis to take seven to eight months followed by recoding the findings and publishing the results afterwards. Therefore, We expect that the total duration for our study would be from ten to 12 months from the date we start data collection. Finally and most importantly, should the outcomes positively confirm the *RQ1* and *RQ2*, this would first; confirm the framework followed (Salih & Patel, 2015) and second, it allows governments, policy makers, leaders and individuals in general to use it as a practical tool for protecting peoples beliefs, heritage and national cultures.

Academic and practical contribution

Our current paper provides two contributions; the first is academic while the other is practical. From an academic point of view, our paper provides insights on the Emirati society as CQ has not been studied before in this country or even the Gulf region, therefore UAE suffers from the scarceness of management studies in general and CQ studies specifically. On the practical side, our paper offers tangible tools that Emiratis can use to intelligently handle their interactions with expats from diversified backgrounds, a matter that became a problem due to globalization (Pacione, 2005). By deploying our transactional framework of CQ, Emiratis can also protect their own national culture from being evicted or lost. Should the results of our study confirm the theoretical framework described, our study can then be replicated in other countries and regions around the world.

Conclusion and future research

The GCC region and the United Arab Emirates specifically has received minimal amount of research albeit the economical effect this country has in terms of being a business hub and destination from most parts of the world. UAE nationals suffer from the unpredictable and uncontrollable cultural mix of expats that come from more than 200 countries. UAE citizens are left with limited number of choices represented by either isolate themselves from the new global environment that became a fact on their doors and a denial state. This can be seen with the old generation, or adopt one external culture where this seen in the young generation and is resisted by their families and tribes. Our present paper introduces transactional framework of Cultural Intelligence that is not based on geo-ethnic national culture in order to provide tools for Emiratis to first; intelligently interact with expats and second; protect their own national culture from being attacked by the unlimited comparisons with other cultures. This is conducted by shifting the cultural comparisons from country-specific cultures to only five cultures proposed by DCF which can be applied to all individuals interacting in the country regardless of their backgrounds. Our research is empirical and will be conducted in almost one year time frame. By implementing the transactional framework of CQ, our paper confirms that this framework is capable of bringing aspects from three knowledge disciplines. i.e. Anthropology, sociology and psychology (Salih & Patel, 2015). While, future research may take into consideration other aspects of the UAE society such as gender influence, common habits, national rules and even national sports.

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