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The Impact of National Culture on Informal Learning in the Workplace

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to identify how differing cultural factors affect informal learning in the workplace. We have introduced concepts and reviewed studies on informal learning and national culture based on an extensive literature review on the factors influencing informal learning, particularly based on five Hofstede's dimensions of national culture. Findings suggest that adult education and workplace learning professionals need to attend to cultural influences and efforts at indigenization when foreign theories or practices are adopted.

Keywords

informal learning, national culture, workplace learning, indigenization, Hofstede

Informal learning is the most prevalent way of acquiring knowledge or skill in the workplace (Ellinger, 2005; Leslie, Aring, & Brand, 1998). Several studies have shown that people gain and transfer knowledge more effectively and frequently in informal learning situations than in traditional formal training (Ellinger, 2005; Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell, 2003; Marsick, 2003). Recently, interest in informal learning has increased among corporations and human resource development (HRD) or workplace learning professionals with a change in the learning paradigm from traditional instructor-driven events to constant knowledge acquisition (Paradise, 2008).

However, most workplace learning theories and practices have been developed in the United States and some developed Western countries and have enormously

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influenced workplace learning throughout the world (McLean, 2010; McLean & McLean, 2001). Moreover, workplace learning settings and needs cannot be fully identified without exploring associated cultural perspectives (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, & Unwin, 2009). Despite the increasing necessity for reflection of cultural influence in learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) and indigenous development of theories and programs in the current global setting, there have been only a few theories developed using appropriate cultural considerations (McLean, 2010).

As cultural context influences developing, implementing, and evaluating workplace learning (Felstead et al., 2009; Marquardt, Berger, & Loan, 2004), professionals who are in non-Western countries or who address and support culturally diverse workforces may need to consider different results in various cultures when they adopt theories or programs developed on a different cultural foundation from those of the recipients. Informal learning is not an exception to this reality. Even in the dominant culture, such as the United States, culturally different approaches in training and development have been on the rise because of the diversity in the workforce (Marquardt et al., 2004).

Ways of accelerating informal learning and its influencing factors have been intensively and extensively studied and developed among western countries, especially in recent years (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijs, 2009; Lohman, 2006). Informal learning occurs in an individual, in interactions among individuals, in organizations, and within the broader environment (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). All these contexts are closely related to culture. As informal learning is gaining more attention in workplaces (Marsick, 2006), it is important to identify how informal learning varies in different cultural contexts and how it affects individual learning.

The purpose of this article was to explore the impact of national culture on informal learning in the workplace. To this end, we identified what is known to date from studies that have examined cultural variables relevant to the practice and outcomes of informal learning in the workplace. The major factors that influence informal learning were analyzed according to five of Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) seven national culture dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hofstede et al., 2010). Indulgence versus restraint and monumentalism versus self-effacement, the most recently proposed dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010), were excluded because very little literature addressing these dimensions was found for this study. Through examples in various cultural settings, we identified differences in informal learning in the workplace based on national cultures.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background for this article focuses on the three primary areas under exploration: informal learning in the workplace, national culture, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

Informal Learning in the Workplace

In the workplace, informal learning is a type of experiential learning that can occur in both institutional and noninstitutional contexts (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). People learn informally from their previous experiences to understand the context of problems or to produce solutions by organizational intentions or personal curiosities. Thus, informal learning can happen anywhere in the workplace if people are motivated to learn and are given such opportunities by their organization (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Although the concept of informal learning has theoretical roots from Lewin (1935) and Dewey (1938), who emphasized individual experience and interactions between learners and their environment (Conlon, 2003), *informal learning* was introduced by Knowles (1950). He divided learning into four types based on the perspective of locus: of control unintended, self-directed, mediated, and authority directed. Informal learning mainly appears in the first three types (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011).

Recently, studies on informal learning have combined learning at the individual level with organizational learning in the workplace (e.g., W. Choi & Jacobs, 2011; Reardon, 2010). Because employees learn mostly from informal activities and interactions, Leslie et al. (1998) claimed that 70% of learning is from informal learning, Marsick and Watkins (1990) claimed 80%, and Sorohan (1993) claimed 90%. Several studies have been conducted to determine how workplace informal learning can be controlled to increase performance or to identify what affects its occurrence (e.g., Ellinger, 2005; Eraut, 2004; Skule, 2004). Table 1 shows the major factors influencing informal learning categorized by individual, peer-to-peer, organizational, and environmental levels.

National Culture

Hofstede (2001) regarded culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (p. 9). He stated that each individual belongs to various groups that have various levels of culture from organizational to national. The shared culture among a group of people appears as basic assumptions or deeply-held convictions; values; and behaviors and practices, symbols, rituals, and artifacts that are easily observed (Schein, 1997).

National culture is a collection of common ways of thinking and acting in a country, distinct from other countries (Marquardt et al., 2004). Hofstede et al. (2010) argued that there are two reasons why national culture is frequently used in the social sciences. First, nations contain strong forces toward integration of language, mass media, laws, education, politics, sports, and economy. Second, one of the purposes of cross-cultural research is to enhance inter-nation collaboration.

However, one might question whether artificial country borders are appropriate for assigning culture to a nation might involve obviously different groups that have a dissimilar history, language, customs, and religion. The population of some countries consists of diverse ethnic groups with different cultures. Moreover, there may be much

Table 1. Factors Influencing Informal Learning.

Level	Examples	Factors Influencing Informal Learning
Individual	• Self-directed learning • Trial and error • Modeling	• Confidence (Lohman, 2006) • Interest in profession (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Lohman, 2006) • Endurance for changing (Eraut, 2004; Skule, 2004) • Previous experience (Eraut, 2004; Marsick, Volpe, & Watkins, 1999) • Professional capability (Berg & Chyung, 2008) • Job satisfaction (Berg & Chyung, 2008; W. Choi & Jacobs, 2011) • Accessibility (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Ellinger, 2005; Lohman, 2000, 2006)
Peer to peer	• Mentoring • Coaching • Teaming	• Climates of collaboration, sharing, and trust (Ellinger, 2005, Eraut, 2004, Lohman, 2006; Marsick et al., 1999) • Feedback of people (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Ellinger, 2005; Eraut, 2004; Jeon & Kim, 2012; Lohman, 2000, 2006) • Supervisor's support and encouragement (W. Choi & Jacobs, 2011; Ellinger, 2005; Lohman, 2006; Marsick et al., 1999; Skule, 2004) • Opportunities to meet professionals (Ellinger, 2005; Eraut, 2004)
Organization/ environment	• Job assignment • Human resource system • Career development policy	• Learning support system (Berg & Chyung, 2008; W. Choi & Jacobs, 2011; Lohman, 2006) • Reward (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Lohman, 2006; Skule, 2004) • Challenging and valuable work (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Jeon & Kim, 2012; Marsick et al., 1999) • Learning culture (Ellinger, 2005; Reardon, 2010) • Time and space (Ellinger, 2005; Lohman, 2000, 2006; Marsick et al., 1999)

shared cultural traits across nations. Thus, in this article, our focus is not on what are included in each national culture, but, rather, how different cultural traits influence informal learning in the workplace using a national culture frame regardless of the cultural stereotypes of a nation.

Table 2. Dimensions of National Culture According to Hofstede.

Dimension	Description
Power distance	The extent to which power is distributed equally or unequally
Collectivism/individualism	The extent to which relationship between individuals is loose or tight
Femininity/masculinity	The extent of assertiveness or modesty
Uncertainty avoidance	The extent to which individuals feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations
Long-term/short-term orientation	The extent to which individuals think and behave for future rewards or present values

Source. Hofstede et al. (2010).

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede (2001) developed four cultural dimensions in 1972 by surveying IBM employees in 72 countries and updated them in 2001. Hofstede's original four dimensions of national cultures are power distance, collectivism/individualism, femininity/masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. He identified a fifth dimension, long-term/short-term orientation while using the Chinese Values Survey (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Recently, he identified sixth and seventh dimensions: indulgence/restraint and monumentalism/self-effacement. These emerged from his collaboration with Minkov using the World Values Survey (Hofstede et al., 2010). In this article, we do not address the two recently identified dimensions because of a lack of literature on them. Table 2 displays features of the five other dimensions.

This cultural framework is regarded as the most practical among the major cultural dimension approaches (Gannon, 2004). Many scholars have recognized that Hofstede's (Hofstede et al., 2010) cultural dimensions provided a useful theoretical tool for researchers and practitioners and opened the door for them to make use of culture in training, learning, development, and management (Chapman, 1997; Meyer et al., 2012; Schröder, 2000; Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2012; Teekens, 2000). According to Google Scholar, the two editions of his book, *Culture's Consequences*, which describe his cultural dimensions, have been cited more than 30,000 times.

However, some scholars have criticized this cultural frame regarding its research design and assumptions. McSweeney (2002) and Schwartz (1994) questioned the sample characteristics of Hofstede's research design and said that it may not be appropriate to generalize the results of research about a corporation to each national culture. Smith (2002) disagreed with the quantitative approach to measure cultures. Taras et al. (2012) found that many results in Hofstede's research are outdated due to more rapid culture change than Hofstede anticipated. We are uncomfortable with the label that Hofstede chose for the Feminine/Masculine dimension, because it reinforces gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, as Hofstede has chosen to stay with this label in spite of criticisms about it, we have chosen to use it because of its familiarity to readers familiar with Hofstede.

There are several models widely referred to in research to understand and distinguish cultures, such as the framework of Hofstede (2001), Schwartz (1994), and Global Organizational and Behavioral Effectiveness (GLOBE; House & Javiddan, 2004). We employed Hofstede's dimensions for our analyses because this taxonomy focuses on values in a group of people, while GLOBE deals mainly with behavioral and managerial practices (Meyer et al., 2012). Furthermore, most previous research that dealt with culture in education and human resources adopted Hofstede's taxonomy. As the focus of this study is not on the dimensions themselves, but on informal learning associated with cultures, adopting a more widely used cultural classification helps clarify the influences of culture.

Research Questions

The purpose of this article was to explore how national cultures influence informal learning in the workplace based on a literature review. Among the informal learning factors, those related to original human nature and individuality were excluded in our research. Hofstede et al. (2010) proposed that culture is distinguished from both inherited human nature, such as physical and emotional functioning, and personal uniqueness, such as experience, opportunity, and ability. For example, professional capability or previous task experience may not be significantly dependent on culture. As such, we formulated the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Does national culture result in differences in the factors influencing informal learning, such as self-confidence, commitment, feedback, collaborative relationships, rewards, challenging tasks, change, and time and space?

Research Question 2: How are the factors influencing informal learning affected by each of the five dimensions of national culture?

Method

We conducted a literature review of peer- and non–peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and books. Keywords used in the database search were culture, cross-cultural, informal learning, and each factor of informal learning (self-confidence, commitment, feedback, time and space, collaborative relationship, reward, challenging tasks, and change). The literature was searched based on publication after 1988, when Hofstede's fifth dimension was proposed (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), to 2012. Relevant literature was identified through the electronic library system of our university, EBSCO, Science Direct, the search system of the Korean Education and Research Information Service, Google Scholar, and references found in identified articles. In total, 74 articles, dissertations, book chapters, and books were reviewed to address the research questions for this study.

Although few references directly identified informal learning associated with cultural contexts, we found several applied intercultural studies related to the factors of

informal learning (e.g., self-confidence, commitment, feedback) in HRD, as well as psychology and management. Hence, the literature for this study included not only informal learning studies, but also cultural or cross-cultural studies in which the factors of informal learning were involved. The identified literature was reviewed focusing on how each factor of informal learning is effectuated in the workplace with cultural differences or cross-cultural contexts. For content analysis, after the initial review of the literature, we segmented relevant information found in the literature into a unit of the identified informal-learning factors. Then, the segments were sorted according to the five cultural dimensions to be analyzed in the findings section. Our cultural background (one is from East Asia and the other from North America with extensive global experience) led us to focus a culturally analytical lens on informal learning.

Findings

We found that informal learning may work differently based on national cultures. The factors influencing informal learning were analyzed according to five Hofstede's (Hofstede et al., 2010) dimensions of national culture selected for this article.

Power Distance

In organizations, the relationship between managers and subordinates shows the extent of power distance. If an organization is in a small power distance country, employees are more likely to have an equal relationship with their supervisors. In contrast, in high power distance countries, there is more likely to be a clearly unequal relationship. Hofstede et al. (2010) explained that, in a large power distance setting, unequal power occurs from the hierarchical system, and people most desire a supervisor who is a "benevolent autocrat or good father" (p. 73). In low power distance countries, subordinates have power despite their unequal roles and regard their supervisor as a consultant who helps, supports, and guides them.

In the workplace, informal learning is enhanced, personally, when an individual is proactive in making decisions about his or her work and development (Marsick & Watkins, 2001) and, organizationally, when supervisory support and a cooperative work environment are provided (Skule, 2004). Therefore, individuals are positively or negatively influenced in their informal-learning activities based on the situated power distance environment because it relates to relationships with supervisors and peers and to self-initiative for learning.

In informal learning, the supervisor's feedback facilitates and expands employees' creativity and knowledge. However, unlike lower power distance found in many western countries, in large power distance cultures, employees are likely to perceive feedback as interference or oppression of their autonomy. In their study with bank employees from 28 different countries, Bochner and Hesketh (1994) found that, in large power distance cultures, employees described the relationship with their supervisor as less open, close, and direct. Employees in a large power distance society tend

naturally to accept a supervisor's interrupting behavior because of the contextual relationship with their supervisor (Chun, 2008), recognizing support and feedback from superiors not as suggestions but as important directions or commands (White & Thobo-Carlsen, 2002). In addition, Lehmann (2009) argued that communications between supervisors and employees are usually one-way in large power distance cultures, such as Thailand and Kenya, where questions from subordinates are not acceptable, and this may lead to a negative impact on motivating individuals' learning and change in the workplace.

As for collaborative relationships that enhance informal learning through active knowledge exchange and reciprocal cooperation, Y. S. Kim (2003) found that, in large power distance cultures, such as Korea, hierarchy is based on age, gender, and position and sometimes inhibits emerging team learning because this power may weaken or erode individual autonomy to choose collaboration and learning. Thus, he suggested that workplace learning practitioners may need to encourage supervisors to understand the effects of their power and avoid one-way commands in a team setting. Jiacheng, Lu, and Francesco (2010) surveyed employees in 10 Chinese and 10 U.S. organizations on knowledge sharing and reported that employees reacted differently according to nationality. Chinese employees in larger power distance contexts revealed acquiescence to knowledge sharing with fear of punishment, whereas U.S. employees did not worry about the consequences and autonomously participated in knowledge sharing.

Lehmann (2009) pointed out that close relationships between supervisors and subordinates can be a key means not for development but for an individual's success in a large power distance culture because it often relates to hiring, promotion, and financial rewards. In a similar vein, H. M. Choi (2004) found that employees in a large power distance culture often focused on face saving for their supervisors because they believed that it affects the relationship between them and leads to better support and recognition for the employee in the workplace.

Power distance affects learning culture, as people become accustomed to different learning approaches in terms of self-directedness and learning sources. Through a survey with 855 managerial- or professional-level employees, Ralston et al. (2008) found that U.S. employees showed much higher scores on self-direction than those from Russia, Japan, and China. This is consistent with the findings of Kirkman and Shapiro (2001) that self-management is negatively related to large power distance. In such cultures, employees are inclined to expect knowledge and expertise to come from a prominent person with status and power (Rao, 2011). Thus, they prefer to learn from experts or a verified learning source using an appropriate learning protocol. Dirani (2009) identified, in Lebanon, a large power distance country, that people are used to respecting a teacher and giving that role strong authority. Students are used to listening and taking notes, not asking questions or discussing.

Time for learning can also be an issue in such cultures. A report of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD], 2004) reported that employees in Korea, who work around 2,400 hours a year (34% more than the U. S. average), usually start their work at 8 a.m. and end at around 10 p.m. or later. They often have dinner

during work to stay late because they should be at their desks waiting for their superiors to leave. This extra time appears, however, not to add to the productivity of the workers (S. Kim, Park, & McLean, 2012).

Collectivism Versus Individualism

In individualistic cultures, individuals are expected to behave for their personal interest, whereas, in collectivist cultures, group benefit is more important than private benefit (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, individual performance is the most important matter of concern (Hofstede et al., 2010). On the other hand, people from collectivist cultures may look on the organization as a family in which reciprocal responsibilities of guaranteeing security and loyal devotion exist. They think harmony in their organizations or groups is more important than any other value (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Relationships between individuals influence how and the extent to which peer-to-peer interactions occur in organizations, one of the major sources for informal learning (Ellinger, 2005; Eraut, 2004; Marsick et al., 1999). Thus, we can expect active informal learning through close relationships with colleagues. Moreover, in relationships with supervisors, expectations, support, encouragement, and recognition from supervisors tend to motivate individual learning as well as commitment to informal learning activities (Berg & Chyung, 2008; Eraut, 2004; Lohman, 2000; Skule, 2004).

On the other hand, with respect to feedback, Shipper, Hoffman, and Rotondo (2007) found that, in strong collectivist cultures, feedback is not valued because criticism is normally avoided, and individuals are afraid of breaking harmony of the group because of their negative feedback. Stone-Romero and Stone (2002) also warned that negative feedback can be dysfunctional in collectivist cultures in spite of its necessity for the organization. If people prefer only positive feedback, some realities that are unfavorable but necessary could be distorted or hidden. Collectivists share knowledge to achieve harmonious relationships with other employees in the organization while individualists share because of individual values (Jiacheng et al., 2010).

Peer-to-peer interactions in informal learning also reveal different aspects according to culture. Compared with people from individualistic cultures, collectivists tend to prefer working on a team to working alone and have more informal contact with coworkers (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994). Several cross-cultural studies comparing collectivistic cultures with the United States (recognized as a high individual culture) showed that Hispanic (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998), Korean (Lim, 2004), Chinese (Bennett, 1999), and Puerto Ricans (Triandis et al., 1988) favored collaborative group activities rather than in-group competition. Through a qualitative case study, Kubo, Saka, and Pam (2001) discovered that, although Japanese organizations have a vertical structure in which peers need a manager's permission to cooperate with each other because of a strong and inflexible hierarchical structure, sharing information or knowledge in informal ways frequently occurs in this culture. After-work hours are important for them to build deep relationships and interactions. This phenomenon is usually observed in other collectivistic Asian cultures. In Korean organizations, informal networks that are formed by drinking together after work, often excluding females (Kang

& Cho, 2007), affect formal work relationships, as well, such as support and information exchange (Jung, 1996; M. Y. Kim, 2007).

It seems that collectivistic cultures have the strength of collaborative group activities compared with individualistic culture. However, several studies have shed light on the relationship between outcomes and collaborations in different cultures. Ramburuth and McCormick (2001) found that Asian cultures (collectivistic) revealed higher motivations in group activities but a lower level of strategies for the project than Australian (individualistic). This supports the findings in Teng (2007) and Trumbull et al. (2000) that people from an individualistic culture performed better in jobs making group decisions and completing group tasks than did collectivists. Although collectivists showed more collaboration, they focused more on building relationships in the group than on the goal. In this regard, Valiente (2008) warned that, in collectivistic cultures, employees may fail to distinguish between what needs to be done to complete the task and how to behave in group activities.

The extent of relationships among individuals closely relates to expectancy or preference for rewards to facilitate informal learning. While western cultures of individualism use individual reward to motivate people's behavior, collectivist cultures, as in East Asia, have strong interdependent traits, regarding performance in social or group obligations and responsibilities as a priority over personal rewards (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivistic employees are often motivated when their group or organization succeeds or is rewarded (Lee & Semin, 2009), and they emphasize individually equal allocation of rewards in the group (Hui et al., 1991).

Environmental or organizational change provides learning opportunities for people in informal ways because the change expands meetings with the addition of new people, ideas, and experience, which enhances learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Opinions on how this dimension influences people's perspective of taking on change are divided. One perspective is that individuals from individualistic countries are apt to engage, set maximum goals, and prefer to take risks to achieve personal development goals (Crowe & Higgins, 1997) and more easily accept and follow changes (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). However, individuals from collectivistic cultures generally prefer safety and security and are likely to favor minimum goals and are reluctant to take risks (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). They desire the status quo (Liberman et al., 1999). Hsee and Weber (1999), however, disagreed with this position, based on their investigation of Chinese and U.S. participants. They argued that in the collectivistic culture, China, people are more risk-seeking than those in the individualistic culture, the United States, because they can cope with risks or change with their family or group members helping each other. Through this cooperation, people increase learning.

Moreover, Hooker (2003) argued that each nation has different characteristics on space, an informal learning factor. According to Hooker, Germany (strong individualism) has a strong sense of private space. Offices should be surrounded by sound-proof partitions, and the doors are normally closed. On the other hand, the Japanese (strong collectivism) sense of privacy is opposite to Germany's. They are used to sharing rooms with other people and feel comfortable with paper partitions in their offices.

Therefore, when HRD practitioners enhance informal learning, the locus where learning occurs should be carefully considered according to culture.

Femininity Versus Masculinity

Femininity–masculinity is about how aggressive or nurturing a culture is. In the workplace, a feminine culture emphasizes insight, serenity, and consensus while a masculine culture focuses on performance, competitiveness, and achievement (Hofstede, 2001). In feminine cultures, employees expect equal benefits, prefer more leisure to more money, and think that a humanized job needs cooperation with other people, whereas those from masculine cultures take equitable benefits for granted, desire more money than more leisure, and consider humanization of work coming from rich job contents (Hofstede et al., 2010).

In masculine cultures, people are likely to have stronger willingness to challenge at work, which relates to self-concept, affecting work performance and achievement. Self-concepts that influence confidence and efficacy for work are main factors influencing informal learning (Eraut, 2004; Lohman, 2006). Thus, attitudes toward learning may differ across cultures. In addition, individuals from masculine cultures are more responsive to cheerful, honored, and proud emotions related to their work and to the competitive environment there, whereas those reflecting feminine cultural traits are more likely to be open to relaxed, peaceful, and comfortable emotions (Higgins, 1997).

For example, in the research with the Australian and South Asian samples, Niles (1995) found that students from Australia (a masculine culture) recognized competition and reaching the top as the central motivations for learning, whereas social approval, such as caring about a family's expectations and relationship with the instructor, significantly motivated the achievement of South Asian students (feminine culture). Bennett (1999) discovered that employees in the United States who showed strong masculinity were negatively associated with attitudes toward human development. Bing and Ai-Ping (2008) found that Chinese adult learners had a higher level of assertiveness and competition in its masculine culture than Malaysian learners (feminine culture). The Chinese learners more seriously recognized the importance of exams and academic success for their career development than did the Malaysian learners.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance reflects how stressed people are in uncertain and unclear situations (Hofstede, 2001). In the workplace, employees from strong uncertainty avoiding cultures are relieved when they are provided with formal rules, regulations, detailed directions, and explicit duties, whereas people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures feel restricted and uncomfortable in the same setting. Hofstede et al. (2010) concluded that individuals prefer less change, more rules, busier work, and more formalization in strong uncertainty-avoiding countries, while those from low

uncertainty avoidance cultures reveal greater acceptance of change, more autonomy, only essential work, and acceptance of ambiguity.

In light of these different traits, individual informal learning carried out intentionally, such as self-directed learning, may be influenced by these cultural attributes as people from strong uncertainty avoidance countries easily feel anxious with an informal and self-controlled learning environment. They may feel comfortable when structured and predicted learning settings are provided and when there are definite, correct answers in the learning situation (Bing & Ai-Ping, 2008; Hofstede et al., 2010; Rao, 2011). Olaniran (2009) warned that the learning concepts of Web 2.0, in which an individual learns any knowledge by interacting with anybody at any time in the web environment, could be limited to certain cultures because of a lack of relationships between teacher and student and also the extent of the need for self-learning control. He also argued that learning by online technology, on which informal learning also relies, threatens some people and creates anxiety. People in Korea, a strong uncertainty-avoiding country, also have a tendency to prefer formal teaching and learning situations in which learning occurs based on an instructor (H. Kim, Kwon, & Pyun, 2008).

There is an argument that individual learning style is influenced by some traits of national culture, including uncertainty avoidance. Yamazaki and Kayes (2005) examined cultural differences in learning styles and found that Japanese managers who revealed high uncertainty avoidance preferred concrete experience and reflective observations, while U.S. managers with low uncertainty avoidance relied mainly on abstract conceptualizations and active experiments. This is consistent with Hoppe (1990), who surveyed 1,544 adult learners from 19 countries and found that the reflecting style was more associated with strong uncertainty avoidance, whereas the thinking style was more related to weak uncertainty avoidance.

Long-Term Versus Short-Term Orientation

Although time frame orientation is a measure based on the teachings of Confucius, a Chinese philosopher, this is not all about Confucian values (Hofstede et al., 2010). Rather, long-term versus short-term orientation posits "persistence and thrift reflect an orientation toward the future" versus "personal stability and tradition seen as a static orientation toward the present and the past" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 239). In the workplace, strong short-term orientation cultures emphasize leisure time, quick profits, and present performance, while employees from long-term orientation cultures pursue self-discipline and hard work, prefer position to earnings, and worry about benefits 10 years in the future (Hofstede et al., 2010).

As for informal learning, learning motivation and purposes vary in this dimension. In strong long-term orientation cultures, individuals are likely to learn for future positions, jobs, and unexpected change. They stress personal growth and social competence through which personal life circumstances and social status can be changed (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2008). On the other hand, people from short-term orientation cultures may view learning as a solution to confronting challenges and as a

performance tool. They tend not to plan for future learning outcomes but focus on present interests (Rao, 2011). Briley (2009) found that East Asians with strong long-term orientation have an inclination to concentrate not only on the present, but also on the past and future, while North Americans with strong short-term orientation regard the present as most important. He argued that East Asians have a more complex structure when they make decisions because of the tendency of considering experience and anticipating the future, whereas North Americans have a relatively simple thinking model, as they believe that their destiny is up to themselves and is based on present decisions. Individuals who have a long-term orientation are generally open to various types of learning methods and are well-adjusted in the learning environment because their major interest is not learning itself but the results from the learning that contribute to future goals (Chuang, 2012). Thus, in long-term orientation cultures, informal learning may be expected to be strategic for self-development but far from improving work performance. Supervisors may look at self-learning as just a hobby, not as a work-related activity and inhibit individuals from being involved in learning. In short-term orientation cultures, informal learning could be practical for current jobs or problems but far from long-term development.

Conclusions

Learning begins with experience (Jarvis, 2006) and is increased by the relationship between a learner and models from whom the learner likes to imitate (Bandura, 1986). Thus, where individuals have lived and those with whom they grew up play a critical role in how they learn. In this article, to identify cultural impact on informal learning, we investigated how factors influencing informal learning work in different cultural contexts based on Hofstede's (Hofstede et al., 2010) national culture dimensions. Through a literature review, we analyzed influences of culture on major factors of informal learning: self-confidence, commitment, feedback, time and space, collaborative relationships, rewards, challenging tasks, and change.

Our findings point to ways that informal learning is influenced by each national cultural dimension. Regarding the power distance dimension, attitudes on feedback, involvement in knowledge sharing, self-directedness, and preference for learning source may be different by the degree of sensitivity in the relationship with people who have power. People from a collectivistic culture are likely to prefer group activities to activities focused on individual values and goals compared with people from individualistic culture. In feminine cultures, individuals tend to care about social approval (e.g., expectation, relationship) within the team, learning group, or organization, whereas, in masculine cultures, they are usually goal oriented and tend to emphasize learning outcomes. Depending on the extent of uncertainty avoidance, individuals may show a different level of anxiety about the self-controlled learning environment. In strong uncertainty-avoidance cultures, more specific and clear guidelines may be necessary for the learning activities, while more autonomy is acceptable (or demanded) in weak uncertainty-avoidance cultures. In long-term orientation cultures, motivations and goals for learning are generally for future success or change. However, people

from short-term orientation cultures are likely to find their learning motives in present problems or imminent work performance rather than self-development.

Although we found cultural differences in informal learning and described them according to each cultural dimension, it may be a little early to conclude what is the best way for a certain culture to enhance informal learning. As a culture has a tendency to consist of several layers of traits and those layers are interwoven, individual behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, or values regarding informal learning may be influenced by multiple cultural traits. For example, we can analyze self-directed learning from several cultural aspects, such as power, preference for collaboration, assertiveness of the learning environment, tolerance of uncertainty, and whether the motivation for learning is current or for the future.

This article has limitations. First, what we searched was literature written only in English and Korean because of our linguistic skills, and this led to a limited review. Second, despite our efforts, this article could not cover all factors affecting informal learning but only some of the major ones. Third, although our study is based on the assumption that factors of informal learning may work differently in various cultural contexts, we did not explore the possibility that the factors themselves might be different in different situations. We could not suggest solutions for building indigenous theories or practice for every culture, obviously, but we have highlighted the necessity of considering cultural differences. Finally, by selecting Hofstede's construct of culture, we had to accept his perspective that culture is contained within country boundaries, a concept that we reject but had to accept given the void of any other available model for such an analysis.

Recommendations for Theory and Practice

Although most theories and concepts in workplace learning originated in the west, its concepts and practices have spread over the world. As globalization increases, workplace learning practitioners face cross-cultural challenges. Practitioners need to be cautious about adopting practices from other cultures, as has often been the case with concepts. They need to create expectations of academics within their culture for research that is culture specific, with clearer implications of how certain workplace learning practices will work within that culture.

Likewise, informal learning theories and research tools built in one culture might not be applicable in different cultural settings, because each ethnic group and country has disparate contexts (McLean, 2010). If workplace learning professionals adopt foreign theories or programs without any cultural consideration at customizing, they may pay a high price. In the organization, workplace learning professionals should be aware of employees' cultural backgrounds and reflect this knowledge in their learning interventions. If the employees are from multiple cultures, cultural similarities and differences in informal learning may need to be clarified. Previous cross-cultural studies and practices or experts on culture can help identify the traits of the target cultures. A pilot test may be necessary to see beforehand if the newly adopted practice tools work well in different cultures.

Moreover, workplace learning professionals should also avoid creating cultural stereotypes of individuals. The cultural differences in informal learning in our article are not about individual but group (nation) distinctions. This means that the overall ways and results of informal learning in one culture may differ from those with other cultural dimensions. Some people, however, may show different behaviors regarding informal learning from their national culture because individual variability exists.

Recommendations for Future Research

More studies on cultural differences and their impact on adult learning are necessary. Research should be conducted based on its own cultural context and not relied solely on the research done in other cultural contexts.

We propose, first, in-depth research focusing on each factor influencing informal learning according to cultures. Although some factors, such as feedback and collaborative relationships, have been frequently explored in cross-culture studies in education, management, and psychology, few studies that have examined other informal-learning factors (e.g., perception of change or challenging work) combined with culture were found. For instance, Chang, Chen, Huang, and Yuan (2012) studied from a cognitive learning aspect how individuals react over cross-cultural challenges that were entirely different from their previous experiences. Based on their conceptual framework, further studies may examine how differently informal-learning processes occur when individuals face challenges in different cultural contexts.

Second, how informal learning is associated with formal learning in various cultural contexts may also be explored. Informal and formal learning are complementary, and they influence each other (W. Choi & Jacobs, 2011). However, in this study, our research foci did not include the relationship with formal learning. To understand workplace learning better, it is necessary to study not only formal and informal learning separately but also their relationships in various settings.

Third, future research can focus on what is commonly shared regarding learning across ethnic groups or nations. Most cultural or cross-cultural studies have emphasized differences by cultures. However, those differences may be clearer when we identify shared cultural traits. Unlike the general expectation, recent studies have revealed that perceptions of learning and preferred learning methods between adult learners from East Asia and the West are not significantly different, but their different specific-learning situations cause different learning approaches (Chuang, 2012; Zhu et al., 2008).

Fourth, future research on informal learning may include diverse research methods. Through comparison studies, the effectiveness of each type of informal learning in different cultures may be analyzed. If what is different between cultures is clarified, it will help workplace learning practitioners to determine where employees need learning support. Case studies that cover informal-learning practices in various cultural settings are also needed. These case studies will form a basis for further research development on informal learning. In their qualitative study on informal learning of young anticapitalists, for example, Hemphill and Leskowitz (2012) explored the

distinctive learning activities of the unique cultural group considering their national culture and history.

Last, we need to examine informal learning in the workplace from an interdisciplinary perspective. As learning is not a distinct variable from inner or outer circumstances in the organization, such as productivity, economy, members, culture, and society (Felstead et al., 2009), an integrative approach to understanding workplace learning may be necessary instead of regarding it solely as a cognitive psychology phenomenon. Future research may explore informal learning through a combination of multiple aspects, including not only psychology but also technology, policy, anthropology, and sociology.

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