Some cultural considerations for applying the Learning Organization model to Iranian organizations

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Abstract

It has been argued that some management theories and models may not be universal and are based on some cultural assumptions. It is suggested that the effectiveness of the Learning Organization (LO) model across different countries may be associated with cultural differences in terms of some dimensions such as individualism, collectivism, power distance, and future orientation. Given that some Iranian managers have reported high levels of power distance and in-group collectivism and low levels of societal collectivism and future orientation in a recent cross-cultural study, it is argued that aspects of LO such as systems thinking, managing mental models, team learning, and developing shared visions, may face some problems in Iranian organizations. Some theoretical propositions are developed for further empirical investigations.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Management, Learning Organization, Power distance, Individualism, Collectivism

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Introduction

It has been argued that some psychological and management theories and models may not be universal and many, which have been developed in industrialized countries, are based on some cultural assumptions (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen, 1992; Dastmalchian, Javadian, and Alam, 2001; Hofstede, 1980, 1993, 2001; House, Javidan, Hanges, and Dorfman, 2002; Leung and Bond, 1989). The term 'etic' has been proposed to identify those psychological processes of human beings, which are universal. In contrast, the term 'emic' has been suggested to classify those, which are culturally specific (Berry et al., 1992; Dastmalchian, et al., 2001; Triandis, 1995). For example, it has been found that leadership attributions can be classified into etic and emic categories (Dastmalchian, et al., 2001; House, et al., 2002). In addition, some have suggested that even similar psychological attributions across cultures may be manifested differently and be consistent with cultural factors (Berry et al., 1992). The emic and etic approaches suggest that the effectiveness of some theories or models to predict individuals' behaviors may be culturally limited.

It has been argued that organizational culture can be highly influenced by societal culture (Hofstede, 2001). People's organizational behaviors may be partly related to their attitudes, beliefs, and values, which may be affected by some cultural factors (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). In addition, researchers and management theorists understand organizational phenomena based, in part, on some assumptions related to their societies' cultures (Hofstede, 1993, 2001). This suggests that aspects of some management theories and models, which have come from highly developed countries, may not be completely consistent with the cultural characteristics of other countries, and vice versa. This recognition has encouraged some researchers to examine some management theories and models from cultural perspectives. For example, Management by Objectives (MBO), Maslow's Theory, Total Quality Management (TQM) and some leadership theories have

been culturally examined (e.g., Galperin and Lituchy, 1999; Hofstede, 1980, 1993, 2001; Perry, 1997).

This paper, based on some past and recent cultural studies, argues that the efficacy of the Learning Organization (LO) model (Senge, 1990; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, and Ross, 1994) across different countries may vary due to cultural differences. Some theoretical ideas will be developed for further empirical investigation. In addition, it is argued that applying some aspects of this model may be culturally problematic in Iranian organizations. However, it is suggested that the model may still be worthwhile provided some cultural factors are accounted for in its application.

Literature review

Learning organizations

The learning organization (LO) model proposed by of Senge (1990) has five interrelated disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, shared visions, mental models, and team learning. Senge (1990) argued that development of these disciplines may enhance organizations' capacities for highly effective actions (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Roth, and Ross, 1999). Systems thinking has been considered a crucial aspect of LO (Senge, 1990). In brief, it refers to a holistic approach to identifying the dynamic relationships between different components of a phenomenon (Richardson, 1991; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). Systems thinking may be helpful for deeply understanding the effects of organizational actions (Senge, 1990). It has been suggested that systems thinking should be practiced in teams rather than individually, because the effectiveness of systems thinking may highly depend on taking as many perspectives as possible into account (Senge et al., 1994). Personal mastery, another discipline of LO, refers to the learning process of expanding personal capacity and improving the level of proficiency in order to achieve goals (Senge, et al., 1994). From this perspective, an encouraging

organizational environment to help employees improve their personal mastery is an important element of learning organizations. Senge (1990) also suggested shared visions as a discipline of LO. The latter refers to developing shared images of the future and guiding practices by which people hope to achieve their desires (Senge et al., 1994). Shared visions may improve collective actions in terms of people's commitments to their goals and organizational actions (Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990). When people have shared visions, they may be more likely to collectively put effort into their activities in order to achieve their visions and goals. Some studies of leadership have also paid attention to shared visions as an important factor (e.g., Yukl, 2001). Forming shared visions arguably means collectively working on what individuals see as their common future.

Senge and colleagues (1994), with respect to the mental model theory in cognitive psychology (Johnson-Laird, 1983) and the double-loop learning model (Argyris, 1982; Argyris and Schon, 1996), suggested that people's mental models are important factors in forming decisions and actions. Argyris and Schon (1996) argued that people are selective in data acquisition from their environment. They may quickly use a "ladder of inference" in their mind and create relationships among these new data with their assumptions and beliefs, and finally exhibit behaviors based on their inferences. Unfortunately, such inferences are usually untested and sometimes incorrect (Senge et al., 1994; Argyris and Schon, 1996). Implicit inferences are rapid, effortless, and outside conscious awareness. On the other hand, explicit inferences require awareness and effort (Johnson-Laird, 1983).

The single and double-loop learning models of organizational learning have been also proposed to distinguish two types of learning (Argyris and Schon, 1996). Put simply, a single-loop model is used when an organization changes the way of doing an action to prevent repeating unexpected and unacceptable results. However, double-loop learning refers to the modifying of those fundamental assumptions and values, which underlie that organizational action. It has been suggested that double-loop learning may develop more

effective ways of acting when single-loop learning is not functional, because of incorrect and inaccurate assumptions about a situation or problem (Argyris, 1999; Argyris and Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994).

Team learning briefly refers to continually enhancing collective capacities and improving team effectiveness (Senge, 1990). Reflection and inquiry have been suggested as two activities for team learning. These activities may be used when communicating to identify and modify mental models (Argyris and Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). "Reflection" refers to "slowing down our thinking processes to become more aware of how we form our mental models" (Senge et al., 1994: 237). "Inquiry" refers to "holding conversations where we openly share views and develop knowledge about each other's assumptions" (Senge, et al., 1994: 237). Schein (1993) suggested that after the reflection process, dialogue may be helpful for understanding other's viewpoints, and may make it possible to tell what is really on other's minds. It has been suggested that openness is crucial for effective inquiry (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). The dialogue process has been differentiated from discussion, and has been considered the core activity of inquiring and team learning (Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). Schein (1993) suggested that dialogue refers to confronting one's own and others' assumptions and revealing feeling after suspension of mental models. In contrast, discussion may be more helpful when convincing others about our ideas (Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990).

Cross-cultural studies

It has been well established that countries differ in some cultural dimensions, which include sets of values, norms, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Richardson, 1991; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). Cross-cultural researchers have used different cultural dimensions in their studies for different purposes (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Hofstede, 2001; Strunk and Chang, 1999; Trompenaars

and Hampden-Turner, 1997). For example, Hofstede (1980, 1993, 2001) proposed some universal dimensions such as power distance and individualism/collectivism to compare national cultures. Although Hofstede's (1980, 1993, 2001) classic dimensions were developed approximately three decades ago, many researchers have applied them in recent cross-cultural studies (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2002; Strunk and Chang, 1999; Triandis, 1995). However, some recent studies and theories have modified aspects of Hofstede's (1980) framework (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Triandis, 1995; House et al., 2002).

Although many cultural dimensions have been proposed and used in past cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; House et al., 2002), individualism, collectivism, and power distance will be emphasized in this paper. Individualism and collectivism have arguably been the most influential dimensions in many cross-cultural studies (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Hofstede, 1980, 1993, 2001, Strunk and Chang, 1999; Triandis, 1995). This may be because of the capacity of these dimensions to explain other cultural dimensions theoretically and empirically (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Hofstede, 2001). According to Hofstede (1980, 1993, 2001), individualism refers to the degree to which people are supposed to look after their personal interests rather than those of groups to which they may belong. On the other hand, collectivism refers to the extent to which individuals are integrated into their groups. Triandis (1995) defined collectivism as a social pattern in which people perceive themselves as a part of one or more collectives. Individualism referred to a social pattern in which people perceive themselves independent from collectives and highly emphasize their personal goals rather than collective goals. Hofstede (1980, 1993, 2001) argued that individualism and collectivism are two opposite poles of a continuum. However, Triandis and Gelfand (1998) showed that individualism and collectivism are two distinct dimensions, and both may exist in a culture. In addition, different types of individualism and collectivism may be identified in different countries

(Triandis, 1995; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998). Many studies have shown that different countries have different degrees of individualism and collectivism (e.g., Earley and Gibson, 1998; Hofstede, 1980, 1993, 2001; House, et al., 2001). Some countries such as the USA, Australia, the UK, Canada, and Netherlands have been found to be more individualistic than some other countries such as Colombia, China, Indonesia, and Taiwan which are more collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). According to Hofstede's (1980, 2001) studies, Iran ranked 24th among 53 countries in individualism with a small tendency to collectivism. It should be emphasized that Hofstede (1980) conducted his study in organizational contexts, in subsidiaries of the IBM Company in 72 countries. Therefore, the rank of Iran in that study may not be generalized to the whole of Iranian society, which may have been more collectivistic at that time.

Analysis at the country level differs from analysis at the individual level (Leung and Bond, 1989; Triandis, 1995). Study at the individual level is concerned with psychological and individual differences. On the other hand, study at the cultural level is concerned with differences between societies or nations regardless of individual differences within each society (Hofstede, 2001; Leung and Bond, 1989; Triandis, 1995). Some people in a collectivistic society may be idiocentric, individualism at the individual level, and some in an individualistic society may be allocentric, collectivism at the individual level (Triandis, 1995). Some methods and techniques have been proposed and used to differentiate analysis at the cultural from analysis at the individual level (Hofstede, 2001; Leung and Bond, 1989; Triandis, 1995).

Many researchers have tried to explain how culture affects individuals' attitudes and beliefs, and in turn how they may affect individual and group behaviors (Markus, and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis and Gelfand, 1998; Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, and Heyman, 1996). Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested that people in collectivistic societies are more likely to take their relatedness with others into account

when describing themselves; they have an interdependent construal of self. On the other hand, people in individualistic cultures are more likely to emphasize their uniqueness, rather than their connectedness with others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Individualism and collectivism as cultural dimensions have been shown to be related to communication styles through the mediating effect of self-construal (e.g., Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, and Heyman, 1996; Oetzel, 2001). Gudykunst and colleagues (1996) showed that university students with higher levels of self-interdependence were more concerned to take others' feelings into account to avoid offending behaviors, and tended to hide their feelings in communication in order to maintain harmony in their groups. This was considered a high context communication style (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Students with higher self-independence tended to emphasize openness and precision, and showing their personal feelings during communication; Gudykunst and colleagues (1996) called this a low context communication style.

The power distance dimension has been another important dimension in some cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995). This dimension deals with inequality of power between people and can be applied in both society and organization contexts (Hofstede, 2001). According to Hofstede (2001: 83) "The power distance between a boss B and a subordinate S in a hierarchy is the difference between the extent to which B can determine the behavior of S and the extent to which S can determine the behavior of B". Hofstede (1980; 2001) has argued that the power distance is accepted by both boss and subordinate. In addition, this acceptable power distance is supported by the social environment and national culture (Hofstede, 1980; 2001). It has been shown that countries differ in power distance (Dastmalchian et al., 2001; Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2002). Some countries such as Austria, Denmark, and New Zealand had low levels of power distance in Hofstede's studies. In contrast, some other countries such as Malaysia, Guatemala, Panama, and the Philippines had high levels of power distance. According to

Hofstede (1980), Iran ranked 27 in high power distance among 53 countries, close to the average of power distance for those countries (Hofstede, 1980, 2001).

It has been argued that because of a high correlation, (-0.68), between individualism/collectivism and power distance in Hofstede's (1980) study, these may not be distinct dimensions (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). However, Hofstede (2001) argued that they are indeed distinct because, first, they are conceptually different. The individualism/collectivism dimension is concerned with emotional independence from or dependence on groups, organizations, and other kinds of collectives. However, power distance is concerned with emotional dependence on more powerful people (Hofstede, 2001). Second, although most countries with high levels of individualism had low levels of power distance, some countries such as France and Belgium, which were called Latin European countries had cultures with both high power distance and high individualism (Hofstede, 2001), which also suggests that power distance differ from collectivism.

Recently, a study was carried out concerning leadership attributions and cultural factors in some Iranian companies (Dastmalchian, Javadian, and Alam, 2001). This study was part of the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness project (GLOBE), which was conducted in 61 countries (House et al., 2002). The aim of this project was "to investigate the existence of universally acceptable and universally unacceptable leadership attributes and to identify those attributes that are culture specific" (Dastmalchian et al., 2001: 537). The cultural dimensions of this study were modified versions of Hofstede's (1980, 2001) dimensions of culture. Societal collectivism, in-group collectivism, power distance, and some other cultural dimensions were considered in this study (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). Two different types of collectivism, societal collectivism and in-group collectivism were distinguished in the GLOBE project (House et al., 2002). Societal collectivism referred to "the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action"

(House et al., 2002: 5). However, in-group collectivism was defined as "the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations or families" (House et al., 2002: 5). Power distance, which was also used in Hofstede's (2001) studies, referred to "the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared" (House et al., 2002: 5). Three hundred Iranian middle managers from three industries, included banking, telecommunications, and food processing, participated in the study (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). Those managers were asked to rate to what extent they believed that the cultural factors listed above 'existed' in their every day organizational life. According to the results (Dastmalchian et al., 2001), Iranian manager reported fairly high levels of power distance (5.43 compared to the maximum score of 5.80 in the GLOBE list; the ranking was 14 out of 61) and in-group collectivism (6.03 compared to the maximum score of 6.36 in the GLOBE list; the ranking was 3 out of 61). However, Iranian managers reported quite a low level of societal collectivism (3.88 compared to the minimum score of 3.25 in the GLOBE list; the ranking was the 13th lowest country). That is, Iranian managers reported one of the highest in-group collectivism with high power distance, whereas one of the lowest societal collectivism (Dastmalchian, et al., 2001).

Iranian managers also reported to what extent they thought those cultural dimensions 'should be' (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). According to the results, Iranian managers reported a strong desire to decrease power distance in their culture. The differences between 'what was' and 'what should be' for power distance was the highest difference of all the dimensions (5.43 'what was' versus 2.80 'what should be'). Iranian managers were also likely to improve societal collectivism, given the difference between 'what was' and 'what should be' for societal collectivism (3.88 'what was' versus 5.44 'what should be'). It seems that those managers had little desire to change in-group collectivism, given the small

difference between ‘what was’ and ‘what should be’ for in-group collectivism (6.03 ‘what was’ versus 5.86 ‘what should be’).

Theoretical framework

This section argues why the effectiveness of LO across countries may vary due to cultural differences. Although the effectiveness of applying LO may be significantly different in different countries, the country level perspective, organizations in a given country may be more or less successful in applying the model, the organizational level perspective. Specifically, the first key argument put forward here is that Iranian organizations may face some cultural difficulties when applying the model. Second, there may be capacities in the organizational culture of some Iranian organizations, which enable them to be prepared for applying the model effectively. Some propositions are also developed for further empirical investigations.

Individualism and collectivism are important cultural factors, which may affect the effectiveness of applying LO. It has been argued that a fundamental issue for understanding collectivism and individualism is to distinguish in-groups and out-groups (Triandis, 1995). In-group refers to a collective in which members are highly interdependent and have a sense of common fate. In contrast, groups to which they do not belong are out-groups. Family may be a basic in-group in all societies. Some other kinds of in-groups in organizational contexts may be informal groups and organizations and organizational departments and units. People in collectivistic societies tend to belong to a few in-groups with great commitment and loyalty (Triandis, 1995). People in individualistic societies may belong to more in-groups, but their relationships with other group members tend to be looser than for collectivists. Therefore, individualists are arguably able to leave their groups more easily than collectivists. There is evidence that collectivists are more likely to distinguish out-groups from in-groups than individualists (Triandis, 1995). That is, collectivists are more

likely than individualists to perceive a person from other groups as a stranger. This may be because collectivists identify an individual as an in-group member when they perceive a strong sense of interdependence with her/him (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Given the high level of in-group collectivism reported by Iranian managers (Dastmalchian et al., 2001), and the categorisation of in-groups and out-groups, many Iranians may possess strong attachments to their groups, and if they perceive some team members as members of an out-group, they may be less likely to cooperate with them effectively. In addition, this may undermine organizations' efforts to build teams for systems thinking. Senge and colleagues (1994) suggested that taking different perspectives into account when analyzing a situation or problem systematically may require teams to regularly invite new members who view things differently. Therefore, effective systems thinking may require building teams consisting of members from different groups who may have different belief systems. Although communication with such diversity may be difficult in any culture, this may be more difficult in collectivistic cultures when people strongly distinguish in-groups from out-groups. This may be more problematic in large organizations which may have many groups. Collectivists may need much more time to develop functional inter-personal relationships with other team members who may be perceived as out-group members (Watson, Johnson, and Zgourides, 2002).

Working in teams in order to consider different perspectives of a situation can be more problematic if people live in a culture with low level of societal collectivism. Societal collectivism, which emphasizes encouraging and rewarding collective distribution of resources and collective action (House et al., 2002), was one of the lowest scores of Iranian managers in the GLOBE project compared to the managers of other countries. Therefore, it is argued that systems thinking as a collaborative process may face more difficulties in Iranian organizations than similar organizations in some other countries with lower in-group collectivism and higher societal collectivism, given the high level of in-group collectivism

and the low level of societal collectivism reported by Iranian managers in the GLOBE project (Dastmalchian et al., 2001).

Proposition 1: Systems thinking in teams is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with high in-group collectivism such as Iranian culture, when team members are from different groups.

Proposition 2: Systems thinking in teams is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with low societal collectivism such as Iranian culture.

Some studies have demonstrated that social norms and values are more important than personal attitudes, opinions, and attributions in collectivistic societies (e.g., Triandis, 1995). Collectivists may be more likely to pay attention to social norms and values in order to maintain harmony and their interdependence with group members (Triandis, 1995). Consequently, they may perceive quite rigidly what correct actions are in a given situation (Triandis, 1995). However, individualists may be less rigid about correct actions in a given situation and may have multiple choices, sometimes conflicting, about what to do (Triandis, 1995). This may be a consequence of loose relationships with group members, which allow individualists to behave differently from what may be expected in their group. That is, collectivists are more likely than individualists to decide the appropriateness of their behaviors in a given social context based on social norms and values. In addition, Gudykunst and colleagues (1996) found that independent and interdependent self-construal were mediators between individualism/collectivism and communication styles. They showed significant relationships between self-interdependence and the tendency to context-oriented behaviors such as hiding arguments, which may hurt other's feelings or may create negative impressions (Gudykunst et al., 1996).

Reflection has been suggested as a key skill for team learning and identifying mental models during team communication (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). Although people

from different countries and cultures may be able to improve their skills of reflection, they may perceive the challenge of learning and improving of these skills differently. The emphasis of collectivists on contextual factors may affect the process of reflection. Reflection can be arguably effective for learning when people are able to critically slow down their thinking and inference processes to identify their untested assumptions (Senge et al., 1994). During communication, people from collectivistic cultures may greatly concentrate on the activation of those cognitive schemas, which determine their socially acceptable and expected behaviors. The simultaneous attention to both contextual factors and reflection during communication may be cognitively difficult, especially in collectivistic cultures in which attention to norms, values, and interpersonal relations are highly emphasized (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). However, improving the skills of reflection may be easier for people in more individualistic cultures, because they may not cognitively take as many social norms and other contextual factors into account when communicating, as collectivists may do. That is, learning how to use and improve reflection skills during communication may be more cognitively difficult in collectivistic than individualistic cultures. Given the high degree of in-group collectivism of Iranian managers, Dastmalchian and colleagues (2001) suggested that loyalty and expressing pride and cohesiveness towards family, organizations, and other in-group collectives are prominent features of the Iranian societal culture. Iranian may be more likely to emphasize the contextual factors of communication than people of other countries with lower in-group collectivism because of Iranians' strong interdependence with their groups. Therefore, Iranian organizations may be more likely to face some difficulties when encouraging their employees to use reflection than similar organizations in other countries with less in-group collectivism.

Proposition 3: Reflection during communication is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with high in-group collectivism, such as Iranian culture.

A high level of power distance may also be problematic for improving the reflection skill as a key component of team learning and modifying mental models. People may have difficulty critically analyzing their own thinking during communication with powerful individuals when obedience is emphasized and valued in a culture with a high level of power distance (Hofstede, 2001). That is, when power distance is high, people may be expected and required to make their ideas consistent with powerful individuals' ideas rather than critically examine their own ideas. In addition, inquiry, another key behavioral skill of team learning and eliciting of mental models, may be effective when people can communicate openly. As Senge (1990) argued, openness is the crucial element of team learning. Openness may encourage people to exchange their ideas and also take others' ideas into account (Gibson, 2001; Senge, 1990; Schein, 1993). Given that obedience is highly emphasized in cultures with high power distance (Dastmalchian et al., 2001; Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995), it is argued that when people communicate in a context with high power distance, they may not be effectively able to express their ideas openly and use inquiry in order to identify each other's assumptions as has been recommended (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). Inquiring requires interactive asking of questions during conversations to share and exchange views and knowledge in order to identify and modify mental models (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994). It would appear to be very difficult to use inquiry in this way (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994) when communicating with powerful individuals in a culture with great power distance. High level of power distance may affect the ways in which people use inquiry in different situations. A high level of power distance may require people to determine their ideas and behaviors according to what powerful individuals such as their senior managers expect of them

(Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, they may use inquiry mostly for understanding what powerful individuals expect of them. In addition, it is argued that people in cultures with high level of power distance may be more likely to openly exchange their ideas with other co-workers, rather than with their powerful managers. This may be related to their comfort of having open conversations with similar co-workers rather than their senior managers. This suggests that inquiry may be more effective in cultures with lower power distance. Given the high level of power distance in Iranian organizations (Dastmalchian et al., 2001), from a cultural level perspective, it is argued that Iranian organizations may be less able to effectively encourage inquiry when communicating, than similar organizations in other countries with lower power distance. However, the strong desire of Iranian managers to decrease power distance in their workplace (Dastmalchian et al., 2001) may be helpful in facilitating the changing of organizational culture in order to encourage inquiring in organizational communication.

Proposition 4: Reflection during communication is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with high power distance such as Iranian culture.

Proposition 5: Inquiry is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with high power distance such as Iranian culture.

Systems thinking may also be problematic when working in an organization with a high level of power distance. When power distance is high, 'who wants what' may become more important than 'what is right' (Senge, 1990). That is, power becomes the key factor of organizational processes such as decision-making and the distribution of resources. Therefore, people may put considerable effort into gaining more power in terms of exercising political games to improve their influence in organizational processes (Pfeffer, 1994). This may highlight political factors and undermine consideration of other organizational factors when thinking systematically. In addition, the collaborative nature of

systems thinking, considering different perspectives of a situation or problem (Senge et al., 1994), may require organizations to build teams in order to analyze a situation or problem systematically. As was mentioned earlier, a high level of power distance may also undermine team activities in terms of reflection and inquiry.

Proposition 6: Systems thinking in teams is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with high power distance such as Iranian culture.

It is also argued that the processes of building shared visions may face difficulties in some Iranian organizations. In the study of Dastmalchian and colleagues (2001), Iranian managers reported a low level of future orientation and a high level of in-group collectivism (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). Future orientation was defined as "the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies engage in future-oriented behaviors such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification" (House et al., 2002: 6). Given this definition, people in societies with higher future-orientation may be more likely to practice building personal and shared visions. These future oriented behaviors were not highly reported by Iranian managers compared to the managers of other countries (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). However, they reported a strong desire to improve future orientation. A high level of in-group collectivism may also be problematic for building shared visions in some situations, in which individuals are members of each other's out-groups. As was mentioned earlier, because of high in-group collectivism, Iranians may not be likely to work cooperatively with other who may be identified as out-group members. In addition, because of the low level of societal collectivism reported by Iranian managers (Dastmalchian et al., 2001), there may not be organizational atmospheres conducive to collective working which is necessary for building shared visions.

Proposition 7: Developing shared visions is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with low future orientation such as Iranian culture.

Proposition 8: Developing shared visions is likely to be less effective in organizations which are embedded in cultures with low societal collectivism such as Iranian culture.

Conclusions

This paper has suggested a theoretical framework for conducting some empirical studies of applying the Learning Organization (LO) model across different cultures. It has been argued that the effectiveness of the LO model across different countries may vary due to cultural differences in terms of some dimensions such as in-group and societal collectivism, power distance, and future orientation. Although applying LO may face some problems in any kind of organization, it may be more problematic when an organization is embedded in a culture with high levels of power distance and in-group collectivism and low levels of societal collectivism and future orientation. Given that Iranian culture may be considered in-group collectivistic with high level of power distance, some aspects of the model may be very difficult to effectively apply. However, the reported strong desire of managers to reduce power distance and improve societal collectivism and future orientation could result in some changes that could facilitate application of the model in some Iranian organizations. Some propositions have been developed for further empirical investigations.

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