

Knowledge Sharing through Communities of Practice: Exploring the cross-cultural interface

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Abstract

While communities of practice are often situated within culturally complex organisations, it is still relatively unclear what kinds of challenges arise, when knowledge is shared at cross-cultural interfaces. This paper explores the topic of knowledge sharing through communities of practice with a specific focus on the intersections between multiple intra-organisational cultures. Guided by a social constructivist epistemology and Foucauldian discourse theory, the findings suggest that we should pay more attention to the social practices by which knowledge becomes legitimated. It is argued that, rather than focusing too narrowly on the cognitive processes of individuals, the study of knowledge sharing should be located within a broader socio-cultural framework.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural and economic factors of globalisation have heavily transformed the cultural composition and practices of modern organisations during the past decades. Perhaps more than ever, co-workers are required to network and communicate at the intersections of multiple cultures such as professional culture, regional culture, national culture, organisational culture, and departmental culture. While there is certainly an increasing recognition of the relevance of culture in KM, there has been relatively little research focusing specifically on knowledge sharing at the intersections between these multiple cultures. Existing knowledge sharing studies have used an approach, which tends to focus, at the outset, on national culture (e.g. Chow et al., 1999, Yoo and Torrey, 2002, Ford and Chan, 2003, Ardichvili et al., 2006). More importantly, this kind of research has been informed by an essentialist approach to culture (Hofstede, 1980, Hofstede, 1991, Trompenaars, 1993), which guides the study of cultural encounters between well-defined, homogenous entities. This approach may well be seen to be “out of touch with the connectivities and networks of the global economy” (Pauleen et al., 2007, p. 5). Some authors have thus started to endorse a social constructivist perspective and define culture as both a process and form of knowledge (e.g. Holden, 2002, Myers and Tan, 2002). The focus is then shifted towards the study of cross-cultural interfaces, which can be understood as “multi-layered and multi-dimensional space[s] of dynamic relations” [...], “of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses” (Nakata, 2007, p. 199). Interestingly, communities of practice (CoPs) have been relatively unexplored in these dynamic cross-cultural dimensions. While CoPs are complex domains of cultural encounters, it is still relatively unclear what kinds of challenges arise when knowledge is shared at cross-cultural interfaces and in which ways these challenges are tackled. The objective of this paper is thus to explore the topic of knowledge sharing through CoPs with a specific focus on cross-cultural interfaces and to stimulate further research and discussion on the subject. Following this introduction, part two clarifies the concept of culture underpinning the paper. Part three discusses the literature on knowledge sharing through CoPs in relation to culture. Part four outlines the methodology of the study and presents and discusses its empirical findings. Part five provides a conclusion.

2. PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE

According to Raymond Williams, culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams, 1983, p. 87). It has been applied in a variety of intellectual disciplines for different purposes and with different epistemological underpinnings. In KM studies to date, an essentialist perspective has predominantly been applied to definitions of culture. However, a number of authors have also started to embrace a more social constructivist understanding (e.g. Holden, 2002, Myers and Tan, 2002), which informs the theoretical and empirical orientation of this paper.

2.1 THE ESSENTIALIST VIEW

I have argued elsewhere (Heizmann, 2008) that the most frequently adopted definition of culture in the KM field is that of Hofstede, who sees culture as the “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25). The underlying assumption of this definition is that members of the same culture have been socialised in the same environment and thus share a set of common values. Based on his large quantitative studies (Hofstede, 1980, Hofstede, 1991), Hofstede was able to define pairs of universal value orientations such as individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, or long-term and short-term orientation. This approach has been useful in highlighting large-scale differences between national cultures and provides a relatively straightforward method of classification and comparison. It is thus understandable, that, in the emerging empirical literature on KM and culture, researchers have readily adopted the value orientation model.

However, despite its popularity, critics are rightly calling into question the idea of a relative homogeneity, stability, and coherence of cultures based on shared values (Hansen, 2003, Bolten, 2004, Rathje, 2007). Specifically in the KM context, it has been argued that such a view fails to capture the nuances and complexities of the global business world, where cultural differences intersect in myriad ways (Holden, 2002, p. 28). The idea of fixed cultural boundaries, for instance, has led to a focus on cross-cultural knowledge sharing barriers between established groups, while less research attention has been dedicated to the emergence of new cultural links through knowledge sharing (King, 2008).

2.2 THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW

In the broader realm of the social sciences, we can find a number of alternative conceptualisations of culture, which seek to move beyond essentialist premises. In particular, these include the views of culture as a process and culture as knowledge, both of which are fundamentally linked to a social constructivist epistemology.

2.2.1 Culture as process

The notion of culture as a process has been relatively prominent in the recent cultural studies and communication literature. It links culture with the social construction of reality. For instance, the communications theorist James Carey defines culture “as a set of practices, a mode of human activity, a process whereby reality is created, maintained and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 65). Culture is understood here as a verb, not a noun. Stuart Hall, the founding father of British cultural studies, shares Carey’s understanding of culture as an activity by which social reality is created, but pays more attention to the intricacies of this process. In the terminology of Hall, participating in the same culture means to “share broadly the same conceptual map and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways” (Hall, 1997, p. 18). This shared conceptual map is translated into a common language, which allows us to convey the meaning of mental representations to others. The relationship between conceptual maps and language is governed by a code system, which enables

the members of a culture to code and decode meaning in similar ways. Belonging to a culture thus does not necessarily mean to converge with other members on certain value orientations. Rather, as we shall see in a moment, culture defines what is normal and possible (Hansen, 2003, p. 233).

2.2.2 Culture as knowledge

The process view of culture is also linked to an understanding of culture as knowledge. Through learning the code system, we acquire knowledge about the subtle differences within a given group and gradually gain a sense of familiarity. This phenomenon of becoming familiar with intra-cultural differences has been characterised by the German cultural theorist Hansen as cultural cohesion (Hansen, 2003). In essence, a cohesion-oriented view looks at culture as glue, which connects, rather than unifies people (Rathje, 2007). The basis upon which culture can operate as glue is *common* knowledge. A similar approach to culture can be found in Holden's work (2001, 2002), which seeks to make culture accessible from a KM perspective. Holden defines culture as "infinitely overlapping and perpetually redistributable habitats of common knowledge and shared meaning" (Holden, 2002, p. 227). This definition has the advantage of capturing the dynamic changes within cultures. It completely abandons the notion of culture as something stable and homogenous with fixed boundaries. Rather culture is seen as emergent, contested, and dynamic (Myers and Tan, 2002).

In order to better understand the nature of common knowledge and the tensions between different types of common knowledge, it is useful to go back to a less recent conceptualisation of culture as knowledge, which can be found in the work of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980). In essence, Foucauldian discourse theory explains the formation of and relations between different bodies of social knowledge. It is rooted in a deep scepticism in notions of a fixed or absolute truth. Instead, Foucault suggests that there are many truths, each with its own rationality within a particular socio-historic discourse (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 19). Discourses (e.g. the discourse on 'Learning and Organisational Effectiveness') claim to say what an object (e.g. 'performance management') really is; they claim to know its true nature. Groups of individuals, who participate in the same discourse, share the same specialised language and related bodies of social knowledge, as well as the same mechanisms of establishing 'truth'. While Foucault does not explicitly use the term culture, his notion of discourse is certainly in close proximity to a social constructivist understanding of culture. As we shall see presently, his theories allow us to better understand the dynamic intersections between multiple cultures.

2.2.3 The cross-cultural interface

The dynamic intersections between multiple cultures have been usefully conceptualised as cultural or cross-cultural interfaces (Holden, 2002, Nakata, 2007). The advantage of the term 'interface' is that it does not imply a robust or permanent boundary. Rather, it is a physical or metaphysical point of contact (Holden, 2002, p. 212). Cross-cultural contact may occur between different types of cultures, including

for instance the cultures of specific professional, functional, ethnic, or age groups (Sackmann, 1997). This view is based on an anti-essentialist understanding, which assumes that an individual's identity is constructed out of multiple cultural affiliations (Sackmann, 1997, Hansen, 2003). Subjectivity emerges through the dialogue between the subject and its unique combination of cultural experiences and affiliations. This broader approach to culture should not be taken to imply that the influence of national culture is not acknowledged. Rather than dismissing the concept of national culture altogether, we are required to consider the position of national identity as one cultural affiliation, or, as Hall (1996) puts it, as one discursive construct amongst others. The relevance of each affiliation in a particular context of cross-cultural interaction is an empirical, rather than a theoretical one (Sackmann et al., 1997, p. 34).

Integrating Foucault's work into this perspective means paying particular attention to relations between different discourses and discourse communities. The cross-cultural interface then involves the dialogue between different, sometimes competing and contesting discourses, existing within different knowledge traditions. Since the use of discourse is inextricably linked to power (Foucault, 1980), the cross-cultural interface is a space that involves both the potential for synergy and conflict. This has been pointed out incisively by the indigenous education researcher Martin Nakata, who argues that as much as the cross-cultural interface is "overlaid by various theories, narratives, and arguments that work to produce [...] consensual, and co-operative social practices, it is also a space that abounds with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation of meanings" (Nakata, 2007, p. 199). Nakata's definition reveals a compellingly complex understanding of cross-cultural contact, which seems to resonate better with the fluid and dynamic networks that are deemed so important in today's globalised business world.

3. KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

While there has been a considerable hype around CoPs in recent management literature (Roberts, 2006, p. 623), the concept is far from being new. CoPs as a locus for knowledge sharing, learning and practice have existed since the early days of mankind, and today, "every organization and industry has its own history of practice-based communities, whether formally recognized or not" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5). The recent interest and attention, however, has been linked to a growing body of research in human sciences that explores the situated character of human understanding and communication (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 14). Against the backdrop of an increasingly important socio-cultural perspective on KM (Olsson and Halbwirth, 2007), CoPs offer an alternative to functionalist or techno-centric approaches to the management of knowledge. Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that administrative or managerial control alone does not guarantee successful knowledge sharing. In contrast, they draw attention to the existence of non-canonical work practices in CoPs, which are developed in the course of pursuing a joint enterprise (Brown and Duguid, 1991, Wenger, 1998). Rather than giving emphasis to the formal codification of knowledge, the CoP perspective shows the relevance of informal information and knowledge practices among people who share similar domains of activity (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1190). The relevance of culture is usually seen in the

relationships between shared practices, knowledge sharing, and the development of a shared identity and joint repertoire.

3.1 SHARED PRACTICES AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Conventional approaches conceptualise knowledge sharing and learning as the transfer of knowledge from a sending to a receiving person. They are rooted in the classic information transmission model, which views communication primarily as a mechanical process, in which a message is first constructed and encoded by a sender, then transmitted through a channel, and finally received and decoded by a receiver (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Ever since the interpretive turn of the 1980s, this mechanistic view of communication has been increasingly criticised for conceptualising knowledge/information as a thing, which is first “possessed by a sender and then dumped into the heads of receivers as though they were empty buckets” (Foreman-Wernet, 2003, p. 5). CoP researchers dispute the idea that knowledge may be successfully ‘internalised’ without any engagement in social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 43). In contrast, they see learning as a by-product of participation in CoPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 35). Particularly, CoP members can share knowledge without an explicit articulation of the tacit dimension of knowledge, which is embedded in the shared context of practice.

In the absence of shared practices, knowledge is hard to transfer. “It becomes ‘sticky’ and therefore dramatically tests the absorptive capacity of the receiver” (Holden, 2001, p. 159). The argument is thus that some of the advantages of sharing knowledge within CoPs are diminished or lost when knowledge is shared across communal boundaries (Brown and Duguid, 1998, Carlile, 2002, Østerlund and Carlile, 2005). Sharing the same perspective of practice may blind community members for alternative views and limit innovation. This is particularly an issue when knowledge is shared across functions, across national and regional offices, or across organisations. “It is at these knowledge boundaries that we find the deep problems that specialised knowledge poses to organisations” (Carlile, 2002, p. 442).

3.2 SHARED PRACTICES AND CULTURE

One of the key arguments of Lave and Wenger’s work is that shared practices bring forth the development of a shared identity and culture (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998). Through common tasks, work schedules, and ongoing peer relations, co-workers gradually develop a common repertoire. This involves “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). The CoP is a cultural environment in that it provides, in essence, a context of shared meaning.

This should however not lead us to believe that CoPs are generally stable and ‘tightly-knit’ groups (Lindkvist, 2005, p. 1194). According to Lave and Wenger, the culture of CoPs is constantly evolving through the continuous negotiation of meaning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 56). CoPs are social groups where both knowledgeable identities and the identity of the community are constantly constructed, reproduced, modified

and changed. There are thus ongoing and, at times, conflictive dynamics *within* CoPs. These are also linked to the broader socio-cultural context in which they are situated. As Handley et al. (2006) rightly point out, we need to take into consideration “relations and identifications in terms of, for example, gender, ethnicity, class, occupation and generation, as well as spatial groupings such as regions and work location” (p. 648). Interestingly, this aspect of diverse and dynamically shifting relationships has been more or less neglected in the CoP literature (Handley et al., 2006, p. 648). It is in this particular aspect that we can see the usefulness of a social constructivist perspective on culture, which allows for a more complex understanding of cross-cultural contact within and beyond CoPs. Rather than looking at CoPs as homogenous social objects, researchers are required to be sensitive to the tensions within CoPs and the ways these are linked to other socio-cultural relations.

4. THE STUDY

In the following, I will draw on the preliminary results of a qualitative case study on the cultural dynamics of knowledge sharing through communities of practice to further explore and illustrate some of the issues discussed above.

4.1 METHODOLOGY

The case study is based on an inductive approach and seeks to explore knowledge sharing issues and enablers in the participants’ everyday work life with a particular focus on cultural interfaces. To this end, 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with a group of in-house consultants in the area of Human Resources (HR) and Communications (Comms). This community was considered particularly interesting, since a large part of their work involved interacting across functional, regional, or national boundaries. The consultants are situated in a global insurance company with headquarters in Sydney. Functionally, they form part of the organisation’s HR group. Their tasks centre around organisational learning and development ranging from delivering staff induction seminars on corporate culture, planning and implementing leadership development, talent management, and workforce planning, to consulting of specific business units on HR and communication matters. Starting with a group of 5 consultants, further participants were selected through snowball sampling, i.e. through using the participants’ own contacts. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and lasted, on average, 60min.

Interview studies have been criticised for eliciting mainly opinions rather than giving insight into behaviours (Kvale, 1996, p. 292). The interviews therefore were guided by an approach that focuses on the participants’ experiences of everyday work incidences, starting with descriptions of actual behaviours and, thereafter, exploring more closely the participants’ interpretations of the situation (Sundin, 2001). In addition, I observed meetings and staff induction workshops and analysed organisational documents to inform the interviews. Rather than using academic KM concepts, I have sought to use language, which mirrored the participants’ everyday work speech. Following Sundin’s socio-cultural approach (Sundin, 2001), interview analysis was undertaken on a descriptive, interpretive, and discursive level. The participants’ stories were thus analysed in terms of how they describe their everyday

work life, how they interpret these experiences, and how these interpretations can be understood against the background of broader socio-cultural discourses within the knowledge domain.

4.2 KNOWLEDGE SHARING AT CROSS-CULTURAL INTERFACES

4.2.1 Key issues

Particularly when asked to describe challenging work projects, the participants gave diverse accounts of knowledge sharing issues and the causal relationships they saw. The most common issues were related to professional or functional specialisation, lack of trust and time, and power relationships.

Specialisation

A significant barrier to knowledge sharing was the specialisation, which occurred within different organisational groups. The participants found it difficult to gain acceptance and understanding, if co-workers were not familiar with the HR perspective. One of the in-house consultants explained how sharing knowledge is becoming increasingly complicated the further “physically and philosophically” his clients get away from HR:

And I think (...) from a cultural point of view I suppose that's probably the key difference is that in a sense, um, HR is a, you know, small world. Within that world we're pretty well connected now, and we have a fairly good understanding of what each different area is doing and what the key projects are and why we're, you know— we know the philosophy behind it. (...) So we know what the strategy is, we know why we're doing these things. As you get further away from that circle of HR, there's less understanding of that. And so you have to do a lot more of that filling in of the *why* and the process stuff about how we're doing it.

Regular informal interactions and a range of formal knowledge sharing mechanisms, such as update meetings, newsletters, and recognition sessions facilitated information exchange and the sense of a joint enterprise within the HR community based in Sydney. However, the participants struggled at times when trying to share knowledge with people in other organisational areas, where contextual knowledge about HR practices and perspectives did not exist.

Interestingly, these difficulties were perceived to occur on the very basic level of language use. For instance, the training coordinator of the company's Learning and Development programs observed significant language barriers when knowledge was shared between his immediate team (Learning and Organisational Effectiveness) and the IT area:

If someone in Learning and Organisational Effectiveness identifies an area for organisational growth within that IT team, and we start talking to them about that, we might as well be speaking Dutch to these guys. You know, they don't understand necessarily that language and they don't understand the need for that change, and, you know, all they wanna do is focus on their role. And if you reverse that it would be the same. (...) I told you about me and

technology. If someone from IT talks to me about what they do it's "blah blah blah", that's all I hear is "blah blah blah".

Knowledge blocks are thus not confined to settings, in which different national languages co-exist (Ford and Chan, 2003, Peltokorpi, 2006), but may equally occur at the discursive intersections of different functional or occupational groups. This is consistent with the findings of Wenger (1998) and van Maanen and Barley (1984), which show that members of the same CoP or occupational community use similar discursive repertoires and communication patterns, which, without the respective cross-cultural know-how, remain completely alien to the 'non-native' speaker.

Trust and time

Trust is among the most often cited factors that seem to promote KS and is particularly important, when people are culturally distant (e.g. Davenport and Prusak, 1998, Widen-Wulff, 2007, Ipe, 2003). According to Mayer et al. interpersonal trust is based on the belief that the other person will behave or react in a certain predictable way (Mayer et al., 1995). In the interviews, trust often appeared to be an issue in relation to different professional backgrounds. For instance, a communication consultant noted that his attempts to share knowledge with IT professionals were frustrated by a lack of trust in his professional affiliation.

And I guess part of the thing about sharing knowledge is you have to develop a level of trust with that person that you're working for and has asked you to transfer knowledge, transfer information. Because, you know, they have in their mind when they think "ah, you're a communication person!", "ah, you're a spin doctor!".

The consultant was facing a degree of cynicism towards the profession as a whole because of the prior experiences IT staff had had with consultants. He felt misrepresented in that they would look at him and go "you're just froth and bubble" and then very quickly dismiss him "as just a Comms person". This was threatening his working relationships and made knowledge sharing inherently difficult. However, interviews with HR consultants showed that the problem of trust seemed to go beyond the credibility of particular professional affiliations. For instance, lack of trust was an important issue when Sydney-based HR consultants were interacting with regional HR managers. Even though regional HR managers were understood as part of the same broader CoP, the physical distance and lack of time hindered the negotiation of what Sackmann and Friesl (2007) have called a 'shared cultural reality'.

That's a challenge that you don't have the time to build relationships when it's over the phone. You know, we don't have much time to see each other, to know what's going on in each others lives and learn about each other, and when you meet, you know, three or four times a year, and it's usually work-related, talking about the strategy for the next 12 months, not a lot of time to build relationships. And that just sort of encourages this 'us' and 'them'. Cos' they're making assumptions about what we're doing and vice versa.

Limited direct interactions made it difficult for the HR professionals to become familiar with different discursive viewpoints, resulting in a sense of cultural distance. However, while time was seen a scarce resource in the modern business environment, some of the participants recognised that investing time in developing relationships could also save time in the long run. One of the consultants described the problem as

the ‘catch 22’ phenomenon: “I don’t have enough time to talk to you, but because I haven’t talked to you my job is now harder, which means I don’t have time to talk to you”.

Power relationships

In the interviews, participants were often describing and interpreting knowledge sharing issues in relation to power relations. A particularly good example of this was the interaction between Sydney-based HR consultants and regional HR managers. For instance, one of the consultants related how perceptions of power affected knowledge sharing:

If I think about that HR BP (business partner) team that we work with. They’re based in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Brisbane. And I’ve noticed that culturally you need to be more – you have to be aware of the terminology. So there’s very much a viewpoint and I think it’s in all companies, there’s, you know, (...) “head office is in Sydney”, “it’s the Mecca”, “all the decisions are made in the east”, “all the decisions are made in Sydney”, you know what I mean? And you can get the “you do not understand our business”, what it’s like for us in Victoria, Tasmania.” You have to be careful. I find I have to be careful in the language I use. (...) You need to be cognisant that they sit in another region and you don’t sound like Sydney is coming to tell.

The excerpt shows how local HR managers had negative perceptions of Sydney headquarters as the ‘centre of power’. Following up on this issue revealed that negative perceptions were often mutual and linked to different discourses on the role and function of HR. Regional HR managers were following what could be called the ‘traditional’ HR discourse, which revolved around being a direct support and contact point for employees. In contrast, the consultants located in Sydney had been exposed to an alternative philosophy, cascading down from the Executive level, which saw the role of HR as supporting leaders in managing their staff more effectively. One of the Sydney-based consultants commented on the regional HR managers’ approach:

I think we probably think they get too involved in stuff that they shouldn’t get involved in to be honest. They’re not concentrating on what we should be doing and (they are) getting involved in nitty gritty stuff that should be the manager’s job.

In general, regional HR managers felt more accountable towards general staff, whereas Sydney-based HR consultants saw Executives as their direct ‘customers’. These different HR discourses and stakeholder pressures affected knowledge sharing at both ends. While regional HR managers felt that they were missing out on important information from headquarters, Sydney-based HR consultants found it difficult to gain *acceptance* for the knowledge they sought to share with regional HR managers.

4.2.2 Key enablers

While the previous sections focused on knowledge sharing issues, which occur at cultural interfaces, the participants’ stories also provided rich accounts of how knowledge sharing could be enabled in such complex circumstances. Two aspects

were considered as particularly crucial: 1. Translating between different languages, 2. Gaining trust and acceptance.

Translating between different languages

The idea of likening knowledge transfer to acts of translation has gained some popularity in the KM community (Brown and Duguid, 1998, Holden and von Kortzfleisch, 2004, Dixon, 2000). Indeed, if translation is seen as “a kind of knowledge conversion which seeks to create common cognitive ground among people, among whom differences in language are a barrier to comprehension” (Holden and von Kortzfleisch, 2004, p. 129), the analogy of knowledge transfer is readily at hand. The interviews showed how learning and applying the language of different organisational groups was essential for the consultants.

For instance, one of the consultants related how she tended to translate Learning & Development objectives into concrete business issues, in order to gain acceptance from the business unit she was working with.

You'd wanna put it in their language if you can. So if you're trying to sell an idea you sell it through the business impact for example. (...) You don't use L&D (Learning and Development) speak, they don't care, and why would they? (...) You just don't use the language that says that and then they're much more receptive to it.

As Brown and Duguid argue, translators need to “frame the interests of one community in terms of another community's perspective” (Brown and Duguid, 1998, p. 103). Asking questions and speaking to people within the respective communities was seen as an important way of learning the language and becoming familiar with different work domains. Interestingly, this very process of seeking information was often part of a broader strategy of building trust and gaining acceptance.

Gaining trust and acceptance

Generally, consultants were going to great lengths to gain the ‘buy-in’ of the people they were working with. For instance, a communications consultant related how he would give everything he wrote as part of an organisational change project with the IT department to someone from within that group. This was because he had realised that the IT group had their own way of verifying the “veracity of information”, which involved a thorough scrutinising of texts for everything which sounded like “fluffy” HR talk. Credibility was not existing at the outset but was established in a two-way process with people from within the IT community: “I've learned that you must have a foot in either camp, if you're going to share knowledge.”

Another HR consultant who was working with a range of different business units explained how involving people into the process of designing a project, could minimise problems of acceptance later down the track:

If I'm going out and talking to a business group (...) trying to show them something, (...) I'll make sure that as part of my presentation I'll talk about the process and I'll say, you know, “when we drafted these, we sent them out to Fred and Mary and George and Martha and they

all gave us feedback”. And they’re their peers. So they know straight away “ah, okay, so we’ve had some input into this from our area of the business”. Straight away there’s a different mindset, you know, there’s an acceptance of that. If you go out and just say, well, we’ve developed this in HR and here it is, there will tend to be an attitude of, you know, “we’ll see whether this suits us or not”.

Seeking feedback was providing useful input and made HR projects more relevant to the groups at which they were directed. However, at the same time, consultants were very aware of the relevance of peer groups and mechanisms of social legitimisation. The feedback process was thus also seen as a necessary pre-condition for the approval of projects.

4.3 DISCUSSION

In parallel with a growing body of KM research, the study confirms the relevance of culture for knowledge sharing. However, the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study draw attention to a range of issues, which have been relatively unexplored in knowledge sharing research in general and CoP research in particular.

Firstly, the study’s findings support the critique of Handley et al. (2006) who have argued that we should pay attention to the cultural diversity within CoPs, rather than understanding CoPs as homogenous social objects. In the study, two cultural relations were prominent: (1) identifications with different regional locations (e.g. Sydney and Western Australia) (2) identifications with different occupational communities (e.g. HR and Communications). Moreover, when knowledge was shared across community boundaries, there was a strong sense of cultural difference between organisational functions (e.g. IT vs. HR). Interestingly, other cultural identifications such as ethnicity or national culture played a minor role when participants were talking about their everyday work. Rather, the participants’ accounts seemed to indicate that, given the nature of the typical Australian workplace, most people were used to working in a multi-cultural and hybrid environment to the point where they no longer saw ethnicity/national culture as a challenge to their daily work interactions. More important than demographic factors was the lack of time and spatial distance, which hindered direct and regular interactions between community members. While the cross-cultural interface between Sydney-based and regional HR professionals was overlaid by different discourses on stakeholder responsibilities, opportunities for creating a shared cultural reality and bridging discursive boundaries were limited. The latter point resonates with the critique of Roberts (2006), who stresses that CoPs do not function in a vacuum, but are embedded in a broader socio-cultural context including different accountabilities and identifications.

Following on from this, the study’s findings suggest that we need to take into consideration the ways in which CoP members use different discourses to socially position themselves. With a few exceptions (e.g. Schreiber and Moring, 2001, Gordon and Grant, 2005), Foucault’s discourse theory has so far received limited attention and use in KM research. The findings of this study suggest, however, that discourse analysis can yield interesting results within a socio-cultural framework of KM research. Specifically, it offers a way to move beyond the study of knowledge sharing as a mechanistic process, in which the object ‘knowledge’ is transferred from a sender

to a receiver, existing somewhat independent from context. Rather than thinking of knowledge as originating in the minds of individuals, it is useful to recognise the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed on a group-level. This became evident when Sydney-based HR consultants were drawing on a similar discourse in order to defend their social position against regional office expectations. In Foucauldian terms, the struggles between the HR professionals were originating from a 'battle for truth' (Rabinow, 1984, p. 418), in which the "credibility of a particular kind of social knowledge and the legitimacy of particular kinds of interests" came to be contested (Talja, 2001, p. 12).

The latter point also stresses the significance of power relations, which tend to find limited attention in CoP research (Fox, 2000, Roberts, 2006). Perhaps more importantly, if power is studied at all in KM, research seems to be informed by a relatively narrow perspective, linking back to Francis Bacon's famous dictum 'knowledge is power'. The well-known argument in relation to knowledge sharing is that people are reluctant to share knowledge, because of a fear of losing the power that is attached to it. While this is certainly an important aspect, the study's findings point towards a more complex relationship between knowledge and power. The interviews showed, for instance, that power also enables the production of new knowledge. An alternative discourse on the role of HR had emerged at headquarter level, which was clashing significantly with local HR managers' views. Power and knowledge are thus better conceived of as inseparable, or, as Foucault argues:

We should admit ... that power produces knowledge [...]; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault, 1977, p. 27).

Foucault's work does not simply associate power with governance or control, but focuses on the strategies and tactics, which are used to gain peoples' acceptance. Gordan and Grant (2005) have argued that this understanding of 'power as strategy' can significantly enrich KM research. As was evident in the study, whether knowledge is received positively depends to a significant extent on the acceptance of peers. Understanding the discursive rules – they ways by which truth is established in different discourse communities – helps to bridge knowledge boundaries and gain acceptance. This explains why in project work, consultants sought feedback early on, checked back with peer groups throughout the process, and adapted the language they used to match the language of different discourse communities. Through participating in the appropriate discourse and recognising its discursive rules they were able to 'seize power' (Rabinow, 1984).

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to explore the topic of knowledge sharing through CoPs with a specific focus on cross-cultural interfaces. The study was based on a qualitative methodology, which seeks to enrich and widen the body of in-depth contextual knowledge on a particular topic, rather than claiming statistical generalisability in and of itself (Kvale, 1996, p. 289). Conceptually, I have

consciously eschewed the traditional, essentialist view of culture and instead endorsed a social constructivist perspective, which was enriched through aspects of Foucauldian discourse theory. Rather than looking at CoPs as homogenous social groups, this framework allows us to be sensitive to the diverse identifications and relations of CoP members, depending on various factors such as their physical location, time and stakeholder responsibilities. Perhaps most importantly, it provides an approach to study knowledge sharing at dynamic cross-cultural interfaces rather than fixed cross-cultural boundaries. The findings suggest that knowledge sharing is best understood as a dynamic two-way process in which meaning is continuously negotiated, contested, and re-affirmed in relation to broader socio-cultural discourses. This implies a fundamental shift of attention from the study of cognitive processes and individual dispositions, to the social practices by which knowledge becomes legitimated. More specifically, it requires that we pay attention to the question of when and under which circumstances knowledge becomes accepted. The findings of the study suggest that KM research will benefit from a more complex 'strategic' understanding of power, which recognises the importance of gaining the 'buy-in' of discourse communities, i.e. groups of peers who participate in the same specialised body of knowledge. I would argue that, together with the efforts of other socio-cultural approaches such as social capital or social network research, the conceptual framework proposed in this study would prove valuable to further explore the cross-cultural dimension of knowledge sharing. The preliminary empirical findings of this study have provided some useful exploratory insight to understand knowledge sharing at the cross-cultural interface, but further research in a range of different organisational settings is needed to gain a deeper and more extensive understanding of cross-cultural knowledge sharing issues and enablers.

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