

COLLEGIAL COOPERATION IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL COMPETITION

D. Eleanor WESTNEY

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

In research on Japan's business system and Japanese business organisation, there is much to be gained by cooperative research involving Japanese and North American scholars. And yet such research is far rarer than its potential advantages might suggest. The kinds of research-focused "strategic alliances" so popular among leading companies — IBM and Toshiba in flat panel displays, for instance, or the web of alliances between Japanese and U. S. semiconductor manufacturers — are surprisingly scarce in academic circles that are focusing on business-related research, although they are increasingly common in other areas of the Japan field. If companies that are directly competing in world markets can join forces generate new knowledge, why can academics on both sides of the Pacific, who are not directly in competition with each other, not do likewise?

This paper examines briefly some of the impediments to cooperation in research among academics working on business organisations on both sides of the Pacific, and looks at some of the main inducements for cooperation.

IMPEDIMENTS TO COOPERATION:

Different roles for the management researcher: In the United States, business school researchers are generally assumed to be sources of potentially useful expertise and information about management for the companies they seek to study. Often the management researcher conducting interviews and collecting data in an organisation is seen as a quasi-consultant, whose task is to provide insights useful for improving the performance of the organisation. The ubiquity of management consultants in U. S. business makes this blurring of roles almost inevitable, and it is a source of some discomfort to U. S. academic researchers (although it facilitates their admission to companies).

In Japan, however, the external consultants are not nearly so common, and therefore the "outside expert" role is not as well-established as a facilitator of access. Many Japanese companies regard management not as a set of general professional skills taught by business schools but as company-specific skills acquired by experience and not readily transferrable across organisations. Academics can be useful sources of information about the external business environment, but not usually a source of insights to improve management within the company.

This means a great difference in the kind and degree of access that business researchers can obtain to a company. U. S. researchers can often obtain deeper and broader access to American companies than their counterparts can in Japan, where companies are more likely to restrict access to a small set of top managers or to a set of respondents to carefully negotiated questionnaires. The researcher roles and methodologies preferred by business researchers often therefore varies considerably across the two settings.

So does the level of “objective” assessment of the organisation. Management research, as distinct from business journalism, is expected to portray a carefully measured analysis of strengths and weaknesses of companies, and often the name of the company is heavily disguised in order to protect the company from criticism and the researcher from a charge of violating confidentiality. Rosabeth Kanter’s *Men and Women of the Corporation* or Gideon Kunda’s *Engineering Culture*, to take just two examples, provide often highly critical insights into the companies they study, which remain disguised under pseudonyms. In such cases, the company is usually willing to allow the researcher the right to publish their findings (as long as the identity of the firm is disguised) in exchange for the insights the researcher can provide into critical management issues. The tradition of this kind of research is much weaker in Japan, and Japanese companies can be very sensitive to critical portrayals of their organisation.

Therefore one potential problem of cross-national research teams, when different norms and expectations about research roles and the obligations of the researcher to the informant apply, is that the “local” partner is much more vulnerable to sanctions than the “foreign” partner who is the more likely to violate, sometimes unwittingly, the norms.

Different criteria for professional status: Academics in U. S. business schools are heavily dependent for professional status on publications in the leading refereed journals in their subfields, or on books published by academic presses after lengthy review processes. Japanese researchers have traditionally been more likely to want to reach a broader audience through general interest books, and to publish articles in their university “house” organs, which are also less likely to impose a rigorous review process. The Japanese publishing world has a much larger audience for business books by academic researchers than does the United States, and the publishers of these books have very different ways of assessing the publishability of such books. The lengthy external review process of the academic presses of North America are largely unknown in the publishing world of Japan. On the other hand, publication by one of the leading commercial presses of Japan confer a status on academic authors that is not matched in the United States. This influences not only what to do with the output of research projects, but how to design those projects in the first place, and this leads us to the next point.

Different research paradigms: U. S. business academics in the last two decades have been increasingly assimilated to the social science paradigms of the base disciplines of economics

or sociology, and to a set of “legitimate” methodologies. U. S. business research has also been divided into much more clearly delineated specialities than in Japan.

The U. S. management researchers are often caught in a difficult professional dilemma that is unfamiliar to their Japanese counterparts: they are expected to generate “useful” knowledge for the organisations in which they do their research, as we saw above, but to publish the results of that research in highly standardised formats of little interest to managers and to impose on their research a set of methodological strictures of often esoteric interest (if any) to managers and the general audience. The anxieties generated by this dilemma can be profoundly irritating to those not experiencing them directly.

Different audiences: One possible impediment to cooperative research is the fact that American and Japanese academics who are studying business organisations have different audiences, which have different definitions of relevance and different basic assumptions about how the world works. The intensifying trade friction between Japan and the United States has politicised differences in the two business systems: that is, it has made what used to be a focus of research — how are Japanese companies and business systems different from and similar to U. S. systems? — into an issue of immediate relevance to government policy and public opinion.

To over-simplify this complex issue for the sake of argument, many policy-makers and managers on both sides of the Pacific seem to hold to an implicitly Darwinian view of organisational evolution: in a world of intensifying global competition, different types of “species” — business systems — can only survive in quasi-protected environments. Direct competition will result in the “survival of the fittest” — the triumph of the most efficient and effective organisations. The question becomes therefore one of the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness: Therefore, especially for Americans, the persistence of markedly different “species” of business organisations or systems becomes *prima facie* evidence of a protected environment.

This unilinear evolutionary model also imposes the question, “Which is the more effective and efficient organisational form?” on the earlier research question, “What are the similarities and differences between Japanese and U. S. business organisations?” This is a question that raises questions about what constitutes effectiveness and efficiency, and about how these are measured, that are extremely difficult to address directly. Japanese and American audiences often hold very different basic assumptions about this — as do Japanese and American researchers. Untangling and addressing these assumptions in a cross-national collaborative research project can be time-consuming, irritating, and tension-ridden. It can be easier to avoid them by avoiding intensely collaborative research.

INCENTIVES FOR COOPERATION

In spite of the many difficulties impeding cross-Pacific research collaboration in the

business field, there are a growing number of inducements for such cooperation.

Mutual "Gateway" to Information: In the 1980s, when Japanese companies were proud of their accelerating competitiveness and often convinced of the excellence of what they were doing, and when they were intensely interested both in learning more about their Western counterparts and eager for exposure to Western audiences, the U. S.-based academic researchers often had an advantage over their Japanese colleagues in obtaining access to Japanese companies. This is no longer the case. The value of comparative information to the Japanese company, which is likely to have its own access to Western firms through its networks of alliances, is much reduced, and as Japanese companies face disturbing problems induced by slow growth and corporate restructuring they are less eager to publicise their practices. This does not mean that Japanese companies have become inaccessible, but that a combination of the rising quantity and quality of Japanese business research over the last decade and the falling status of the Western researcher means that access to Japanese research sites is more likely to come through a joint research effort with Japanese colleagues. Similarly, Japanese business researchers are more likely to gain access to U. S. firms through joint projects with the American counterparts.

Diminishing Differences in Criteria for Professional Status: In Japan, there has been a welcome and growing tendency for leading Japanese business researchers to publish in international research journals and through Western academic presses, a trend fuelled by (though by no means limited to) the growing number of Japanese getting advanced degrees from U. S. and European research universities and taking up positions in Western business schools and social science departments. On the other hand, American management researchers have come under growing fire for the esoteric nature of their research and the unreadability of their publications, a trend which is likely to intensify in the coming decade.

Intellectual Synergies: One of the reasons for the growing number of research alliances in business is that the challenges to basic assumptions that are inevitable in cross-national research teams is a valuable stimulus to creativity. The same can be said for management research. The questioning of basic assumptions about management, the evolution of business systems, and the fundamentals of generating reliable and useful knowledge can be extremely painful, but it is potentially very productive.

CONCLUSION

Over the coming decade, we can expect to see growing cross-Pacific cooperation in research on business systems, and given the growing interest of both Japanese and American companies in the Asia-Pacific region, we can expect to see the cooperation extend more broadly across the Pacific.