Title

The “Nasty” Business of Emotions: Responses across cultures to withholding knowledge

Abstract

The dissemination of knowledge is a key element of a firm’s capacity to innovate. This exploratory multi-method study investigated the emotional response to withholding knowledge by peer groups and supervisors in organisations. A questionnaire was administered to 147 MBA students employed in the service and manufacturing industries.

Asian respondents reported a high level of withholding knowledge by peers (72%), while non-Asians reported a high level of withholding knowledge by supervisors (76%). Qualitative data revealed themes of anger, annoyance, alienation, frustration, lack of trust, and jealousy.

This study suggests that country of origin may impact on the transfer of knowledge in organisations and discusses the possible implications of this in today’s business practices.

Key words: Knowledge Transfer, Country of Origin, Emotion, Innovation, Business Practice
The “Nasty” Business of Emotions: Responses across cultures to withholding knowledge

Introduction
Organisations rely on the dissemination of knowledge to build capability in order to drive their strategies, products and operations. More specifically, the creativity and innovation necessary for competitive advantage, are more likely when employees experience positive emotional states and trust is present in individual and group relations. This multimethod study adopted a social constructionist approach to the transfer of knowledge by using the social process of sharing knowledge and its effect on those working in organisations. The sample consisted of 147 MBA students. With a 100% response rate, the data collected covered 20 Countries of Origin (COO). Of the respondents, 90 were non-Asian, including Australian, European, and South African, and 57 were Asian, the largest representations being from India, China, Thailand and Malaysia. Both public and private sector organisations were represented across a wide variety of industries.

Knowledge Management
Knowledge management (KM) literature has proliferated over recent years and has involved many disciplines (Wiig, 2000). In their brief critique of the KM literature, McAdam & McCready (1999) noted three types of KM models in use. These include knowledge as categorised in discrete elements (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995); knowledge represented as intellectual capital; knowledge and the KM process as a socially constructed phenomenon (Demerest, 1997) which is better understood as a social process rather than a functional resource (Alvesson , 1998). The definition of knowledge used in organisations has been shown to include a social constructionist element that recognises the social elements in knowledge creation, embodiment and use (McAdam and McCready, 1999). While Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) note that social process is an integral part of creative routines that generate innovative ideas, Grover and Davenport (2001) draw attention to the importance of social interaction in converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge as part of the innovation process. Nonaka et al. (2000: 9) assert that “tacit knowledge can be acquired only through shared experience, such as spending time together...” and this is irrespective of whether or not the tacit knowledge is then converted into explicit knowledge or remains tacit.

It has been suggested by Maula (2000), that the conventional definition of knowledge, based on the writings of Polanyi (1967) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), is insufficient. Demerest (1997) draws a distinction between the goals of philosophical and scientific knowledge (truth or what is right) and commercial knowledge (effective performance or what works). He goes on to offer a definition of knowledge that includes “actionable information embodied in the set of work practices, theories-in-action, skills, equipment, processes and heuristics of the firm’s employees” (Demerest, 1997: 374). This paper adopts the view that knowledge transfer is a social process.

Trust
Within the social processes that facilitate knowledge transfer (KT), trust has been seen to be “the single most important precondition for knowledge exchange.” (Snowden, 2000: 239) and is a KM issue both at the individual and group levels (Murray, 2000). Kramer (1999), referring to recent research by Coleman 1990, Fukuyama 1995, Kramer & Tyler 1996 and others, have observed that within the field of organisational behaviour there has been a resurgence of interest in the role of trust as a determinant of intra-organisational cooperation, coordination and control. Interest in trust as a factor in the social processes of KT becomes more important then, when we consider the value of KT in innovating to create competitive advantage. Srica (2002) asserts that monitoring knowledge is one of seven principles for the effective management of innovation.

Innovation
Abraham and Knight (2001) maintain that the strategic innovation cycle in an organisation helps to create knowledge, transform knowledge from tacit to explicit, and enables knowledge, as an output from the cycle, to be shared so that it can be used in future innovation cycles. They
content that a top-down, bottom-up structure best promotes systematic knowledge creation and recommend a leveraging condition they call ‘spreading resources’ as a condition that includes technological and social processes to make knowledge widely available. Invisible assets that create knowledge and help position a firm to exploit new opportunities, enhance continuous innovation (Johannessen et al. 1997).

Country of Origin

If we are to effectively manage an organisation’s capability in the 21st century, an understanding of the national dimensions of management is vital (Purcell and Shenkar, 1996). This is because organisations are increasingly integrating across national borders and organisations within countries such as Australia comprise multicultural workforces. This requires the ability of managers to see the relativity of their own cultural frameworks to others in an organisation and improve their intercultural management skills (Hofstede, 1996). Recent research in the area of cross-cultural management may be helpful in this regard. For example, four attributes have been identified that may be the universal dimensions of the constructs of individualism and collectivism, which are characteristic of western and eastern cultures respectively (Triandis, 1999). Firstly, there is definition of the self, wherein collectivists view the self as interdependent with others and individualists view the self as autonomous and independent. Secondly, structure of goals in collectivist cultures is compatibility between individual and in-group goals whereas individualists’ goals do not often correlate with in-group goals. The third attribute is emphasis on norms versus attitudes. Here the determinants for the social behaviour among individualists are attitudes, personal needs, perceived rights and contracts while collectivists’ behaviour is determined equally by a) norms, duties and obligations and b) attitudes and personal needs. Finally, individualists emphasise rationality, cost benefit analysis of relationships, while collectivists emphasise unconditional relatedness. In his seminal research on national cultures, Hofstede (1984) identified that 53 cultures differed mainly along four dimensions. Power distance is the equilibrium of inequality established in a society by leaders and followers. Individualism versus collectivism, that is, the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. The third dimension is masculinity or assertiveness versus the nurturing characteristic of femininity. Lastly, uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which a culture programs its members to feel either comfortable or uncomfortable with unstructured situations. Hofstede and Bond (1988) further identified a uniquely eastern dimension in Chinese culture they referred to as Confucian Dynamism, which is to do with a society’s search for virtue. Hofstede and Bond (1988) maintain that cultural differences in these dimensions have consequences for organisations particularly those managing multicultural workforces. For example, the most effective leader in a low power distance culture would be a resourceful democrat, whereas in a high power distance culture it would be a benevolent autocrat.

Emotion

A review of recent trends and methodological issues concerning emotion noted that research on emotions within the previous five years was almost as vast and diverse as emotional life itself (Cacioppo and Gardner, 1999). While there is support for this observation (Fisher, 2000), others have indicated that research on emotions in the workplace and in particular affective-related issues, has been neglected (Wright and Doherty, 1998; Muchinsky, 2000). Emotions may be referred to as affect, mood or feelings (Callahan and McCollum, 2002). Dispositional affect is often used to describe a person’s general affective orientation, positive or negative and may be a long term. Moods are more likely to be short term, unstable and fluctuate with events. Emotions or feelings tend to have an identifiable cause or object, are short term and more focused and intense. According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1995: 97), “the experience of work is saturated with emotion” and they further argue that emotion and rationality are interpenetrated within organisations. In her review of recent literature, Domagalski (1999) examines the three themes of the relationship between emotion and rationality, emotion in the social domain of the workplace and the control of emotions by those in positions of power and dominance. In discussing shared
assumptions in human activity, Schein (1992: 128), referring to cross-cultural studies, notes that one of several orientations whereby a group relates to itself and its environment is the Being-In-Becoming Orientation. This is positioned between the Being and Doing orientations and refers to the idea that individuals must achieve harmony with nature through developing their own capacities and thereby achieve a perfect union with the environment. This state involves detachment and control of those things that can be controlled. This is typified in an Apollonian organisation wherein people curb their natural impulses and desires through various organisational control mechanisms. The basic assumption here is that human impulses are dangerous and must be controlled. The relevance of this dimension can be most clearly seen, according to Schein (1992), in organisational attitudes and norms about the expression of emotions. For example, in the United States business relationships tend to be defined as emotionally neutral with managers who are seen as too emotional judged to be incompetent. An assumption here is that the presence of emotions can undermine rationality and clear thinking. However, as Ratner (2000) points out, emotions never exist alone because all thinking entails feelings. Members of organisations try to de-emotionalise emotions and make them seem rational (Fineman, 1993). Those challenging the rationalist approach to managing have often perceived emotions narrowly (Hosking and Fineman, 1990) and people within organisations presented as emotionally anorexic (Fineman, 1993) whereby they have dissatisfaction, stresses, preferences, attitudes and interests rather than expressing envy, hate shame, love, fear and joy. Furthermore, emotions are found to vary in individualist and collectivist contexts whereby “ego focused” emotions (such as anger, frustration, and pride) with the individual’s internal attributes as the primary referent are found to be more marked among individualists (Kagitcibasi, 1997). Drawing on the work of Markus and Kitayama 1991, and Matsumoto 1989, Kagitcibasi (1997) explains that other focused emotions, such as sympathy, shame, and feelings of interpersonal communion, that have the other person as the primary referent, are more marked among collectivists and also studies have shown that emotions are more subdued in hierarchical societies. Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) arranged emotions into five categories. The first are the nasty emotions, which include anger, envy and jealousy. These emotions, if not managed can create tremendous interpersonal and social problems. The second are the existential emotions and include anxiety, guilt and shame. The third category are those emotions provoked by unfavourable life conditions such as relief, hope sadness and depression. Fourth are those emotions provoked by favourable life conditions and they include happiness, pride and love. Finally, there are the empathetic emotions including gratitude and compassion.

**Research questions**

Within the context of a multicultural workforce, the authors believe that if, as has been suggested, KM is a social process, and its success is dependent upon the trust relationships between people in an organisation so that they willingly transfer their knowledge to each other, then it would be useful to explore the following questions. Do people from different cultural backgrounds experience emotional responses to the withholding of knowledge by supervisors and peers? Do people from different cultural backgrounds have different emotional responses to withholding of knowledge by supervisors and peers?

**Methodology**

A sample of 147 MBA students, including over 70 managers and directors, of various ages and cultural backgrounds were surveyed. The survey instrument consisted of 20 items including open and closed questions to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Four questions relating to the quantity and quality of disseminated tacit knowledge were anchored to a Likert type scale from 1 = highly satisfied to 5 = highly satisfied. Two questions relating to trust were anchored to a Likert type scale from 1 = Always to 5 = never. Two questions relating to withholding knowledge required a yes or no answer and five open-ended questions required responses relating to reasons for withholding knowledge, emotional responses and the promotion of innovative behaviour by the respondent’s organisation. Seven items were included to collect demographic
data including gender, age, country of origin and country of origin of parents, type of organisation and industry and tenure in reported organisational role. Some of the questions were based on the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1979), Allen and Meyer’s organisational commitment scale (1990) and others, were developed by the authors using KT as a theme. The instrument was administered to the respondents in two groups with the authors present to provide explanation and assistance as required. An introductory explanation of the survey and its purpose was provided.

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistical procedures and qualitative data relating to emotions was analysed using a category theme analysis by defining the words and then collapsing them into five categories of emotions (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Responses to the questions about innovation were categorized using Srica’s (2002) seven principles of effective innovation management.

Analysis

Of the 147 useable responses, 90 of the respondents reported as being born in non-Asian countries and 57 born in Asian countries. Due to the small sample size, a descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken combining the responses to questions within the categories of KT, trust and withholding knowledge and comparing the data from Asian and non-Asian students. Respondents were asked if they trusted supervisors and peers to keep something in confidence. The responses to the questions were combined to provide an overall analysis. As with the KT questions, there was a high report of ambivalence from Asians (40%). This group also reported a low overall trust level (26%) and just over one third reporting trust of supervisors and 19% reporting trust of peers. In contrast, 23% of non-Asians reported ambivalence with 51% of non-Asians (18% higher than the reporting level of the Asian group) reporting trust of supervisors and 41% reporting trust of peers.

Table 1 shows the percentage responses by Asians and non-Asians to each question. The data shows both Asians and non-Asians report higher levels of trust of supervisors then peers although this difference is more pronounced in the Asian group. The level of trust of peers reported by non-Asians is significantly higher than the Asian group who also report higher levels of ambivalence and distrust of peers compared to the non-Asians. The analysis in table 1 shows that respondents reported that supervisors could be trusted more to keep something confidential than peers. Trust of supervisors was reported by 18% more non-Asians compared to Asians and the disparity in levels of trust of peers was even greater with 21% more non-Asians compared to Asians reporting that they trusted their peers. Lower levels of distrust of peers, was reported by non-Asians compared to Asians with the same percentage (32%) of both groups reporting distrust of supervisors. Both groups reported a higher level of ambivalence towards peers.

Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the quantity and quality of KT from supervisors and peers. Overall, 41% of Asians reported ambivalence, 40% satisfied and 19% dissatisfied, whereas 46% of non-Asians were satisfied, 33% ambivalent and 21% dissatisfied. The data was analysed by examining the responses to each of the four questions dealing with quantity and quality of KT from supervisors (questions 1-2) and peers (questions 3-4) and shows the level of satisfaction among Asians and non-Asians. The combined data from both groups revealed that the highest levels of satisfaction (45 respondents), dissatisfaction (25) and the lowest level of ambivalence (26) were with the quantity of KT from supervisors. The highest levels of reporting by non-Asians, related to satisfaction with the quantity of KT from supervisors (25) and quantity of KT from peers (25). The highest level of reporting from Asians was ambivalence towards the quality of KT from peers. There were higher levels of satisfaction with quantity rather than quality reported and the highest levels of ambivalence were related to KT from peers. Both Asian and non-Asians report similar levels of dissatisfaction with peers.
However, non-Asians report higher levels of satisfaction while Asians report higher ambivalence. Dissatisfaction was higher with supervisors than peers in the combined data and in the data from each group.

A higher proportion of non-Asians (76%) compared to Asians (65%) reported that supervisors withheld knowledge. Whereas a higher proportion of Asians (72%) compared to non-Asians reported that peers withheld knowledge.

As illustrated in table 1, a greater proportion of both groups reported they believed that supervisors and peers withheld knowledge. A higher proportion of non-Asians reported that supervisors withheld knowledge whereas a greater proportion of Asians reported that peers withheld knowledge. The lowest level of reporting was from non-Asians believing that supervisors did not withhold knowledge.

Qualitative data was collected from the open questions to show why respondents believed supervisors and peers withheld knowledge and the respondents’ emotional responses. Responses relating to emotions were analysed and categorized consistent with Lazarus & Lazarus (1994). The overall results are provided in table 1 and the results relating to withholding of knowledge by supervisors is analysed in Figure 1.

Figure 1 About Here

A high proportion of all respondents reported experiencing an emotional response to withholding of knowledge by supervisors (80%) and peers (69%). There was less than 2% difference in the overall reporting level of both groups. Non-Asians reported a much higher level of experiencing “nasty” emotions as a result of knowledge being withheld by both supervisors (48%) and peers (43%) than the Asian group (33% and 24% respectively). Non-Asians also reported higher levels of empathy, supported by qualitative data that included legitimate business need for “confidentiality” and “need to know” as the reasons why supervisors and peers withheld knowledge. Asians reported all categories of emotions including those consistent with favourable life conditions as a result of both supervisors (12%) and peers (14%) withholding knowledge whereas the non-Asian group reported no such emotional response. Asians reported higher levels of emotional responses consistent with unfavourable life conditions than did non-Asian respondents. No emotional response to knowledge being withheld by supervisors and peers was reported by similar proportions of Asian and non-Asian respondents.

Asians reported that supervisors withheld knowledge for reasons of competition and power and peers withheld knowledge for reasons including competition and jealousy. Non-Asians reported that supervisors withheld knowledge for reasons of ‘need to know’ and power and control and peers withheld knowledge for reasons of self-interest and ‘need to know’. Asians reported frustration (45%) and hurt (29%) when supervisors withheld knowledge, whereas non-Asians reported annoyance (27%) and frustration (22%). When peers withheld knowledge, Asians reported feelings of frustration (29%) and annoyance (25%) whereas non-Asians felt angry (31%) and frustrated (23%). Significant levels of reporting of frustration and annoyance were common to both groups, however, hurt (which is related to humiliation and loss of face) was peculiar to the Asian group and anger was peculiar to the non-Asian group.

Findings

The study findings indicated differences in the respondent’s emotions relating to withholding knowledge by supervisors and peers. These appear to be culturally based and consistent with Hofstede’s (1984) identification of Asian cultures generally characterised by high Power Distance whereby Asian respondents are less trusting of supervisors and peers than non-Asians. The non-Asians report higher levels of withholding knowledge by supervisors (not peers), but appear to be more ready to see this in a positive way than the Asians who report competitiveness as a reason for the occurrence.
The study has demonstrated that a significant proportion of people have emotional responses when their supervisors and peers withhold knowledge. These responses appear to differ across cultures. This appears to be consistent with the literature (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; Kitayama and Markus, 1995; Triandis, 1995). It may be that different emotional responses reflect reaction to a departure from a cultural norm. For example, in the lower power distance (non-Asian) culture workers might expect knowledge to be shared, whereas in the higher power distance culture (Asian) little anger is expressed because what has occurred is part of a cultural norm. When asked a question requiring a rational answer and a question about emotions, in relation to withholding knowledge, those surveyed responded with greater frequency to the emotional question. This is an inconsistency and the qualitative data collection would have been enhanced through interview rather than survey. The dominant methodology in the literature was the use of surveys.

**Conclusion**

KT is a social process whose success is dependent on trust relationships. The data suggests that when knowledge is withheld, there is an emotional response that differs across cultures. We have used KT as a theme and attempted to establish a relationship between trust, the respondents’ satisfaction with KT, the withholding of knowledge and emotions in organisations. This exploratory study has found lower levels of trust and higher levels of distrust of supervisors and peers among Asians compared to non-Asians. This is consistent with the literature where previous research shows that in countries with high power distance, one’s power is seen as potentially under threat from others and so that they can rarely be trusted. Whereas in low power distance countries people are more likely to trust others as they feel less threatened. The consistency is further reinforced because Asians reported competition, power and jealousy as reasons why knowledge was withheld by supervisors and peers, compared to non-Asians who reported, “need to know”, power and self-interest as reasons why supervisors and peers withheld knowledge. The “need to know” response from non-Asians may be a more positive response as it indicates an understanding and acceptance that knowledge may be withheld for a legitimate business reason. The concept of innovation may be problematic across cultures as some responses from the Asian group included a six-monthly meeting, meetings and one hour per day coaching staff as means by which organisations promote innovation. Further investigation of this issue should include constructing meanings of innovation across cultures. Future studies would also benefit by utilising a larger sample population.

Finally, in answering both research questions the implication from this study for managers and business practice appears to be that understanding emotional responses in organisations is made more complex through the cultural dimension.

**References**


**Table 1: Asian and non-Asian comparative data (% responses)**

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<th>Non-Asian</th>
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**Source: Authors**

**Figure 1: Emotional responses to K withheld by supervisor**

**Source: Authors**